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Managing the Customer Experience through Intermediaries

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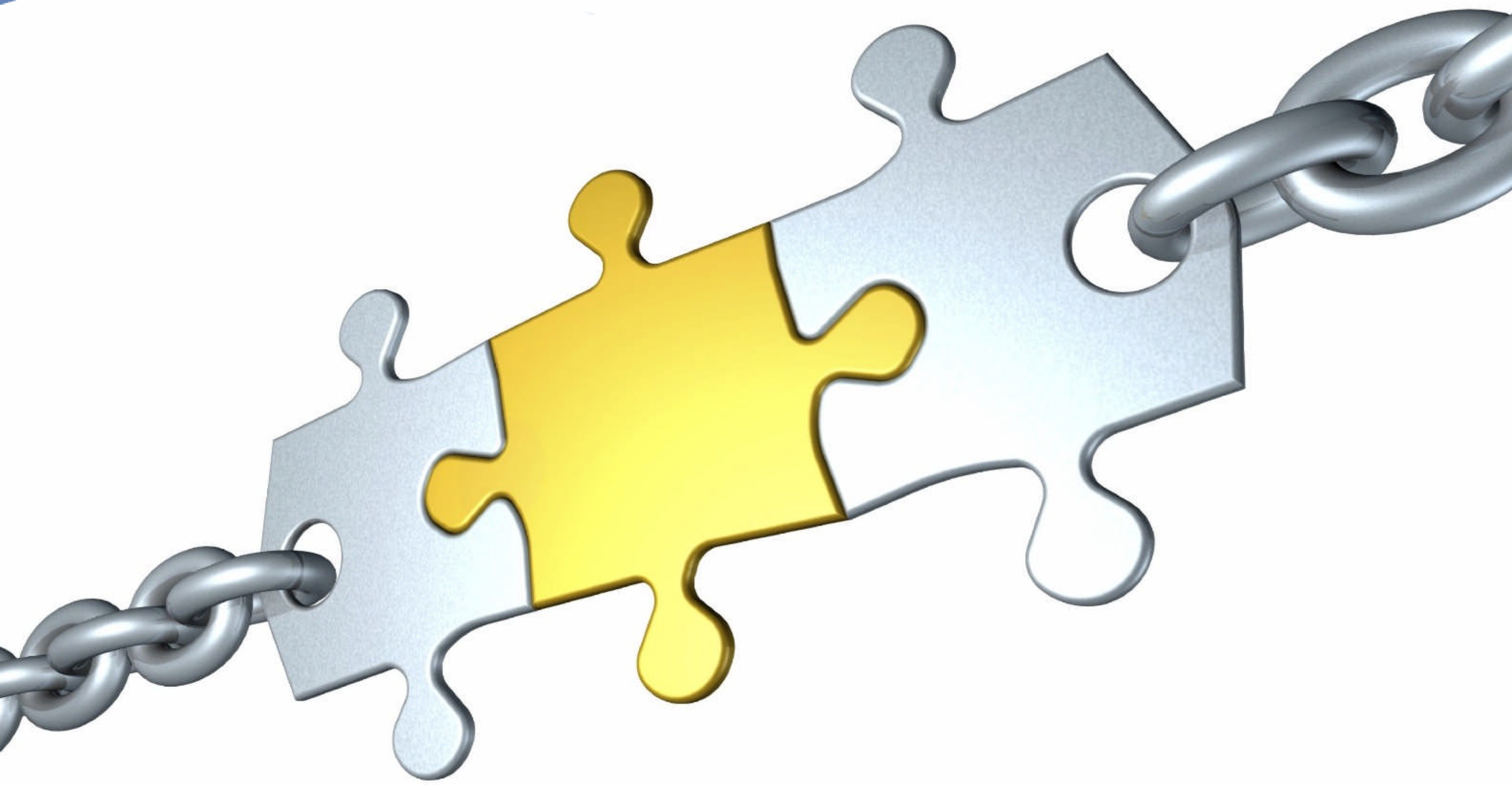

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1. Introduction

This study explores the question “How can a company create and maintain an ideal/perfect customer experience (CE) in the presence of intermediaries / distribution partners”?

The literature covering this particular combination is sparse although a lot has been written and published about the distribution or supply chain management (Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001; Corsten & Kumar, 2005); satisfaction in channel relationships (Geysekens, Steenkamp & Kumar, 1999; Schmitz & Wagner, 2007; Johnson, Krapfel & Grimm, 2001) and the area of a perfect customer experience is currently gaining popularity (Frow & Payne, 2007). So in addition to the areas identified above exploration of associated literature in working with others in a collaborative environment from both a marketing and HR perspective were used. This appeared to offer a much richer picture of what is required and from these various sources a framework and a set of questions was created to facilitate suppliers and intermediaries to think through the various important issues that enable them to create a ‘positive customer experience’.

At this stage the results have been validated against a ‘list’ created by the attendees at a Henley Centre for Customer Management Workshop which was looking specifically at maximising value through relationships. The list identified suggestions that would enable an organisation to deliver the perfect Customer Experience through Intermediaries. This was further developed after the literature review to a more comprehensive checklist detailed at the end of this paper.

Findings

- Marketing interaction ‘touchpoints’ need to be consistent so that different channels play complementary roles
- Positive and negative behaviours exhibited by both the supplier & intermediary will affect the customer experience
- Perfect customer experiences need to be mapped and understood
- Conflict can be constructive but needs to be managed
- Prior channel models that identify structure , conduct and outcomes need enhancing
- Culture, leadership and strategy need to be focussed on multi-channel delivery and facilitate effective exchange and co-creation of value
- Performance should be measured using a modified Balanced Scorecard approach and reviewed as a joint process
- Creating an intermediary corridor and ‘touchpoints’ approach through the Integrated Services Brand Model and the Supplier Brand Experience Framework enables the supplier intermediary dyad to create iterative processes to support customer focus

2. Context

Customer experience is a rich tapestry that is woven out of a customer’s interactions at various ‘touchpoints’ with the brand product or service. (Stuart-Menteth et al 2005) It is the total interaction involving many aspects of what the supplier, intermediary and others do (directly and indirectly) to market the brand, product or service. This is also known as the customer corridor. (Meyer and Schwager 2007) Given all the threads that this experience contains it can be challenging to create a consistent and reliable experience and this is inevitably complicated when a third party, the intermediary is included.

Intermediaries exist to facilitate both suppliers and customers in the exchange and co-creation experience. They can offer both efficiency and effectiveness gains for the supplier although they can have significant cost implications accounting for perhaps 50% of the final price. (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Doyle 2002; Stern & El Ansary, 1992) In many instances they are also the face of the supplier, and as will be discussed in this paper, have a very powerful impact on customer satisfaction. So the challenge for many suppliers is how to ensure that their brand promise as exemplified in products and services is delivered consistently and to the right quality through these independent organisations.

That means the supplier is managing expectations and performance with their intermediaries and also their customers. Unfortunately there appear to be significant gaps between perceptions of how successful this might be.

- According to a recent Bain & Co report 80% of executives said their company delivered a superior customer experience; while only 8% of customers felt they received a superior customer experience.
- In a survey of suppliers and their intermediary resellers only 19.7% agreed on the intermediary level of satisfaction and of the rest 35.5% underestimated their specific intermediary's satisfaction and 44.7% overestimated their specific intermediary's satisfaction. (Johnson, Krapfel & Grimm, 2001)

This is important because perceptions drive behaviours and therefore resulting actions can lead to conflicts and defection.

3. Definition, types and role of Intermediary

Intermediaries exist to add-value to the customer and the supplier by addressing particular shortcomings in the manufacturer/original provider. These shortcomings have been described in a number of ways but generally are versions of the original description by Anderson: (Anderson, cited in Pitt,1999)

- *Intermediaries support economies of scope by adjusting the discrepancy of assortments*
- *Intermediaries routinize transactions so the cost of distribution can be minimised*
- *Intermediaries facilitate the searching processes of both producers and customers by structuring the information essential to both partners. (Pitt, 1999, p.20)*

So essentially what the intermediary does that is so valuable is to provide:

> ***The right quantities of the right product/service in the right place at the right time. (Pitt 1999, p19)***

Hence the collective title of the 'distribution channel'.

Traditionally intermediaries have been termed dealers, agents, retailers, resellers, etc (Kotler & Keller, 2008) and then with the World Wide Web came the new cybermediary

(Sarkar, 1996 quoted on Dave Chaffey website) and others. Their titles tend to reflect their business domain such as resellers in technology, retailers in B2C, etc. What is striking is the number of different titles clustered under the catch-all intermediary so it would appear appropriate to identify the key differences between the various types:

- Whether intermediaries act solely on behalf of the supplier or, provide other suppliers goods and services e.g. car dealerships can carry only 1 marque or several different (affects independence)
- How ownership/title is handled e.g. agents do not take title while retailers do (affects risk)
- What expertise/value is being added e.g. what is the nature of the additional service
- Where & how business is conducted e.g. in a virtual, physical environments or both (affects costs and reach)
- How large they are e.g. some retailers and resellers can be owner managers while others can be large organisations such as large chain stores like B & Q, etc (affects business objectives, reach, etc)
- Which market domain B2B or B2C

In any event the critical issue is that they exist to facilitate trade helping both the manufacturer and buyer in all business classifications in both products and services and so add-value to both supplier and customer.

3.1. Intermediaries & the web

With the advent of the worldwide web and increased internet familiarity and usage many observers (Pitt et al, 1999, and others) felt that the environment was changing so dramatically that traditional intermediaries would find themselves obsolete as so succinctly put by Pitt et al, the web or net would *"Kill distance, homogenize time and make location irrelevant".* (p. 20)

However many intermediaries (existing and new) met the challenge and developed new ways of adding value (the constant) both via the web (clicks) and physical locations (bricks). e.g. Retailers created their own websites. In particular the metamorphosis from pre-web to post-web emphasised the interactive and personal nature of the new intermediary rather than a static and impersonal channel so that interaction was creating a powerful differentiator. Good examples of this in a virtual environment are provided by Amazon and e-Bay who track previous interactions and personalise communications.

Further changes foretold by observers (Pitt et al, 1999) was that the increasing commoditisation of products and services and proliferation of information and access via the web would drive mass customisation which would be the important added-value in this new approach thus encouraging re-intermediation.

3.2. Multi-channels

The development of more and different intermediaries both virtual and physical has created a much more complex environment where customers expect to be able to carry out various activities associated with the full purchase cycle (pre to post purchase). (Weinberg, 2007; Becker, 2007) This has become known as multi-channel. So customer touchpoints have become more numerous and varied and, more importantly, there is a growing body of evidence that supports the case for providing to the customer a fully integrated, seamless and consistent service across multi-channel options. In particular, levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty have been raised as a result of:

- Being able to offer customers options through multi-channels about where and how they interface with the supplier when they want to seek information, ask questions, see samples, etc. (Wallace et al 2004 in Madaleno et al 2007)
- Consistency across customer 'touchpoints' and channels in both B2B and B2C environments. (Madaleno et al 2007, Payne & Frow 2004, Stuart-Menteth et al, 2005)

In order to achieve this consistency, multi-channel integration, or 'integration quality' (Sousa & Voss 2006 quoted in Madaleno et al) needs to be considered as a 'key new service component'.

In addition the growth in multi-channel approaches is likely to cause more channel conflict (Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001) which can ultimately affect the customer as negative behaviours get reflected into parallel dyads. (McFarland, Bloodgood & Payan (2008)

Conceptually a fully integrated multi-channel approach is a rational response to customer demand. However, the practicalities of delivering this are challenging as the co-ordination required will be demanding. This potentially would have an impact on the role requirements of the intermediary relationships manager and require a clear strategy to help guide individual intermediary decisions.

3.3. Product & service

Within this paper we do not feel it is appropriate to make a distinction between product and service unless it is mentioned in the literature reviewed. The rationale for this is the continuing blurring of boundaries between the 2 concepts making them much less distinct than they were as products acquire intangible characteristics and services acquire tangible ones. Moreover the key output of the intermediary is to add-value in whatever shape or form is most appropriate. (e.g. mass customisation as predicted by Pitt 1999)

4. The Intermediary relationship

Structure-Conduct-Outcomes

There are several relevant ways to look at an intermediary relationship such as Interaction Framework, Hakansson, 1982 which examines the interaction process, interaction parties, relationship atmosphere and the relationship environment this is particularly useful in looking at individual or groups of relationships. However for this paper the framework used by Geyskens et al (1999) in their meta analysis of satisfaction in marketing channel relationships is used in the first instance as it mirrors a causal sequence:

- Structure - **"***patterned or regularized aspects of relationships between channel participants"*
- Conduct – *"strategies and behaviours that emerge in a relationship"*
- Outcomes – *"relational, qualitative outcomes that result from the relationship."* (p/224)

However, undertaking the literature review exposed three other critically important areas for the intermediary relationship that this study does not identify, or discuss, and they are strategy, leadership and culture/climate. It may be that the individual studies did not look at these items or that they are held to be outside structure, conduct and outcomes. On reflection it seems reasonable that strategy should precede and influence structure and conduct, culture/climate would influence structure and conduct while leadership rather than management would influence conduct. However in this paper they are dealt with after the structure, conduct, outcomes framework.

4.1. Structure

Centralisation refers to the how and where decisions are made. In an effective relationship this might be shared and directed to wherever the required expertise existed. (Donaldson & O'Toole, 2002) However, there are many who fear the loss of autonomy and so even though they enter a relationship fail to develop it past the early life stages. (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh,1987) Where decision making is centred in one partner then this tends to encourage greater use of threats and promises by that partner. (Geyskens et al 1999)

Independent, dependent or interdependent

Within a channel setting, dependency is about an organisation's need to maintain a relationship to achieve its own goals or how much one party needs the other. (Geyskens, 1999, Heide & John 1988) Where dependency occurs it can be seen that the other organisation has more power. So the dependency spectrum is mirrored in power. In a relationship life-cycle the further that progress is made the more individual autonomy has to be given up for the 'greater good'. (Refs: Tuckman,1965; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987) This means that while the individual organisations lose power the joint 'relationship' gains it and thus moves from co-ordination which focuses on efficiency through co-operation, which focuses on teamwork, through to collaboration which focuses on creation. (Denise, 1999) This is well summarised by the Balance of Power vs. Common interest matrix (Krapfel, Salmond & Spekman, 1991) shown in Figure 1 where information sharing is the key indicator and collaboration occurs where there is high common interest and balanced power.

Figure 1 Balance of Power vs Common Interest

Power Balance

Common Interest	Favours Intermediary	Balanced	Favours Supplier
High	***Accommodation*** Communication focussed on useful but not sensitive info Supplier feels vulnerable	***Collaborative*** Open, trusting info sharing Long term horizons	***Administration*** Useful info offered by Supplier but tends to flow one way Not very open Win/lose
Low	***Submission*** Some info shared but not in any volume Seller may feel trapped with few attractive options	***Negotiation*** Info exchanged as necessary	***Domination*** Directive communication, more threats than promises Gains more info from

Adapted from Krapfel, Salmond and Spekman, 1991

The issue of information sharing is sensitive as ownership of customer relationship, customer information and customer transaction is one of the driving forces behind disintermediation. (Chesborough, 2006) Therefore, sharing can be counter intuitive for some organisations where competitive attitudes have prevailed in the past. e.g FMCG manufacturers who have experienced a power shift to the retailer. (Kumar, 1996) Moreover the perception of customer equity or seeing customers' potential repeat purchases as "*important intangible assets of a firm"* (Gupta and Lehmann , 2003, p.9) can lead to concerns over ownership of this asset, the manufacturer/supplier, the intermediary or the relationship (the combined entity) itself.

However returning to power, this is essentially neutral. However, the way it is used can create both positive and negative effects. (McDonald, Rogers & Woodburn, 2000; Geyskens et al, 1999; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1998) The main concern is that power (or partner's dependence) leads to opportunistic behaviour (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1998) although others (Brown &Frazier, 1978) would suggest that as dependence increases then threats and other coercive behaviours are not necessary.

According to Vandaele, Rangarajan, Gemmel & Lievens, 2007, one method for overcoming opportunistic behaviour is the contract, a formal statement of how each party should behave which remains relatively constant unless renegotiated. Complementary to this is relational governance which is more akin to the individual psychological contract and is more dynamic than contract governance in that it is built upon "*the values and agreed upon processes found in the relationship*". (Ibid, p243) Moreover, it changes and develops over time as the relationship matures. While there is some debate over the merits of the two types of governance and their impact on performance outcomes (Ibid) given the challenges of the intangibility and growth of services, Vandaele, et al, (2007) suggest that more emphasis should be given to contractual governance.

Figure 1 also identifies situations where interest is low and that can happen in a supplier intermediary situation where the supplier is arrogant about their power or sees the intermediary as "part of the supplier's channel" rather than their 'best customer'. (Gordon, 1998)

While the above discussion focussing on collaboration and power equality would suggest that interdependence is the ideal, there is some challenge to that. *"True intermediaries are neutral about suppliers. They represent the buyers."* (Anderson & Anderson (2002) P.55) in that they sell adjacent and complementary products/services and so are most likely to offer unbiased advice. This is patently not true where intermediaries only deal with one supplier, e.g. some car dealerships, and it may be that this point is not about neutrality as reflected in independence – dependence spectrum but neutrality in their communication both to the customer and the supplier – which would be beneficial to all three parties. This focus on representing the buyer is one way of connecting internal (to the supplier/intermediary relationship) and external (with the customer) conversations so that information can flow in both directions. A key issue in helping John Lewis and Waitrose who according to Which (2008) were numbers 1 and 2 in service out of 77 retail organisations. (Source: MyCustomer.com)

In reality interdependence exists at many levels and an intermediary is often affected by supplier policies and practices. Interestingly although car dealerships are very influential in how the service is delivered, many aspects are influenced by others such as the original manufacturer and other parties. For example the labelling of parts, service bulletins, quality of service manuals all have an impact on what and how the dealership performs. (Gross, Caruso & Conlin JD Power Survey 2003)

4.2. Conduct

Behaviours are contagious

As we enter any new environment we take our lead of how to behave from others around us and after observation we start by copying/mirroring those behaviours we have seen and experienced. This is the case whether they are positive or negative. So intuitively it is not surprising to discover that the results of recent fieldwork by McFarland, Bloodgood & Payan (2008) identified the same phenomenon within the supply chain. They identified that interfirm behaviours are copied and act like an infection spreading between one dyadic relationship to adjacent relationships within the supply chain. Moreover this contagion happens whether it is intentional or not – so control is impossible after the behaviour has been demonstrated. In other words how the supplier treats its intermediaries is likely to affect, and be reflected, in the way the intermediaries treat their customers. McFarland et al's conclusions identified four drivers for imitative behaviours:

- Uncertainty – in the face of uncertainty, economic and/or environmental, intermediaries will imitate behaviours, shown to them by their suppliers/manufacturers, in their behaviours towards the customer. This happened both with coercion and reward. Note: The issue of power is discussed further in section 3 and is also related to dependence asymmetry discussed below

- Similarity – common interests, behaviour patterns, etc. tended to lead to greater imitation. So the closer the similarity the more specific behaviours were practised and reinforced.
- High interaction levels – increasing interactions between the organisations at all levels but especially those in ‘boundary-spanning’ roles increase levels of imitation.
- Dependence asymmetry – typically where the power is not balanced between the organisations and so one organisation is more reliant on the relationship than the other. The findings suggested that this can lead to two distinct sets of imitative behaviour. Imitation of the stronger party increases in the weaker dependent organisation to help validate their position in the chain and become more like their stronger counterpart. So if the behaviours are coercive or are used in an abusive or domineering way these will also be adopted and reflected in the intermediary customer dyad. The imbalance also leads to increasing levels of instability which is reflected in increasingly erratic behaviours.

Rewards & punishments

Identified as threats and promises in the literature (Geyskens et al 1999) these are influencing strategies designed to get the intermediaries to take a particular course of action which is to avoid a threat or punishment or work towards a reward. Together they are sometimes categorised as ‘coercive’ strategies in that they do not attempt to alter beliefs or attitudes merely behaviours. (Frazier & Rody, 1991, Anderson & Narus, 1984) However this is not universally accepted (Kotler & Keller, 2008; French & Raven, 1959) and as demonstrated in the meta-analysis (Geyskens et al, 1999) promises lead to higher economic satisfaction for the partner while threats increase conflict, and lower both economic and non-economic satisfaction. Taking a slightly different perspective and looking at reward and punishment within an organisational climate, Clark (2002) identified that better performing bank branches (higher customer retention) focussed on more rewards than punishments while the lower performing branches (low customer retention) emphasised more punishment than reward.

Influencing behaviours

Influencing strategies can be considered as either attempting to change behaviour and obtain conformity or change hearts and minds to obtain commitment. Managing change literature suggests that conformity will only last as long as the presence of the threat while commitment once won will exist in its own right. Therefore information exchange, sharing of expertise, etc would be classed as non-coercive.

4.3. Outcomes

Channel conflict

Conflict in the channel is defined as when one organisation’s actions prevent another organisation achieving its goals. (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Anderson & Narus 1990) This creates feelings of tension and frustration. Much has been written about channel conflict and according to Geyskens et al 1999 the area of conflict and its negative effect on the relationship has been over examined. However, they do identify that even though conflict is recognised as potentially functional as well as dysfunctional there have been few empirical studies into when how and why conflict can lead to positive relationship effects. One such study by Arya & Mittendorf (2006) does demonstrate that conflict is potentially useful when one organisation pursues its own goals and forces others to review their own situation and identify a more beneficial course of action. However, another potentially beneficial conflict scenario did not work well. When, in the face of a supplier initiated 'destructive act' ('Destructive Acts' are carried out deliberately, although not necessarily with an understanding of the full consequence, by one party that is to the detriment of the other. - Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001) the intermediaries tried to engage in positive and constructive dialogue, subsequent performance, measured through both actual and supplier perception, was seen to deteriorate. This was an unexpected result although quite logical when examined in context - a meaningful constructive dialogue takes time and effort and although it is a reasonable response in a 1 to1 or 1 to few situation, many of the supplier – intermediary relationships are 1 to many. In the case described there was 1 supplier to 1200 active dealers. (Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001)

Conflict in channel relationships is most likely to occur over economic issues as this will be more important in the early phases of the relationship when trust is more fragile and commitment is not yet fully present. (Geyskens et al, 1998; Kotler & Keller, 2008; Doyle, 2002; Gordon, 1998) However the most 'destructive acts' identified by the intermediaries in the Hibbard et al study were developing an alternative channel and adding another dealer in an existing dealers territory. These would appear to affect both economic and non-economic satisfaction.

The discussion above would suggest that an overall strategy for the co-ordination of channels and clarity over expectations, rewards and terms and conditions will be more important during the early part of the relationship and that will reduce the possibility of conflict. Hence we see the importance of induction and orientation in the relationship at the early stage. However when the relationship is well established and has moved to the commitment phase (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987) it is more likely that conflict can be managed with constructive outcomes for both parties through collaborative behaviours. This may be due to a focus on the 'macro-motives' of the whole relationship, and will be based on a history or interaction, rather than the 'micro-motives' of the specific situation. (Holmes, 1981 cited in Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001)

Conflict may be about the channel structure or behaviour : vertical channel (conflict between supplier and intermediary); horizontal channel (conflict between members at the same level over issues like territory); or multi-channel (conflict between different channels), the latter being more likely as multi-channels become more varied and complex. (Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001)

Conflict Resolution

According to Doyle (2002) effective conflict resolution is a key determinate of a successful relationship and can be considered similar to an effective customer complaint resolution which is likely to increase customer satisfaction.

Potentially there are set of accepted conflict handling modes (Thomas –Killman)

- ***Collaborate*** – where parties work towards super-ordinate goals and are required to look past their own concerns and objectives and consider the issues in broader terms.

- ***Compete*** – to try and drive through own goals and objectives at the cost of the other parties. This requires superior power to work effectively.
- ***Compromise*** – meet half way and trade-off own goals against others. This works where there are time restrictions, or competing has failed.
- ***Accommodate*** – give up your own objectives to satisfy the others. Works well if the relationship is worth more than the issue.
- ***Avoid*** – do not address the issue at all. Works if time will solve the issue or make required additional information available.

Certainly the collaborative form is recognised widely and can take the form of creating better understanding through experiencing life on the other side (e.g. job shadowing) where it involves the parties directly; or in more challenging circumstances by involving a third party as a diplomat, mediator or arbitrator. The final strategy and one to take when all else fails is legal recourse. (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Doyle, 2002)

Trust & openness

Trust is stronger than fear. Partners that trust each other generate greater profits, serve customers better, and are more adaptable (Kumar 1996, p.93)

So what is this important element – what constitutes trust. According to Kumar 1996 trust is "*to make a leap of faith: they believe that each is interested in the other's welfare and that neither will act without first considering the action's impact on the other."* Geyskins et al 1999 identify 2 different types of trust –*" trust in the partners honesty" (p225) and "trust in the partners benevolence"* this difference is important as they believed that trust in honesty occurred much earlier in the relationship cycle while '*welfare trust' (Geyskins)* or *'benevolence trust' (Kumar)* occurred later

Trust is recognised as a critical factor in successful relationships. Research in 2006 undertaken by Slico research and IBM Business Consulting found that "*a respondent's assessment of the partner's openness to knowledge sharing and new ideas, and the cultural compatibility between the 2 partners showed a strong correlation with the success of the partnership as reported by the respondents."* They explained that this was due to the significance of the action, rather than the action itself, as it signalled that the relationship was valued beyond the contract; that exchange of such information would continue and give rise to new opportunities; that the openness demonstrated by this exchange created a sense that any issues or difficulties would be addressed by a similarly open approach. So this, as identified by the authors, was a confirmation that stability of a relationship is enhanced by information sharing and asymmetrical information de-stabilises as one party hoards information to the detriment of the other. Game theory and Prisoner's dilemma (Flood & Dresher) would suggest that information sharing (co-operation) is a rational strategy only if both parties believe the other is willing to share. Certainly Kumar 1996 found extensive support for the conclusion that co-operation between retailers and manufacturers delivered "significant returns". However, if one partner does not trust the other then the rational strategy would be to withhold information creating information asymmetry and increasing likelihood of conflict.

The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness (Luft and Ingham, 1955), was originally designed to examine interpersonal communication but works just as well in an organisational and partnering construct and reflects the above. Here the sharing of information created by giving and receiving feedback enables both parties to have a common understanding of any situation and this leads to future success. Not sharing causes conflict and inhibits optimum solutions being identified.

Channel satisfaction

Of profound significance is the assertion by Geyskins et al (1999) that satisfaction in marketing channel relationships focuses on satisfaction levels between channel members and makes little or no attempt at exploring how this might affect performance. In the previous studies that they refer to in their meta-analysis they found only a weak relationship between satisfaction and performance (Gaski & Nevin, 1985 quoted In Geyskins); "*substantial correlations between perceptual measures of performance and satisfaction but marginal associations between archival measures of performance and satisfaction."* Geyskens et al citing Kumar et al 1992. Thus highlighting another important difference in perceptions and the importance of supporting any qualitative perceptions with archival data as indicated in the measurement section of the Intermediary Corridor.

In focussing on satisfaction between the channel members, Geyskens et al (1999) make an important point about the aggregation level of the satisfaction construct and suggest that a distinction should be made between economic and non-economic satisfaction.

- Economic satisfaction being the '*"positive affective response to the economic rewards" Geyskins et al p224* so sales targets, lead generation, etc.
- Non-economic satisfaction being the positive affective response to the softer social relationship aspects like the communication exchanges, meetings, joint problem solving, etc.

Further they contend that by disaggregating satisfaction into economic and non-economic factors and separating satisfaction and trust, they could envisage how it would be possible to have satisfaction (economic) without trust.

Breaking down intermediary satisfaction even further Schmitz & Wagner (2007) who were looking at satisfaction in International marketing channels, identified seven factors that constituted satisfaction:

- Products
- Marketing
- Order handling
- Fairness
- Financial support
- Communications
- Cultural sensitivity

Now while the last factor could be seen as only relevant to international trade it should be remembered that culture operates at a number of levels including professions, organisations and regions and has been cited as the cause for many partnerships or takeovers failing to realise their full combined potential.

Their findings (ibid) included:

- Intermediary satisfaction leads to higher levels of trust and commitment in the supplier/intermediary relationship. However this was reduced in highly competitive environments. So it could be that competitive intensity encourages opportunism as the environment is less stable and if that is true is it likely to be reflected in the way customers see suppliers and intermediaries?.

- Intermediary satisfaction reduced levels of conflict. However, this had a reduced impact when the channel environment was heavily controlled. So it could be that a controlling environment reduced conflict as it was clearly directed by the supplier however too dominating control could be likely to demotivate intermediaries and encourage rebellion. Certainly overspecifiying processes especially those like ‘scripts’ was found to be counterproductive (Mosley (2007).

It does seem logical given the ‘contagion’ approach McFarland, Bloodgood & Payan (2008) that channel/intermediary satisfaction will lead to positive behaviours and that will have potentially both positive and negative effects on the customer experience.

5. Strategy, Leadership & Culture

5.1. Strategy

While it is clear that a multi-channel strategy is required, a search on EBSCO under that term produced no results, a search under integrated marketing communications fared slightly better and a further search using integrated marketing media also yielded a few results. So is it that there has been only passing interest by academics in this subject and are they being outstripped by practitioners as it is clear from a Google search that practitioners are creating multi-channel strategies although how successful they are is debatable.

5.2. Leadership

Given the importance of multi-channel consistency and the increasing complexity of options that a supplier and intermediary face (Stuart-Menteth et al, 2005; etc) it is proposed that any strategy requires leadership to inspire and direct the implementation. (McDonald, Rogers & Woodburn 2000)

Hibbard, Kumar & Stern (2001) have already made the case that intermediary initiated constructive dialogue in the face of supplier ‘destructive acts’ is not effective, potentially due to the challenges when suppliers are dealing with many intermediaries. Moreover many negative effects of ‘bad news’ and potential ‘destructive acts’ can be minimised by communication with the intermediary and this needs to be allocated as a specific responsibility.

Leadership is strategic and an operational role is also required in this situation. In this context it is boundary spanning between two organisations and should have joint responsibility and accountability for the relationship with the intermediary. Given the above discussion around the impact of behaviours they need to live the brand values and practice them in all their dealings. McDonald, Rogers & Woodburn (2000) specifically identified what a Key Account Manager needed to achieve by looking at their role and responsibilities and then the relevant skills and attributes. This paper contends that given the boundary spanning characteristics of a Key Account Manager, the Intermediary Relationship Manager requirements are very similar. The following have been developed from their original list:

Intermediary managers need to be able to:

- Identify where value can be created (for all parties – supplier, intermediary and customer)
- Communicate effectively – Many people believe themselves to be good communicators and to a certain extent it is relatively straightforward if you are only sharing good news. However, in this context, effective communication spans organisational boundaries and includes listening and understanding others points of view even if they do not agree with you, developing empathy, sharing good and bad news effectively and being able to tackle feedback about excellent and/or poor performance. Finally managing conflict constructively. (Hibbard, Kumar & Stern, 2001)
- Think and plan both strategically and tactically - Plan for the future through monitoring the environment, analysing trends affecting their 'joint venture' with the intermediary. Sharing information and planning how to maximise opportunities and competitive advantage. Apply both strategic and tactical thinking to problems and challenges.
- Manage relationships within their own organisation (supplier) and with the intermediary and the customer
- Lead and participate in a team of collaborators – that is to say where power is shared and not abused. (even though inevitably one party will have more power in some aspects like customer or product knowledge so the relationship should be complementary.
- Live the brand values and ideals (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2007)
- Co-ordinate consistent messages across a multi-channel environment

Relevant skills are therefore clustered around:

- People
- Thinking
- Project management
- Relevant knowledge
- And personal qualities such as integrity, resilience, etc

5.3. Culture

Partnerships imply "*a corporate culture based on trust, open communication and a lack of opportunistic behaviour."* (Donaldson & O'Toole, 2002 p.16) Moreover, it should be shared across all functional boundaries and across the channel. (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) It needs to be customer centric with customer preferences being identified and experiences being mapped using tools like "process mapping, service blueprinting, customer activity cycles, and customer-firm touchpoint analysis." (Frow & Payne, 2007 p.98) This can be challenging as some industries such as manufacturers and retailers in FMCG have an adversarial history. (Kumar, 1996)

Finally it is important for any espoused culture to be seen to be lived as described by Mosley, 2007; Meyer & Schwager (2007) about Siebel. Customer satisfaction ratings had dropped and this was traced to the difference that customers were experiencing between the true cost of ownership and the expected cost of ownership – which was lower. The proposed solution meant that a different development (fee generating) would have to be postponed to a later date (2 years). Siebels leaders went with the proposed solution and this lead to higher satisfaction levels from both customers and staff who saw the customer's importance being demonstrated through behaviours.

This is further supported by JDPower who identify a significant disconnect in many organisations between what is espoused and what is practised. (Espoused theory and theory-in-use). They suggest that if CS is only espoused and not seen by employees to be practised then any decisions and actions they take will be reflective of that. (Contagion within the organisation)

6. Impact on Customer Experience

All of the above creates a challenge to delivering a consistently perfect consumer experience at the point of delivery. (Frow & Payne, 2007)

Stuart-Menteth et al (2005) identified that in the case of Lexus cars " *many channels play complementary roles in the customer relationship.*" (p.310) so any use of intermediary cannot be viewed in isolation but as part of a whole process/experience. Having said that, any part of the experience should be capable of being mapped and improved. Moreover they also found that consistency across the experience was important with outstanding performance in any channel having a significant effect on the customer relationship. The same type of conclusion applied to disappointing performance.

According to Stuart Menteth et al,(2005), interactive channels 'deliver the best experience' therefore is it fair to hypothesise that interactive channels have the most impact (positive and/or negative). While Mosley (2007), citing a JD power survey into employee interactions with customers in mobile phone market, identified that, "*Personal interactions are generally more important in driving customer service satisfaction. In attempting to manage the total customer experience, complexity is generally the enemy of consistency. In terms of delivering a consistent brand experience both operational and interpersonal dimensions provide headaches to a service provider". (Mosley, 2007 Customer Experience p 125*) However Mosley also makes the point that many companies have a rigorous approach to process management which tends to underwrite the functional side of any service delivery. He implies that the functional side of service delivery is a hygiene factor (likely to cause dissatisfaction if not delivered) while the emotional side of a service encounter is a motivator (more likely to delight and improve loyalty and advocacy). This is not necessarily supported in Dube, Le Bel & Sears who identify that in their context (hotels/lodging in North America) physical attributes were a very important source of value to guests and were mentioned more often that best practice processes. This may be due to the high level of tangible content in their context (hotel and lodging) where the décor and physical aspects of the building are very important in overall satisfaction. So again context is a very important consideration.

6.1. Employee behaviours and customer satisfaction

There is lots of evidence (including Mori survey covering six service sectors) to support the major impact of employee behaviour as a driver of satisfaction. (Mosley, 2007; etc) The Mori poll quoted in Mosley found that the single most important factor in driving customer satisfaction and brand loyalty was employee behaviour. McEwan & Buckingham 2001 people management 17th May p40-44 and further research by IBM conducted with ten major US retailers found similar results with person-to-person experience twice as important in driving satisfaction than any other factor.

This has links to the Service Profit Chain which further links satisfied employees to satisfied customers to positive business results. *MOHR Retail Learning Systems relayed study results to the National Retail Federation indicating that the highest employee turnover rate in companies correlates to the lowest customer satisfaction.* (My Customer.com 23/5/2008)

While there has been much discussion around the benefit of happy employees following a number of studies looking at the link between customer satisfaction and employee attitudes (Liao & Chuang in MyCustomer.com); customer satisfaction & employee turnover rates (Hauser in Marketing Science quoted in MyCustomer, etc. David Pardley of the Institute of Leadership & Management (MyCustomer.com23/5/2008) suggests that the key is not happiness but rather, "*an effective well managed workplace enables people to do their job well (and who wants to do their job badly?). Doing your job well makes customers happy, and that encourages people to work even better, creating more satisfied customer – it's a virtuous spiral."* Therefore, an induction and orientation that includes developing joint understanding of both parties and their motivations, desires and expectations is a useful place to start. B&Q (an intermediary themselves) identified a link between employee engagement and customer satisfaction (MyCustomer) and enjoyed increased customer satisfaction levels (from 65% to 80.4%) in parallel with an increase in employee engagement rates. In 2007 B&Q received the Gallup Great Workplace Award and it is continuing to investigate the links between engagement and business metrics such as sales, mystery shopping outcomes and complaints. A spokesperson was quoted as identifying that high engagement stores experience higher customer satisfaction and loyalty, fewer customer complaints, lower staff turnover and less shrinkage which equals higher profitability. ORC International who conducted primary research in the public sector further supported the link between engagement and customer satisfaction.

So as the functional element of a service (the how of service setting) is often provided by the intermediary, it is important to remember that this element is potentially highly emotionally charged as consumers feel most at risk, etc. (Morrison & Crane 2007)

7. Measuring Customer and Intermediary satisfaction

Bridging the gap between the supplier intermediary dyad and customer satisfaction is a set of measures that enables the organisation to capture the final outcomes.

7.1. Modified Balanced Scorecards

Balanced scorecards as originally conceived by Kaplan & Norton in the early 90's are well known and accepted tools for driving performance. They originally identified that financial performance was not only a very limited perspective it also was lagging behind many other leading indicators such as customer satisfaction, job satisfaction, etc. So the balanced view came from a basket of measures grouped under the headings of financial, customer, internal business processes and learning & growth. These proved to be extremely popular and organisations such as Tesco have credited the Balanced Scorecard as integral to its phenomenal success with its business strategy. Developing on from that is the application of the scorecard to alliances and other close relationships that exist in the supply chain. Appropriate measures might include shared goals and milestones, customer satisfaction, shared processes and learning and growth. According to Silco Research, as long as the relationship members identify what are the critical success factors in making their businesses work, then the Balanced Scorecard is a useful tool. (www.jungle-research.com/analysis/partnering/briefing/scorecards)

Although not identified as a scorecard Kumar, Stern & Achrol (1992) identified a number of areas that suppliers needed to measure and translated these into intermediary measures (although they termed these as resellers in their study) as follows.

Table 1 – Measures for supplier/intermediary dyad

Supplier's focus	Intermediary measures	Considerations
Goals (efficiency & productivity)	Sales	Level of sales in the context of competition, resources and targets
	Net contribution to profit	Sales minus cost to service
People management & development (HR)	Competence	Skills, knowledge & development of all relevant including staff customer facing staff and management
Internal process (Stability & control)	Loyalty	Time & effort spent on suppliers products/services in comparison to other products/services stocked
	Compliance	Behaviours related to conformity and rebellion
Growth	Sales increase	Past performance and future forecasts
Adaptation & flexibility	Flexibility and innovation	Tracking, understanding and responding to changes)
Quality of service	Customer satisfaction	Experience, level of information, service and complaints

Adapted from Kumar, Stern & Achrol (1992)

This was further supplemented by some validation areas:

- Intermediaries level of influence – given the premise that good and excellent intermediary performance increases their level of influence with the supplier (Anderson & Narus, 1990)
- Supplier satisfaction with the intermediary – higher levels of satisfaction reduces the likelihood of conflict
- Level of conflict
- Contextual variables such as competitive intensity, environmental changes (also cited as important in accounting for performance perception differences by Johnson, Krapfel & Grimm, 2001)
- Overall performance
- Supplier historical data from each intermediary account to validate the earlier responses

Respondents to this were drawn from the supplier and occupied positions that meant they had high knowledge of the intermediaries.

The first example in this section of performance measurement was the Balanced Scorecard being used by the intermediary. The second was a multi-measure approach used by the supplier to score the intermediary. While the second approach was designed some time ago the logic and measures do still appear relevant and certainly the inclusion of contextual factors such as competitive intensity and size of territory do develop a richer picture than the more simplistic Balance Scorecard as previously described. In addition a measure of customer experience as part of the customer satisfaction would enable a more thorough review. Context was also considered as a critical factor in identifying what makes a great customer experience (Lemke, Clark & Wilson, 2006) where 119 mutually exclusive experience factors were identified. Moreover, in the more collaborative environment it would seem reasonable and desirable to gain both the supplier and intermediary perspective on these areas. (An approach supported by Kumar et al) This could form the basis of a regular performance review where each party could discuss the results, implications and future improvements. Thus any perceptual differences and environmental variables could be raised and discussed. (Johnson, Krapfel & Grimm, 2001)

7.2. Perfect customer experience with Intermediaries

Frow & Payne (2007) looked at achieving a perfect customer experience and using two case studies (one with intermediaries and one direct), they identified the following issues as important:

- Recognise that it is always possible to improve the customer experience
- Identify potential for customer participation/co-creation
- Apply mapping tools and techniques to develop the ‘perfect transaction’/customer experience
- Identify how this ‘perfect transaction’ changes at different stages of the relationship
- Manage and co-ordinate customer touchpoints to deliver perfect transaction
- Measure the customer experience (satisfaction & dissatisfaction)
- Deliver an effective and consistent multi-channel experience
- Share customer information across the organisation so it can be utilised effectively by all departments to deliver an integrated service
- Identify which segments are feasible (profitable)
- Deliver consistent and coherent brand messages (rational or emotional) throughout the touchpoints
- Identify how to improve the customer experience through enhanced employee motivation

While this is a useful as a set of issues and the preceding discussion would offer support for each one of their findings this paper would like to develop this into some form of iterative process**.** Moroever it does not explicitly identify leadership or strategy as being relevant.

8. Managing the Tri-partite relationship

The preceding discussion/review would suggest that there are three key elements that need to be addressed:

1. Understanding what the customer experiences. This can also be framed as how the customer judges the experience, what their ideal is and how the current channel/intermediary performs against these factors
2. Creating and maintaining a positive customer culture in both organisations to deliver the emotional and philosophical context.
3. Creating structures, systems and processes within both organisations to deliver the functional aspects of the experience.

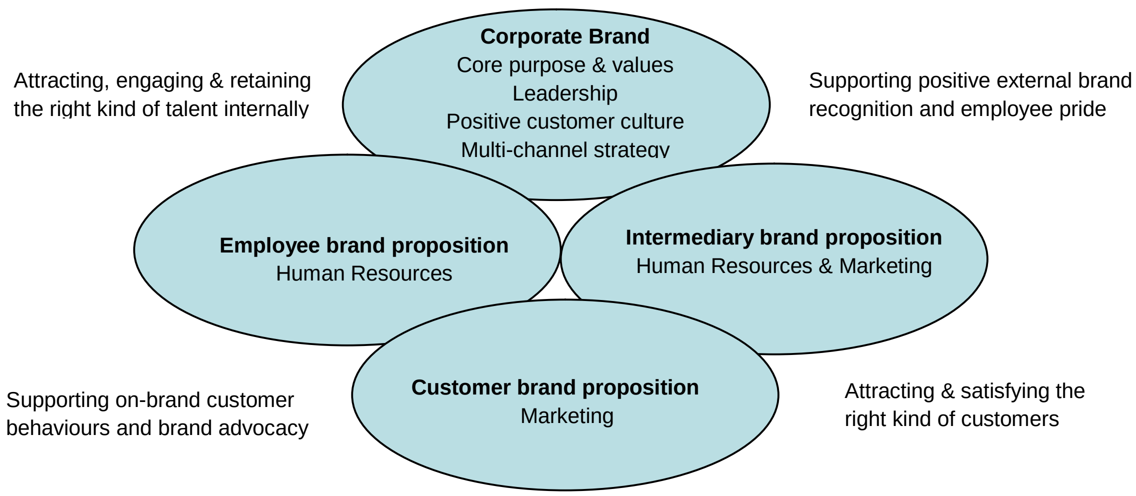
8.1. Role of Brand Management

"The ultimate aim of brand management has always been to deliver a consistent and distinctive customer experience, but this task has been particularly difficult for services brands due to the greater complexity involved in managing the service brand experience." (Mosley2007, p123)

In reviewing the literature on how to deliver the ideal customer experience through intermediaries a number of elements have been identified as important and a synthesis of these is outlined in the points above. These have now been conceptualised in the following framework Integrated Services Brand Model which has been adapted from Mosley (2007). According to Mosley 2007 (citing Barrow and Ambler,1996) the employer brand is a "*package of economic and psychological benefits provided by employments and identified with the employing company". (p.130)* In its original inception it created a clarity and coherence to the internal audience about what the brand was about. However recently it has developed to facilitate employee engagement and to guide the whole range of employee relationships so that employee behaviour and customer expectations about the brand are more aligned.

This model was considered particularly useful because it recognises the importance of core purpose & values, leadership and positive customer culture – areas that were missing in the structure-conduct-outcomes framework described in section 4. It also helps clarify expectations from both employer and employee. A further addition has been made to include a multi-channel strategy that facilitates an integrated approach to intermediaries and any other channel alternatives the supplier might employ such as direct sales through the World Wide Web. Finally in recognition that the supplier also needs to reflect the brand in its interaction with intermediaries, the intermediary brand proposition is added.

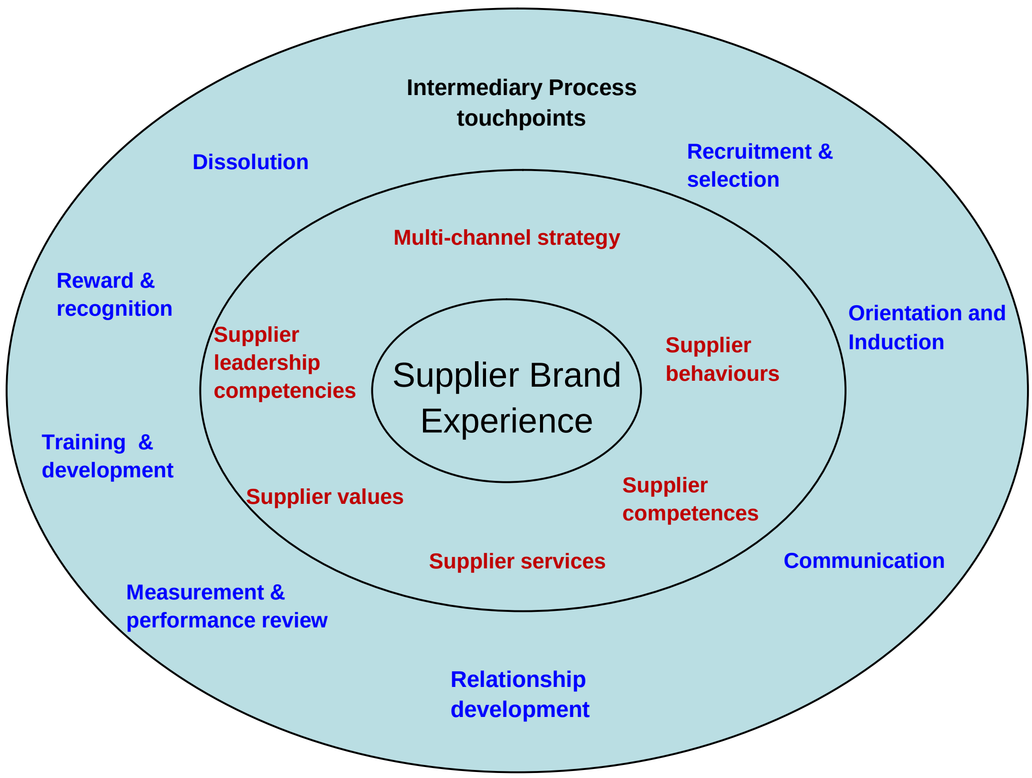
Figure 2 Integrated services brand model



Supplier Intermediary Brand Management

However in order to operationalise the Integrated Services Brand model a Supplier Intermediary Brand Experience Framework (adapted from Mosley 2007) was created to identify the touch points along the intermediary corridor.

Figure 3 – Supplier Brand Experience



At the heart of this framework lie the brand experience and what the brand represents. This is the guiding principle for the interactions between supplier and intermediary and intermediary and customer. It is supported by the supplier behaviours, competences, services, values and leadership. The proposed framework is also seen to be relevant as a set of processes that will reflect the relationship life cycle model as proposed by Dwyer, Schurr & Oh (1987). It will also allow information about the changing environment to be reflected back to the organisation and joint decisions about appropriate actions to be taken.

Recruitment & Selection

Guided by the multi-channel strategy recruit the intermediaries who:

- Have a similar or complementary culture and values and where there is empathy with your brand.
- Believe in your product in a rational and emotional way
- Are customer centric

(Donaldson & O'Toole, 2002)

Orientation and Induction

According to a number of studies looking at the relationship progression cycle (relationship development life cycle, Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987: team life cycle Tuckman, 1955; and further relationship and tasks in Situational Leadership, Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) the start of the relationship requires more emphasis on clarity of purpose, structure, roles and responsibilities. This more highly structured approach should change as the relationship develops thus addressing concerns about higher levels of formalisation having negative effects on motivation (Dwyer & Oh, 1987 quoted in Geyskens 1999) and too much direction creating automatic responses whatever the context. (e.g. call centre scripts) The need for clarity around roles and the transition from rigid to flexible structure as a relationship progresses is also supported by Clark (2002) as indicators of effective customer retention.

Given the importance of 'engagement', orientation and induction should involve appropriate front-line employees as well as business principals if appropriate. This paper recognises that intermediaries can be large organisations like B&Q or John Lewis as well as small owner managers in any sector.

Communication

Communication is the oil that facilitates the whole framework and includes speech and behaviours. The oft quoted study by Mehaberim that looked at mixed messages found that, where there was incongruence between the words used, the body language and the tone, the recipient attributed 7% of the meaning to the words used, 38% to tone and 55% to body language or behaviour. This type of perception could account for some of the differences between what managers believe they do and what they are seen to be doing.

Communication is two way with important information flowing from the supplier to the intermediary and vice-versa. While the intermediary may have valuable information about individual customers, the supplier probably has information on a wider scale such as market share, trends, etc. (Emery, 2008). Sharing of information, as was identified earlier, is a sign of trust and signals respect for the relationship.

Many organisations set up intermediary specific websites with information, contacts, forms, etc (e.g Clerical Medical) that enables the intermediary to access information when they need it. Tesco claim that their system ‘Tesco Link’ has become *“the primary IT system for the sharing of supply chain information and the development of collaborative supplier relationships, providing Tesco suppliers with EPoS data, in-store and warehouse availability levels and service level performance information.”* (Watkins, www.igd.com/CIR.asp?menuid=82&cirid=2674)

Effective communication includes sharing bad news. According to Hibbard, Kumar & Stern (2001), sharing bad news about future developments as soon as possible is important to the relationship. Subsequent ‘destructive acts’ can then be explained and the consequences explored with empathy and sensitivity. This has been shown to reduce the negative impact as there is an understanding and feeling of being treated with respect. (Folger & Skarliki 1998, cited Hibbard et al). This helps turn a potential victim storyline into a plot reconceptualised as a quest (Downing) and in Transactional Analysis terms effects an I’m okay- you’re okay stance. (Stewart and Joines)

Relationship Development

This area is supportive of the relationship development so needs to be an exchange where ideas, aspirations and goals are shared and an understanding of each other’s business is developed. It has already been identified that understanding of each other’s perspectives reduces conflict and leads to focussing on the macro level.

Measurement & Performance Review

Measurement should be against objectives and a modified Balanced Scorecard as described in section 7 as this covers both intermediary performance and customer satisfaction measures.

Given clarity about expected outcomes provided through agreed objectives, the contract, induction and regular communication performance reviews should become part of the process. These reviews should be collaborative and include ongoing training and development which is considered next.

Training and Development

While this is generally considered necessary in the case of a performance shortfall it is also desirable as an ongoing process. e.g. Clerical Medical set up a ‘Treating Customer Fairly’ programme aimed at all their intermediaries to enable them to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by TCF around brand and service. According to their website www.clericalmedical.co.uk/business/media/MZDisplayRelease.asp?id=MZ200

“This initiative forms part of Clerical Medical’s ongoing ‘Advice Matters’ programme, which provides a wide range of services designed to support intermediaries in growing their businesses.”

Reward & recognition

Given an agreed methodology such as the Balanced Scorecard then rewards and recognition as well as penalties need to be considered.

Obviously given previous discussion on the effects of incentives and penalties in the form of threats and promises it will be important to get the right balance. As the meta analysis of Geyskens et al (p228) found:

- Greater use of threats/punishments by the supplier promoted higher levels of conflict, lower economic and non-economic satisfaction for the intermediary.
- Greater use of promises/rewards by the partner promoted higher economic satisfaction and lower non-economic satisfaction. *Note: in this case we assume promise to mean economic reward only*

So equally important is the use of intrinsic reward and recognition as a way of balancing the promises point above.

Dissolution

Business contexts change and so do strategies therefore it is useful to recognise that at some stage in the future a relationship with intermediaries may cease to 'add-value' or help solve problems. Equally it may be that an intermediary will want to terminate hence the term dissolution rather than termination. In such cases an agreed procedure will help reduce and manage potential conflict which, as identified in section 4, is a critical factor in effective relationships.

9. Check List Questions

These questions were created by the attendees at a Henley Centre for Customer Management Workshop which was looking specifically at maximising value through relationships. The list identified suggestions that would enable an organisation to deliver the perfect Customer Experience through Intermediaries. This was further developed after the literature review to a more comprehensive checklist that should prove useful to any manager responsible for intermediate relationships.

Strategy

Is there a multi- channel/intermediary strategy that facilitates multi-channel integration quality?

Leadership

Who leads and manages this relationship?

What qualities does this role need?

What are the main tasks and processes of this role?

1. Intermediary selection

Is there a process and set of criteria that is used for choosing your intermediaries?

- What is the recruitment process?
- What are the criteria and why? (could include hard and soft factors like turnover, size, culture, values, etc)
- How do you handle unsuccessful applications?

2. Training

Is there an induction and on-going training programme for the intermediaries?

- How and when are new intermediaries inducted into the relationship?

- What training is provided to existing intermediaries, what triggers it and how often does it happen?
- Is it always supplier initiated?

3. Working relationship

Is the relationship with the intermediary managed in a collaborative way? (e.g Sharing information, plans, each others experiences; co-creating value; identifying the ideal customer experience, sharing responsibility for future actions, etc.)

- What do you know about the intermediaries and how is this knowledge acquired and shared internally?
- What do they know about you?
- What is provided by you to the relationship?
- What is provided by the intermediary to the relationship?
- How is empathy /commitment demonstrated by you
- How is empathy /commitment demonstrated by the intermediary
- Do you have a formal contract and what details are included?
- What is expected and not necessarily reflected in the contract?
- How do you handle conflict?
- How is dissolution handled?

4. Performance review /Recognition & reward

Is there a process to review performance on a regular basis and does it deal with good and/or poor performance by the intermediary?

Are these matched with a set of rewards/training requirements?

- How often is a review carried out?
- What measures are used?
- What incentives/rewards are offered and for what?
- What penalties are prescribed?
- How do the intermediaries respond to the reviews?
- What happens when an intermediary does not perform?

5. Customer information

Do you know what your customers want from you and your intermediary?

- How is feedback collected from the customer?
- How is this shared with the intermediary?
- How is the feedback used?

Have you designed a 'perfect/ideal' customer experience using the above data?

6. Clear Brand promise

Is there a clear brand promise that is actionable by the intermediary?

- What is the role of the intermediary
- Are activities and processes mapped to identify clear paths of action in a mixed range of circumstances?
- How much initiative is allowed/encouraged by individuals when dealing with clients?

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