

An Empirical Examination of Business-to-Business Service Quality in Credence Based e-Services: It's impact on Loyalty

The marketing literature considers perceived service quality as a key contributor to relationship development (Chenet et al., 2010, Molinari et al., 2008) but highlights a deficiency of research exploring this concept in a B2B context. Recent studies on service quality recommend that its' operationalization should be specifically tailored to the industry under investigation (Gounaris et al., 2010) and for its extension into the online retailing and services domain (Rafiq, 2013). Furthermore, studies examining professional services, which are considered high in credence attributes are rare and in the case of web based credence services is significantly lacking from the literature (Keh & Pang, 2010; Vize et al., 2013). Holmlund, et al. (2016) found significant deficiencies in research relating to buyers purchasing complex technology based services from third party suppliers and suggest while there have been some useful contributions in the supply chain and operations management literatures, these have not been followed through in the marketing literature. The authors argue that service quality plays a significant role for businesses operating online, particularly where dynamic web technology services underpin the relationship. This paper addresses these deficiencies and develops a model that examines the role of Relationship Quality (RQ) as a significant mediating variable between B2B Service Quality antecedents and service Loyalty outcomes. Taking into consideration that retail and services sectors are increasingly driven by technology and where web technology is progressively taking center stage the nature of B2B relationships is undergoing fundamental transformations with implications for both parties involved.

Survey data is gathered from retailers with an online presence who are currently in a relationship with third party Web Solution Service Providers (WSSPs)¹. The disaggregated model shows that each RQ component - trust, satisfaction, and communication quality are significantly influenced

¹ Web Solution Service Providers (WSSPs) is a term developed for this study that defines a firm, which offers customized services for developing, designing, and marketing websites including, hosting, domain registration, and maintenance and support services specifically tailored for their clients' online business.

by elements of perceived service quality. Trust and satisfaction are significant drivers of behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Interestingly communication quality is not significantly related to loyalty, however it has significant links to service quality components namely, potential quality (pre purchase perceptions) and hard process quality (perceptions of the actual service process). Sellers of web-based services cannot ignore the complexity and ambiguity small business buyers experience when purchasing such products and services. Managers need to solidify their understanding of the full service process (before, during and after) and its impact on loyalty. It is important to emphasize that the path to achieving loyalty is through investing in core aspects of the relationship that facilitates strong communication quality, satisfaction and trust between the service provider and the buyer.