GLOBAL VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

International Relationship Marketing closeness:
Is e-Relationship an Answer?

Federica Bressan

Department of Business Administration
University of Verona
Verona, Italy
federica.bressan@univr.it

Paola Signori

Department of Business Administration
University of Verona
Verona, Italy
paola.signori@univr.it

Abstract—**This research strives to discuss the importance of relational closeness in international contexts and to bring out solutions applied by companies to close their perceived distance gaps. IT tools can represent a solution to mediate Business to Business (BtoB) and Business to Consumer (BtoC) international relationships, in particular in emerging markets. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how companies develop relationships in foreign markets and which tools do they use in their e-Relationship approaches.**

Keywords – International Relationship Marketing, e-Relationship, BtoB, BtoC, Emerging Markets

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the last decades the importance of the creation of long-term relationships with customers, and more in general with stakeholders, has been constantly growing. In particular, the Relationship Marketing approach suggests creating an active dialogue and a direct interaction with critical partners in order to stimulate satisfaction and retention.

Relationship quality becomes particularly relevant in internationalisation processes, especially when there is a fast growing orientation to emerging markets, which offer new market opportunities. New stakeholders get in contact with the company, and they are often culturally and physically distant. To develop their relationships in foreign markets, companies might use a mix of instruments, and manage direct or IT-mediated relations.

The broad diffusion of technology within the society is an evident trend; individuals and businesses are globally affected by a new wave of cheap/user-friendly Internet and software revolution. New Internet and social media frontiers also allow companies to reach and interact with a growing number of subjects globally, with unpredictable time and money savings.

Helped by technology, relationship with distant stakeholders may evolve. This research strives to investigate if and how companies are aware of e-Relationship tactics, in particular in their International Relationship Marketing strategies, to create closer connections with customers reducing the perceived physical and cultural distance.

II.   LITERATURE BACKGROUND

A.   Relationship Marketing

The Relationship Marketing (RM) concept was developed in 1983, when the strategic importance of focusing on a long-term relationship with the final customer, instead of finding new clients for a single selling transaction, became evident [1]. To create a long-term relationship, it is important to maintain a dialogue with the client by investing in resources and services focused on its actual and future needs, such as after-sales services, which can influence the customer's next buying process [2; 3].

The importance of RM and the value created by long term relationships was recognised both in the industrial and services marketing contexts, because it impacts all companies' internal strategic marketing decisions and customer retention [4; 5; 6]. The traditional marketing concept defined as "transaction marketing" and based on the 4Ps marketing mix, maintains its importance and can co-exist with the RM paradigm [7; 8; 9; 10; 11]. However, the new paradigm gives more importance to relations and interactions, and the 4Ps are considered as elements that support relationships [12].

From a customer point of view, RM is important because it simplifies buying processes: a continuous dialogue established with the company reduces the perceived risks, increases knowledge and products and services quality, creates a psychological comfort and gives to the customer the opportunity to become active in a co-creation process [13; 14; 15; 6].

B.   International Relationship Marketing

The importance of RM also in an international context was evident since the beginning of its development, due to the growing inter-dependence of markets and the specific needs final customers required [2; 16; 17; 18]. In particular, relationships are critical when the delivery time, from the moment of purchase to product receipt, is long; as is the case when there is a great physical distance or when a high level of customisation is requested. This evidence is valid for both products and services, and highlights the need of a holistic relational orientation, when "people buy expectations, not things" [2, p. 89]. Furthermore, International Relationship Marketing (IRM) is essential with foreign partners to obtain strategic information and share resources and risks [19; 20].

In their internationalisation processes, companies mainly manage Business to Business (BtoB) relationships, which concerns interaction with local partners, such as distributors or sellers. These relationships are influenced by social and economic contexts [21; 22; 23; 24; 25] and by the kind of relationship created [26; 27; 28].

The main threats in international relationships with local partners are the cultural and linguistic distance, and the difficult partner evaluation to avoid opportunistic behaviours [29; 19; 30; 28; 31]. It is also considered strategic that the local partner is active in constantly sharing information about the final customer, to be able to profile values, beliefs, behaviours, expectations, every-day life and to offer them expected products or services [32; 31; 33; 34]. If the local partner is not aware of his critical role, an indirect/intermediate presence in a foreign market exposes the company to the risk of a lack of information on consumers' preferences and trends, losing actual and future market opportunities. To avoid this risk, it is necessary to create specific marketing strategies towards final customer to actively involve them [35].

Emerging markets, actually representing a growing opportunity for companies, are countries with peculiar cultural and economic characteristics [36; 37], which can influence individual behaviours [38; 28]. A specific cultural orientation is needed to show managerial adaptability and relational tendency of companies [36; 39; 33]. The creation of a trust-based relationship, in particular when it is not face-to-face but mediated through technology, is highly suggested in these countries [36; 38; 33; 37; 28].

The importance of creating close relationships in a global environment is evident, and it is more critical with great cultural and geographical distances. However, companies may tend to create direct relationships with their BtoB partners, usually carried out by IT instruments, without directly interacting with their final customers due to a mediated presence in the market.

C. E-Relationship Marketing

This research adopts the European Nordic School RM approach [40; 41; 35]. It purposes 30 different relationships that can be managed by a company; one of them is the "e-Relationship" [35]. Its concept relies upon relationships, networks and interactions IT based, that can be helpful to reduce the distance perception, decreasing also stakeholders' costs of contact. Technology also enables the creation of a new market space, where personal and business relations dynamically interact creating deep changes in socio-cultural and socio-economical contexts [42; 43] and where companies can dialogue and collaborate with their customers [44]. In this scenario, all members of the network become important for the company, in particular when they interact to share contents and to create value and sense of belonging [45; 46; 47]. Social media marketing represents a new and smarter way to connect companies with customers of their networks.

If companies are able to adapt themselves to social media characteristics [48], they may influence people intellectually and emotionally, increasing companies' credibility and potential selling, while decreasing promotional costs [47; 49;

50]. If IT is important in BtoB relationships to support direct interactions with local partners, in BtoC contexts it is essential to create closer, "direct", and more interactive relationships.

D. Development of Research Questions

As pointed out above, many studies highlighted the importance of IT to support closer relationships with every kind of stakeholder, and to reduce the perceived distance creating a dynamic dialogue. However, International Relationship Marketing researches focused on international marketing strategies in emerging markets and cross communication abilities mediated by technology, are very limited. This research helps to better understand how companies manage their relations with distant stakeholders, in dyadic buyer-seller relations within traditional and emerging markets. In particular, three research questions were developed:

Q1. How companies develop their international relationships, both BtoB and BtoC, in particular in traditional and emerging markets?

Q2. Which IT/internet tools do they use to create a closer e-Relationship with their partners (BtoB)?

Q3. Which media do they use to dialogue and build an effective e-Relationship with their final customers (BtoC)?

III. METHODOLOGY

E. Research goal

This research has been structured to discuss International Marketing Relationship closeness and verify if e-Relationship can represent a solution for companies that need to reduce the perceived distance with their foreign partners. It also aims to investigate which software or media are used to enable BtoB and/or BtoC e-Relationship.

F. Sample and data collection

To investigate companies' e-relationship orientation, a two-phases research was conducted in a high-value product industry. Kitchen industry is particularly interesting for RM, due to the tangibility of the product, which requires physical distribution and installation, and therefore the creation of a BtoB relationship is particularly relevant; furthermore, it has a high level of intangible values (such as design, quality, level of customisation) that necessitate being transferred to the final customer for a real competitive advantage. Finally, the furniture industry has been highly oriented to international markets for decades. All the 56 companies of the Italian kitchen industry, members of the main national furniture association, have been involved in the research.

In the first research phase, a CAWI method with double questionnaire was submitted to sales managers and CEOs to find answers to Q1 and Q2. Two online questionnaires were created, one for closer relationships in traditional markets, such as the western ones, and one for more distant relationships, such as emerging markets, identified as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China). The content of the questions asked was previously tested with sales and international marketing managers and experts; a pilot test of questionnaires was

submitted to some CEOs to ensure questions were clear in meaning and appropriate. Since the creation of a relationship starts from the company who is willing to begin an internationalisation process, they are the targets of this research. A reminder mailing and phone support for eventual clarifications were provided. The response rate of the questionnaire was 69,2%, which allows for generalization of results in this industry (Tab. 1).

TABLE I.   QUESTIONNAIRES SAMPLE

Number of questionnaires sent	56	100.0%
Total number of responses	32	69.3%
Number of responses on traditional markets	25	44.6%
Number of responses on emerging markets	18	32.1%
Number of respondents to both questionnaires	11	19.6%

a. Own data processing

The second research phase aimed to specifically investigate the BtoC e-Relationship. The third research question requires understanding if companies who are more distant from their final customer use IT technologies to interact with them and create a closer relationship. An online observation of social media mix and communication behaviour was conducted on two groups of companies emerged from the first phase (18 with emerging market relations; 14 with only traditional market relations). Within these groups, the observation was conducted to understand digital marketing and tools used by companies: website, newsletter, e-commerce, facebook, twitter, youtube, pinterest, linked-in, g+, flikr and others.

IV.   RESEARCH FINDINGS

G.   Direct and Mediated Relationships in foreing markets (Q1)

The analysis of the internationalisation process showed that both in traditional markets (TM) and in emerging markets (EM) companies prefer to use a BtoB internationalisation strategy, mediated through different forms of partnerships with local companies[1] (Tab. 2). Only in 3% of cases companies decided to open a flagship store in the TM, while none of them opened one in EM. This data demonstrates that companies do not (or cannot) invest in creating a direct relationship with final customers (BtoC), losing the possibility to interact with them and understand their needs and shopping preferences. If companies do not obtain directly updated market information, it therefore becomes even more important and strategic to create a stronger and closer relationship with their BtoB clients, especially focusing on market information sharing, in particular on customers' cultural and life style characteristics and purchasing trends.

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[1]   Please note that in the questionnaire more than one choice was possible and some companies use multiple partnership strategies with different subjects also in the same market. That's why the number of answers exceeds the number of vthe respondents to the questionnaire.

TABLE II.   DIRECT AND MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS WITH FINAL CUSTOMER

Traditional Markets (TM)	Frequency	%
BtoB mediated presence	127	97%
BtoC direct presence	4	3%
Total answers	131	
Emerging Markets (EM)	**Frequency**	**%**
BtoB mediated presence	78	78%
BtoC direct presence	0	0%
Total answers	78	

b. Own data processing from questionnaires

H.   BtoB e-Relationships (Q2)

In this scenario, the implementation of a BtoB e-Relationship can represent an opportunity to create a virtual connection place with a potentially high frequency of use and low cost. Therefore, the sharing of information mediated by IT, defined as anything related to the computing technology, may represent an interesting alternative to create a closer relationship with local partners.

The analysis of how, and how often, companies share information with their local BtoB partners demonstrates that in emerging markets the 64% of relationships, nearly two thirds, are mediated through IT technologies (Tab. 3). In traditional markets, instead, the direct (physical) versus IT-mediated relationship is nearly equal, respectively 48,2% and 51,8%. It also emerges that daily and weekly non-IT contacts have a double frequency with partners in traditional markets than in emerging ones. In particular, the number of personal meetings is nearly double in traditional markets.

TABLE III.   IT-MEDIATED AND DIRECT RELATIONSHIPS

Traditional Markets (TM)	Frequency	%
IT mediated relationship	41	51.8%
Direct relationship	38	48.2%
Total answers	79	
Emerging Markets (EM)	**Frequency**	**%**
IT mediated relationship	34	64.0%
Direct relationship	19	36.0%
Total answers	53	

c. Own data processing from questionnaires

A focus on which relational instrument was used in mediated relations, in both contexts, demonstrated that the use of reports, newsletters and house organs are more applied in TM (as traditional unilateral communication media), while the use of computing platforms and CRM systems are much more used in EM (as tech solutions to enable relational processes). It is interesting to note that CRM system, a specific tool to manage customer relationships, is used three times more in markets characterised by a greater distance (Tab. 4).

TABLE IV.   IT-MEDIATED BTOB RELATIONSHIPS

Tools	TM	TM %	EM	EM %
Report	17	21.5	8	15.1
Newsletter/House organ	13	16.5	6	11.3
Computing platform	7	9.0	12	22.6
CRM	4	5.0	8	15.1

d. Own data processing from questionnaires

I. BtoC e-Relationships (Q3)

A BtoC e-Relationship analysis reveals the use of a different media mix. Some e-media are used to reach awareness and to present the company profile and related products and services, such as the website; some social media are used to create interaction and dialogue with the final customers.

All companies of this sample have their own website, as a virtual showroom where it is possible to create a first step towards direct contact with all customers, both BtoB and BtoC. In some cases, it has emerged that companies have some social media profiles which are not promoted on the website, demonstrating a weak knowledge of the potential offered by e-media integration. In addition to this, none of the companies seem to use their website to promote the selling of their goods through the use of e-commerce, even when they have ready-for-delivery products in their outlets. However, 35,7% of companies in TM, and 27,8% of the ones present in EM allow customers to keep them updated about companies' news through the subscription to a newsletter. This unilateral communication strategy does not allow dialogue and interaction with customers.

It is interesting to notice that companies in EM use all types of social media, more than those present in TM only (Tab. 5); expect LinkedIn, which used more often in TM than in EM, and this can be justified by its content, since it is an online professional directory. Facebook represents the most used social media for all companies (in 2014), even if it is more used in EM (83,3%) than in TM (64,3%). The second most used social media in EM is Twitter: 61% of companies try to connect with their customer through short messages. The number of Twitter adoption is double in EM rather than in TM, where companies prefer YouTube.

Another important aspect comes from the list of other social media used. While for companies in TM only one blog and one inactive community were detected, for the group of companies exposed in EM a variety of e-media are used, such as apps, QR-code, blogs, MySpace, Vimeo and a Share button with the possibility to share contents in multiple social networks reaching a maximum integration. The heterogeneity of the instruments used to create connections and interactions represents a stimulus for innovation for all the industry and for companies in general.

The last consideration regards e-communication abilities. Even if a structured content analysis wasn't carried out, for researchers was evident how in general the creation and use of social media just followed the general trend of "being there", without a real relationship strategy, with any integration with other social media, or respect for specific media characteristics in terms of message coding and frequency.

TABLE V.   IT-MEDIATED BᴛᴏC RELATIONSHIPS

e-media	TM	TM %	EM	EM %
Website	14	100.0	18	100.0
Facebook	9	64.3	15	83.3
YouTube	6	42.9	9	50.0
Newsletter	5	35.7	5	27.8
Pinterest	4	28.6	6	33.3
Twitter	4	28.6	11	61.1
G+	2	14.3	5	27.8
LinkedIn	2	14.3	2	11.1
Flikr	1	7.1	4	22.2
e-commerce	0	0.0	0	0.0
Others	Community blog		Share button MySpace QRcode App blog Vimeo	

e. Own data processing from questionnaires

V. CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this research was to investigate how companies develop relationships in foreign markets and which tools do they use in their e-Relationship approaches. The originality of this research is the integration of International Relationship Marketing, with a comparison between emerging and traditional markets strategies, and cross e-communication abilities analysis. In particular this research has been applied in one of the most relevant and internationalised industries of Italy, characterised by a high level of intangible values that need to be communicated and shared with the final customer, together with the product on itself. The high response rate is also a plus, because it shows the commitment and the relevance of this topic for companies.

L. Theoretical Implications

The creation of a long-term relationship leads to advantages for both companies, who obtain customer retention and information sharing [2; 4; 5; 6], and customers, who reduce the perceived risks, obtaining a deeper knowledge about the product or service, and in some cases being involved in its creation process [13; 14; 15; 6]. RM importance grows especially in an international context, characterised by a higher physical and cultural distance [19; 20; 28; 32]. To reach both BtoB and BtoC critical subjects and to create a sense of belonging, companies could start a dialogue, enabled by IT, reducing the distance and decreasing promotional and connection costs [35; 44; 45; 47]. However, an empirical research was requested to understand if companies are able to manage IT tools and which ones are they using more [48].

This research confirmed the relevance of e-Relationship for companies, for both BtoB and BtoC relationships. In this industry, the presence of companies in foreign markets is mainly mediated by a partner (always in emerging markets) (Q1). The survey revealed the need to find solutions to help BtoB relations with critical foreign partners and to be able to better connect with final customers. In spite of this conscious need, managers prefer a direct/personal BtoB relationship, using technology only as a way to support it (Q2). A richer e-media selection is adopted for BtoC relations, even if with

limited abilities that are not yet driving them to the expected dialogue and interaction. However, communication behaviours differ (Q3): some companies, and in particular those oriented to emerging markets, are experimenting new tools such as apps and quick response codes; some others are not exploiting them, especially those companies whose internationalisation presence is in traditional markets only.

M. Managerial Implications

From a managerial point of view, the importance of IT mediated relations becomes clear, particularly when there is an indirect presence in foreign markets (Q1).

On one hand, companies revealed a need to interact more with BtoB partners when the physical and cultural distance perceived is higher, such as in emerging markets, where supporting technologies are used more frequently than in traditional markets to create a closer relationship. The kinds of tools mainly used in these contexts are computing platforms and CRM instruments (Q2). We'd suggest exploring the potential of social media marketing business tools, which are still unknown in this industry.

On the other hand, companies also need to reduce the perceived distance with BtoC customers for multiple reasons. When companies have a mediated presence in a foreign market, the importance of technology to create a direct and closer relationship grows, because it represents a great opportunity to understand customers needs and changing behaviours on time and at a very low cost, particularly in contexts with a high level of physical and cultural distance. In this research also emerged that, to create a dialogue and actively interact with different subjects, multiple and more appropriated media are required (Q3). In particular, an adequate social media mix is essential to open an easier connection with customers. First of all, however, manager should update their knowledge in social media communication abilities, before pretending to use those tools to support their relationship.

N. Limits and Further Research

The main limitation of this research is that the survey was conducted in one specific industrial business context and mainly on classic market relationship. Results should be tested also in a service business context, where processes are different and knowledge management may need more trustable ways to interconnect stakeholders.

We suggest further researches to extend this analysis to other kind of stakeholders' e-Relationships. Moreover, there is a need of an in depth e-media analysis to verify quantity and quality e-Relationships, and to detect if they are respecting companies strategies. In fact, the use of enabling tools may grow and become pervasive, even if they may remain underdeveloped instruments without adequate relational strategies. Future researches might explore commitment and relational skills needed in new e-context, to help companies to be able to establish a closer constructive long-term dialogue with their customers.

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