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Customer Relationships through Sales Forces and Marketing Events

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Abstract

Competitive organizations are always concerned about the development of management skills to enable them achieve competitive advantage in the reference market. Marketers are aware of difficulty of product development and implementation of strategies focused on consumer satisfaction. In this respect, competition is very strong; therefore, there must be taken appropriate strategies and marketing tactics that will lead to achieving these objectives. Building customer relationship marketing is considered a very important goal that can turn into a genuine organizational competence. This article aims to show the role played by sales forces, on the one hand, and marketing events, on the other hand, building a solid relationship, in the long term, with the customers. As components of integrated marketing communication, both sales forces and marketing events should be developed and supported by effective strategies and marketing tactics able to determine the competitive position of the organization. To capitalize on the benefits of sales forces, their position ought to be known in relation to marketing activities within the organization. It is also a "must" that advantages created by using marketing events should be acquainted by managers. But some of the most visible benefits refer to direct contacts directly with consumers through sales forces and create special moments through marketing events. Based on the literature in marketing at presenting the advantages orientation, these two communication techniques for developing and maintaining customer loyalty constitute a strong case for developing directions of action focused on these concepts. For this purpose, the article proposes several management measures in the use of sales forces and marketing events to build customer relationships.

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1. Introduction

Managers of proficient companies often ask themselves questions regarding the need for application and development of certain specific methods and tools for developing long-term relationships with customers. Building relationships with customers represents a real challenge that requires knowledge and understanding of marketing concepts as well as their practical use. Starting from relationship marketing, several authors aimed to capture the essence of this concept. Thus, Weitz and Bradford (1999) consider that relationship marketing is applied to a number of different marketing activities ranging from consumer frequency marketing programs to selling activities directed toward building partnerships with key business-to-business customers. Grönroos (1994) defines relationship

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marketing by organization efforts directed to establishing, maintaining and developing relationships with customers and other partners, a relationship that can be divided into two parts: to attract the customer and to build the relation with the customer, so that the business objectives are accomplished. Regarding the period of time in which the relationship between the two partners develops, the organization and consumer indicates that, in terms of time, relationship marketing is focused on the long run.

Berry and Parasuraman (1991) considers relationship marketing as an approach “that concerns attracting, developing, and retaining customer relationships”. The aim of the organization by implementing Relationship Marketing is to develop and maintain long-term relationships with its customers and, thus, gains a competitive advantage, which is difficult to imitate by other competitors within the market. Certainly, other objectives can be taken into account by addressing RM: customer satisfaction, share of customer, customer retention, customer loyalty etc.

Considered as a new marketing paradigm, the importance of knowledge and practical application of RM was supported by other specialists in this field, Hunt and Morgan (1994), Parvatiyar and Sheth (1994), who explained the need to focus on marketing activity, predetermining, developing and maintaining long term customer relationships.

Relationship marketing is “the ongoing process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic value at reduced cost”, as described by the authors Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000).

Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) consider RM as a philosophy, a way of doing business, a strategic orientation that focuses on keeping and improving current customers rather than winning new ones.

Grönroos, in *The Marketing Strategy Continuum*, captures various implications regarding the existing differences between transaction marketing and relationship marketing, from the organization’s perspective.

Table 1. Implications regarding marketing transaction and relationship marketing

The strategy continuum	Transaction marketing	Relationship marketing
Time perspective	Short-term focus	Long-term focus
Dominating marketing function	Marketing mix	Interactive marketing
Price elasticity	Customers tend to be more sensitive to price	Customers tend to be less sensitive to price
Measurement of customer implication	Monitoring market share – indirect approach	Managing the customer base – direct approach
Customer information system	Ad hoc customer satisfaction surveys	Real-time customer feedback system

Source: Adaptation from C. Grönroos, *The Marketing Strategy Continuum: A Marketing Concept for the 1990s*, Management Decision, Vol. 29 No. 1, 1991, pp. 7-13

Therefore, the need for developing customer relationship can be sustained taking into consideration at least two reasons:

(1). Accomplishing their own marketing objectives focused on achieving a competitive position on the reference market.

(2). Attracting and keeping profitable customers for the organization.

The development of these relationships must be based on several significant attributes:

(1). Trust, both the client and seller trust each other, that trust is generated either by a previous mutually beneficial relationship, either, in case of the buyer, the competence of the seller.

(2). Commitment, the sales force commitment towards the mission and values of the company, towards the sales targets requires total involvement in customer relationship.

(3). Open communication, the seller must know the buyer profile and be able to identify clear elements of description of the customer. By direct contact and by creating a bidirectional communication, the seller can learn about the consumer's needs and wants and, then, can develop sales techniques that will lead to the development of customer-salesperson partnership.

2. Organizational competence

One of the objectives of the organization is to strongly compete strongly within the target market and capitalize on the competitive advantage held. However, choosing the most effective competitive strategies remains a challenge

for managers. The organizational competences identification represents a priority, due to the fact that, in this manner, the organization will know what path to follow and the type of strategy to be adopted. Over time, many authors have tried to present the elements of description of these competences. Hamel and Prahalad (1994) mention the fact that these core competencies take into account a set of skills and technologies owned by the organization, which enables it to offer customers a real benefit. The authors Thompson and Richardson (1996) grouped into three distinct competencies of the organization: strategic competencies, current strategic skills policy change and learning skills, specifying that all of these skills are built based on a strategic vision of the organization indicating that it has been implemented on marketing strategy. The authors Spanos and Lioukas (2001) classify the organizational competences in three distinct categories: managerial competences, marketing competences and technological competences. On the other hand, the authors Kotler and Keller (2009) present the three specific characteristics of the core competences, namely:

- (1) Sources of competitive advantage, which contributes to the perceived benefits offered by consumers,
- (2) Difficult to imitate by competitors,
- (3) Practical applicability for different markets.

Considering that a part of the marketing skills required inside an organization to strengthen its market position is represented by the integrated marketing communication strategy, then the communication steps initiated by organizations are very important in this respect. The development of certain complementary communication steps constitutes a solution for gaining and maintaining the competitive position as well as for attracting and retaining certain category of consumers.

3. Sales force and marketing events

Orientation towards sales force and marketing events represents an effective way to achieve these marketing objectives, due to the fact that the sales force has always played a key role in developing long – term customer relationships, and marketing events provides a direct, interactive, personal method to build relationships with these customers.

Through marketing events, the sales force can achieve a number of specific objectives, such as: attracting new categories of consumers to the promoted products/services, interaction with the actual clients of the organization, knowing the profile of these clients, and so on.

The role played by the sales force differs depending on the specific stage of development and implementation of the concept within the organization. These different roles are listed in Table 2, presented below.

Table 2. The role played/assumed by the sales force

Role	Sales	Marketing	Partnering
Sales force objective	Making sales	Satisfying customer needs	Building relationships
Sales force orientation	Short-term seller needs	Short-term customer and buyer needs	Long-term customer and seller needs
Critical tasks of salespeople	Convincing buyers to buy products	Matching available offerings to buyer needs	Creating new alternatives by matching buyer needs with seller capabilities
Activities of salespeople	Influencing customers using a hard-sell approach	Influencing customers by practising adaptive selling	Building and maintaining customer relationships Organizing and leading a sales team Managing conflict
Role of salespeople	Persuader	Problem solver	Value creator

Source: Adapted from Wotruba (1991) and Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner (1998) cited in Barton A. Weitz and Kevin D. Bradford (1999), *Personal Selling and Sales Management: A Relationship Marketing Perspective*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 241-254

Therefore, due to the particularity of the activity carried out by the selling staff, the direct contact with customers and building a communicative message adapted to the profile of these clients remains one of the most effective means of communication. (Spiro and Weitz, 1990)

An effective model for implementation of an integrated communication step can be focused on the two communication techniques, sales force and marketing events, having as marketing objectives establishing a direct channel of communication with the target audience, attracting potential customers to the company's products,

informing/updating customers about the characteristics of the promoted products, etc. In this case, in order to gain a competitive position, the selected communication techniques will be represented by organizing a themed marketing event in which the sales force will present and realize demonstrations for the advertised products.

The action plan developed for this integrated communication step includes several stages:

(1). Preparing the themed event. Choosing the theme of the event will be realized taking into account a number of factors such as: the profile of target customers, similar actions initiated or not by competitors, the nature of promoted products, the company's involvement in social responsibility projects, and so on.

(2). Defining the problem identified at the level of the selected target group. This group of consumers participating in the event will be representative for the targeted consumer segment of the company. Identifying a precise problem at the level of the target group will determine the direction towards choosing several specific actions from the created event.

(3). Situation analysis. Identifying the cause of the problem, that has a direct and powerful connection with the typology of the target group (age, sex, income, purchasing behavior and consumption, attitudes towards certain products, beliefs).

(4). Establishing communication objectives may take into account the information and awareness of the existence of a problem related to, for example, the lifestyle and healthiness of the target audience, determining the participants to the event to buy the products designed for solving the problem identified.

(5). Establishing the communication strategy should consider choosing a unique communicational message built on rational and emotional elements that have a powerful impact over the target group selected for the event.

(6). Presentation and demonstration made by the sales force within the themed event.

The sales force will be supported in this endeavor by auxiliary elements provided by the marketing department of the company. For instance, the flyers and samples given to the target group participating in the event will sustain the sales force argument. These support activities will be included in the action plan of the promotional campaign.

Specific to the activities carried out by the sales force, the presentation and demonstration will be allocated to a sales strategy based on the concept of selling in the bilateral form. (Miller and Heiman, 1989) This strategy involves, as a task, applying the concept of selling focused on identifying the existing needs at the target group level and describing the appropriate product to these identified needs. Likewise, the sales force will be responsible, at this stage of the event, for the application of the concept of client based on the presentation of the best solutions for the identified problems of the target audience. As a means of accomplishment will be used a two-way communication based on attracting the present audience at the event to the presentation made by the sales force.

(7). The end of the themed seminar is a stage in which it will be sought out the establishment of contacts between the sales force and participants to the event, as well as the actual sale of the advertised products.

(8). Results evaluation of the themed event and gathering feedback from participants implies initiating certain actions of analysis and control, in order to obtain the necessary information for continuing the integrated communication steps supported by the company.

4. Conclusions

It is obvious that a powerful organization focuses on identifying those organizational competences, which enable the holding of the competitive position in the field of activity. The direction towards applying an integrated communication step focused on the two components, sales force and event marketing, can substantially contribute to achieving competitive success and gaining loyal clients for the company. However, the complexity of the implementation of those communication techniques implies genuine marketing skills developed in this respect. On the other hand, we cannot talk about the efficiency of the employment of a combined event with the sales force, if the latter is not actually sustained by precise marketing activities. Attracting the target customers to the organized events and persuading them through the activities performed by the sales force constitute specific marketing objectives. By combining these techniques and developing certain thematic events suitable to the target consumer profile, there can be developed long-term customer relationships. The attractiveness of the two techniques is displayed among the public due to the interest in themed events, on one hand, and the direct involvement of sales

force, on the other hand. If managers will implement a customer loyalty strategy using these communication techniques, there will be respected the correct and efficient implementation rules in order to obtain positive results. Close monitoring of all the specific stages of development of the scheduled event and clear description of sustained activities by the sales force constitute compulsory conditions that have to be respected.

The orientation towards the integrated marketing communication strategies enables the organization to achieve its communicational objectives through differentiation from the actions of other competitors. Therefore, through marketing activities oriented towards communication, preparation of sales force in order to be able to sustain presentations and demonstrations at certain marketing events may constitute a priority in the management of sales force activities.

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