

TOWARDS GROWTH AND PROFITABILITY THROUGH RELATIONSHIP MARKETING: THE CASE OF THE TYRE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The study sought to explore the role of customer relationship management in generating growth and sustaining profitability in the tyre manufacturing industry of Zimbabwe. The main objectives were to find out the level of awareness of the relationship marketing concept within tyre manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe; to evaluate the level of adoption and implementation of relationship marketing by players within the tyre manufacturing industry and to find out the contribution to profitability and business growth of relationship marketing in the tyre manufacturing industry. The study adopted the exploratory and descriptive research design. The study was exploratory in that it was not clear whether relationship marketing was being adopted in the tyre manufacturing industry. It was also descriptive in that a detailed account of what is happening was then given. The study focused on all the three tyre manufacturing companies, thirty three dealers and their biggest customers. A total of 114 respondents (83 customers and 33 tyre manufacturing representatives) were used as study subjects. Questionnaires were used as research instruments to collect data. The research findings revealed that building of relationships is important in the tyre industry in Zimbabwe as it plays a critical role in gaining customer loyalty, retaining profitable customers and increasing their customer life-time value

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(CLTV). The study also reveals that once customers are loyal then company growth and profitability are sustained. The study recommends that tyre manufacturing companies broaden their view of customer relations and incorporate the use of information communication technology to help implement lifetime relationships with their clients and stimulate corporate growth. The study also recommends that the organisations undergo a culture reform and align all their employees in all departments, to the demands and needs of ideal and effective relationship marketing.

Keywords

Relationship marketing, Relationship management, Relationship building, Relationship development, supply chain, sustaining, profitability, growth.

List of acronyms

RM - Relationship marketing

CRM – Customer Relationship Management

1. Introduction

Customers determine the bottom line of any organization. This is because once they stop buying the product of any company then the company is likely to become extinct. Gilmore and McMullan (2009) citing McMullan and Gilmore (2003) note that it has become of interest for organisations to measure the lifetime profitability of customers resulting in creation of relationships with them. This shift in company thinking has dovetailed to the emergence of the concept of relationship marketing (Veloutsou, Saren and Tzokas, 2002). Customer relationships seem to be lacking in the tyre manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe. An analysis of the Zimbabwe tyre manufacturing companies' financial reports for the periods 2010 and 2011 indicate that these tyre companies were battling with low profitability emanating from low revenues. A further analysis of the players in the industry over the last ten years indicate that the Zimbabwean tyre industry has been characterised by the mushrooming of unregistered tyre dealers, influx of second hand tyre traders and direct importation of tyres by cross boarder transporters and some mines. The market also witnessed the arrival of other premium brands like Bridgestone, Firestone, Continental, Silverstone and Yokohama. With such an increase in product choice, the source of competitive advantage would lie not just in the uniqueness of offering but also in the

relationships with customers. This study sought to find out the situation regarding the three tyre manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe creation of relationships with customers thereby locking them in and increase their switching costs.

Vast literature exists on the subject of building relationships with customers. Research in customer relationship management has somehow concentrated in the financial, grocery, clothing retail and airline industries. Although, research on customer relationship management has been conducted in automotive industry, it has tended to focus on supply chain management (Naude and Badenhorst-Weiss, 2011). Customer relationship management researches in the tyre industry are somehow limited. This study therefore analyses customer relationship management strategies that are being implemented by tyre manufacturers in Zimbabwe given that their market shares are threatened by imports.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The evolution of the RM concept

Sheth (2002) notes three historical drivers of RM; the energy crisis in the 1970s and its effect on the economy, the emergence of services marketing, and business to business marketing. According to Grönroos (2004), the term RM was first introduced by Berry in 1983 and was later used by Jackson in 1985 in a business to business context. However, citing various scholars like Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995a), Arndt (1979), Levitt (1983a), Grönroos (2004) notes that RM had been in existence much earlier, though in some cases, under different terminology. Iglesias, Sauquet and Montaña (2011) citing Hunt and Morgan, (1994) and Grönroos, (1997) argue that, to establish RM, it is particularly important to create the appropriate corporate culture that is conducive for RM. According to Iglesias, Sauquet and Montaña (2011) citing Moller and Halinen, (2000), while the definition of RM first centred on a business and its customer, over time this definition has been broadened to include the various networks established by businesses. Eiriz and Wilson, (2006) depict RM as having evolved from other disciplines like economics, political science, law, sociology, social psychology and organizational science. These scholars see it as having been premised on different theories; transactions costs theory in economics, theories of power in political science, social exchange theory in sociology and social

psychology, relational contracting theory in law and resource dependency theory in organizational sciences. They see these as the foundations of RM. Arias, (1998), citing Cova and Pras (1995) notes that management in Asia differs from management in Western countries, where in Asia the emphasis is the family as the main economic actor rather than the firm, the focus being long term, risk reduction and consensus in decision making. They therefore argue that the growth of the Chinese market has brought the need for RM.

2.2 The importance and benefits of RM

In a case study of Kwik-fit insurance services by Waite, (2001), it was noted that the success of the company was attributed to effective RM. Fleury, Fleury, (2007) agree with the view that in the service shop market, it is important for companies identify, attract and keep new customers. Different scholars concur that RM creates benefits for both the supplier and the buyer, Grönroos (2004), Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009). Grönroos (2004) argues that RM creates a sense of security, control, trust, minimized purchasing risks, and ultimately a reduction in the costs of being a customer.). Harwood and Garry (2006) also note the importance of RM. They cite Davenport (1994), who argues that around two thirds of information and operational knowledge is obtained from informal face to face interactions. Loftus, Meyers, (1994) citing More (1986) and Roger (1983) argue that relationship management affects the adoption rate of the new technology by companies. Citing Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009) referring to a study by Yau et al. (2000) in Hong Kong concur that RM is of critical importance in the manufacturing industry than the retail industry. This is because the manufacturing industry tends to have few but large business to business transactions. However, Grönroos (2004) argue that the importance of RM should depend on the customer, noting that some customers just want a transactional contact while others are willing to have a relational contact with the organization. This view is also shared by Ward and Dagger (2007). Grönroos (2004) citing Grönroos (1997) goes further to put the customers that want to create a relationship with the business as those that may prefer a passive relationship, or active relationship. Those that prefer an active relationship seek to be contacted and those that prefer a passive relationship just want to be content by the mere knowledge that the supplier should be there as long as they are in need of the supplier. Ward and Dagger (2007) also consider the duration of the relationship as well as the frequency of purchase of the product as being affected by the nature of the service product. Harland,

Knight, Lamming and Walker (2005) note that RM is particularly important in outsourcing arrangements. Lyons, Coronado, and Michaelides, (2006) similarly emphasize the importance of relationship management in build to order arrangements.

2.3 The success of RM in organizations

In a study by Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009) on the impact of RM in a Thai context, they found that sales managers consider bonding, empathy, reciprocity and trust as the variables that affect the success of RM. They also noted that the company image, information exchange and time as being pointed out as the key factors that help to build the bonding, empathy, reciprocity and trust. This in turn is noted as contributing to the company performance. According to Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009), studies by Yau et al. (2000) and Sin et al., (2002) and (2006) in China and Hong Kong found that relationships can be affected by decision-making, uncertainty as well as perceived similarity. These were found to positively affect relationships. Opportunism was found to negatively affect relationships. Additionally, Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009) citing Lee et al.(2001); Sin et al. (2006), note that business performance is also affected by RM, which they note as being further cemented by the quality and interdependence of the relationship. Barry, Dion and Johnson, (2008) take relationship quality as referring to the level of satisfaction, the level of trust as well as affective commitment between the parties involved which they consider as affecting the relationship strength apart from perceived value and switching costs. In their study on the role of culture in RM, Iglesias, Sauquet and Montaña (2011) argue that the key values required for successful RM are i) focusing on the customer and ii) having high concern for employees. They also note that shared values like being results oriented, having some flexibility, being innovative, a culture of teamwork, commitment and trust are important in having an RM orientation in the organization. Citing Chesbrough (2003) and Mo'ller, (2010), Gebauer, Truffer, Binz, and Störmer, (2012) argue that is important for organizations to network in order to be innovative. The advocacy by Gustafsson, Kristensson, Witell, (2012) for customer co-creation service innovation can taken to be somehow linked to the concept of RM that is advocated for by various scholars.

3. Methodology

The data collection approach in this study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Exploratory and descriptive research designs were adopted to gather information about RM in the Zimbabwe tyre manufacturing industry. According to the Zimbabwe Registrar of factories, there are three registered tyre manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe. The study focused on all the tyre manufacturers, identified in this paper as company A, company B and company C. The target population were all Sales and Marketing Managers, Branch Managers and Sales Representatives from the three companies, as well as the key accounts for these three tyre manufacturers. The study assumed that these respondents are likely to be involved in the RM programs of their respective companies and therefore making them suitable to be the study subjects. Table 1 summarise the target population and total number of Sales and marketing managers, Branch Managers and Sales representatives that were interviewed.

Table 1: Target population and sample sizes

Tyre Manufacturer	Sales and Marketing Managers	Sample	Sample Size	Branch Managers	Sample	Sample Size	Sales Reps	Sample	Sample Size
A	1	1	100%	9	8	89%	4	3	75%
B	2	2	100%	8	7	88%	4	3	75%
C	2	2	100%	2	2	100%	7	7	100%
Total	5	5	100%	19	17	89%	15	13	87%

Source: Field research

Given the small numbers of the Sales and Marketing Managers, a census was used to select respondents. Two of the tyre manufacturers A and B have more branches throughout the country than Company C. The study left out just one branch for each of the two tyre manufacturers whilst a census was done for the branches for Company C.

The Pareto principle (the 80–20 rule, law of the vital few, or the principle of factor parity) was used in selecting the target customers. This approach resulted in customers participating in the study being industrial customers who resell their products. This is the category of customers that the tyre manufacturers are likely to target for retaining given the volumes of business they deal with. The total number of targeted customers was 415 and the sample was 83 customers making a sample size of 20%. This was reached at as follows:

Company A had 125 customers that contribute 80% of the sales and a 20% sample of these gave 25 participants. Company B had a total of 110 customers that contribute 80% of their sales and a 20% sample of these gave 22 participants. Company C had 180 customers that contribute 80% of their sales and a sample of 20% gave of these gave 36 participants. This study used both self administered and drop and pick questionnaires to collect data from tyre respondents which made data collection economic and ensured uniformity and standardization of questions, as well as reaching at a number of respondents at the same time. Structured interviews were also used to collect data. An interview guide was prepared with various questions, allowing for vague answers and questions that were not clear to be clarified. Validity and reliability was achieved by carefully choosing the appropriate methodological approach and addressing the inherent weaknesses of the methodology for example asking simple and straight forward questions in the questionnaire that were related to the study objectives and no names were included for confidentiality. The questionnaires were subjected to pre-testing with a small sample of respondents and corrections were made the actual field use. The data was checked, edited, coded, cleaned and then analysed.

4. Results

- a) According to the survey, out of the 5 targeted sales and marketing managers, 100% responded, out of the 17 sampled branch managers, 88% responded, out of the 83 sampled corporate customers 97.6% responded and 33 tyre dealers' representatives out of 40 responded.
- b) The study found that the 3 tyre manufacturers maintain a customer database which is done through generic financial management software with no marketing orientation.
- c) The tyre manufacturers have manageable total key customer base of below 200, which clearly highlights that these organizations can be able to forge relationships with their clients. The study found that the tyre manufacturers have branches throughout the country as a means to reach out to customers.
- d) According to this study, out of the 33 dealers 27 respondents maintain a customer database whilst 6 indicated that they do not maintain the data base. The fact that 81.82% of the respondents maintain a database show that emphasis is placed in managing relationships to facilitate after sales service.

- e) Of the 33 dealers, 43% indicated that they have retained their customers for more than 5 years. Interestingly, 27% indicated that they have acquired and retained new customers in the past two years after embarking on some CRM activities.
- f) The study also sought to establish from customers how long they have dealt with their tyre manufacturer for either new tyres or re-treading business. The results are as shown in the table 2 below.

Table 2: Period customers have dealt with their tyre manufacturer:

Duration	Number of respondents
1 year and below	1
1 to 2 years	17
2 to 3 years	3
3 to 4 years	3
4 to 5 years	8
More than 5 years	49
Total	81

Source: Field research

The study sought to identify the benefits that tyre manufacturers get in exchange of the costs they incur in building these relationships. The customers were asked to indicate whether they have benefited from long trading relations. Of the 81 respondents, sixty nine (85%) said that the long trading relations with the tyre suppliers have been significantly beneficial to their organizations. On the contrary, 15% of respondents (12 respondents) viewed the long trading relations indifferently; as it sometimes exposes them to exorbitant prices hence prefer to buy from where it is cheaper. Those who said the longevity of business dealings is beneficial gave the following reasons that it: saves them searching costs thus enhancing their profits, guarantees consistent supply of product in times of shortages, cuts down transaction costs, there is provision of free after sales services; scrap surveys, fleet surveys fitment and training services as well as discounts. Of the 33 dealers, 28 (84.85%) acknowledged that there were benefits accruing to the dealers from maintaining long trading relations. They noted that it was cheaper to service

a long standing customer than to find a new one. The benefits were noted as emanating in the following ways: becoming the preferred supplier of their customers enabled them to plan their stock holding and cash flows better, they do not chase for orders thus selling costs are reduced hence increases profits, they often charge premium prices thus enhancing profits, there is reluctance by customers to try new suppliers and products and also free word of mouth advertising through testimonials.

The main reason cited by the 15.15% of the respondents who felt that the supplier does not benefit from the relationship was that customers can readily shift suppliers in case of product shortages.

- g) Out of the 81 customers, 77 respondents (95.06%) indicated that they are less likely to shift suppliers whilst only four (4.94%) indicated that they are more likely to shift suppliers. Those who indicated that they were less likely to shift suppliers noted that they were satisfied with the manufacturer they were dealing with and that they had established an excellent rapport with them.
- h) Respondents were asked to highlight the reasons why they continue to give purchase preference to their tyre supplier. The reasons given are highlighted on the table 3 below.

Table 3: Reason for customers to continue dealing with a supplier

Reason	Frequency
Supplier understands our needs	9
Offer competitive pricing	5
On time delivery of product	13
Provision of relevant information	6
Special treatment as a loyal customer	11
Offer solutions to operational problems	23
Professional and ethical business practices	5
Staff with good product knowledge	9
Total	81

Source: Field research

As it can be seen the most preferred supplier is the one who offers solutions to operational problems (28%), followed by timely delivery (16%) and special treatment of loyal customers (14%)

- i) The study sought to establish from the suppliers what they felt were the causes of customers being retained over longer periods. The most frequent response (33%) was that because they provide their customers with relevant information and that they were friendly and professional (18%). The other reasons given with less frequency included: good product quality, provision of after sales services (Product support), giving promotional materials like caps, cups, T-Shirts and diaries to loyal customers and corporate sponsored events such as golf days. It was interesting to note that price was not considered a priority in the formation and development of business relationships but more emphasis was placed on service quality, product durability, product quality and prompt delivery as key factors for relationship development.

These findings concur with the theory given by Stone et al (2000), on the benefits of customer relationship management that companies accrue benefits from relationships such as higher customer profitability, reduced costs of sales and improved customer retention & loyalty.

- j) Respondents were asked to indicate the factor/s they consider as important for the nurturing of perfect links and ties between their organization and the supplier. 81 respondents responded on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. 43% of the respondents strongly agreed whilst 33% agreed that quick turnaround of service returns would strengthen relations. The fact that a total of 76% either agreed or strongly agreed makes this an important factor in customer relationship management. A total of seventy-eight per-cent (78%) of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the point that effective customer training programs are essential in relationship building. This after sales service provided by tyre manufacturers instils the sense of a relationship which fosters trust and confidence among parties. Fifty one respondents representing 63%, strongly agreed and twenty three (28%) agreed that suppliers who offer alternative

solutions to problems are most likely to build strong relations thus leading to customer retention and loyalty. On efficient delivery systems, 80 respondents strongly agreed and agreed. These represent ninety-nine percent (99%) of the respondents. Seventy percent of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that well trained sales representatives strengthen buyer-seller relations. Interestingly, credit terms and discounts were found to be less important in relationship building. Only thirty-one percent (31%) either agreed or disagreed. Forty-three per-cent of the respondents neither agree nor disagree whilst fifteen percent (15%) and eleven percent (11%) strongly disagree and disagree respectively that credit terms and discounts were important. Seventy-four percent (74%) and twenty two percent (22%) strongly agreed and agreed respectively that effective after sales service and technical support is essential in customer relationship management. According to Christopher et al, 2002, organisations are partnering with other members of the supply chain to improve the performance of the customer value delivery network. Supplier satisfaction means that they can rely on suppliers to help it improve its own quality, reduce cost and develop new products quickly. Forty one respondents (51%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the fact that mutual development of product and services contributes o relationship building. The survey uncovered other salient elements of relationship development, which were not covered fully by scholars in the subject.

Respondents mentioned the following: cocktail parties can extend the informal contact between a supplier and a customer, lunch invitations resulting in business being discussed over lunch, congratulatory messages for customers achievements/milestones, knowing customers by name which can make customers feel important when addressed by their real names rather than by account number and sports and recreation activities, as they result in business being discussed informally.

These findings also indicate that informal meetings with customers help in improving formal relationships between the two parties thus making the relationship strong.

- k)** To find out the points of contact that could result in customer RM in the organizations, the level of interaction between customers and the various departments was established. The study highlighted that twenty eight (34.57%) of the customers make contact with the distribution department. Twenty four (29.63%) of the respondents indicated that they also make contact with Finance whilst eighteen (22%) do so with Production department.

Only seven (9%) interact with HR and four (5%) with other departments. Those other departments cited were I.T and training departments.

5. Conclusions

The main objectives were to find out: the level of awareness of the RM concept within tyre manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe; to evaluate the adoption and implementation of RM by players within the Zimbabwean tyre manufacturing industry and to find out the perceptions about the benefits leading to profitability and business growth emanating from the adoption and implementation of RM by players in the tyre manufacturing industry in Zimbabwe.

Following the analysis of findings, the study came out with the following conclusions.

- i) Players in the tyre manufacturing industry in Zimbabwe are aware of the RM concept as seen from the programmes they are undertaking. The companies use customer retention strategies that include the maintenance of customer database as 85% of the respondents maintain customer databases.
- ii) Tyre companies in Zimbabwe have implemented the RM concept to a larger extent, as shown by 61% of tyre manufacturers who have managed to retain their key clients over longer periods of time. From the findings, 61% of the dealer respondents confirmed that they have retained their key customers for over three years.
- iii) The customers have their own preferred suppliers of tyres that they patronize on regular bases because of certain benefits they accrue from that supplier. 60% of the respondent customers indicated that they have been trading with their supplier for over 5 years and another 10% for 4 to 5 years. This confirms that there are certain value benefits accruing to both parties in the relationship.
- iv) Involving customers in product development ensures a solid foundation of a long term relationship. Relations with customers can be improved if the company becomes highly responsive to customer's specific requests. Increased technical support services to customers and training of customer's staff in product use, storage of products and other related issues builds long lasting relationships.
- v) A successful customer relationship management campaign requires total organisation commitment as 34% of the 81 customers indicated that they interact with Distribution Department, 30% with Finance and 22% with Production. This almost even spread

- indicates that it is important for tyre manufacturing companies to ensure company-wide customer relationship management approach so as to strengthen relations, retain customers and increase revenue and profitability.
- vi) Price is not considered a priority in the formation and development of business relationships in industrial marketing but more emphasis is placed on service quality, product durability, product quality and prompt delivery as key factors for relationship development. Prompt delivery, favourable payment terms and discount on bulk purchases were established to play a pivotal role in aiding the relationship building process.
 - v) There is a positive relationship between CRM and value creation. These results agree with the ideas presented by the various authors and in the theoretical background which prove that buyers and sellers focus on value enhancement through the certainty of more satisfying exchanges (Gronroos et al,1994).

6. Study Recommendations

The study recommends that RM must be embraced by the organizations so that it becomes an organization-wide responsibility that should be embraced by all employees regardless of departments. It should be implemented in all its facets and should be used as a source of competitive advantage. It must be extended and be linked to the concept of total quality management, as this can result in more notable measurable outcomes like reductions in costs. The study recommends more quantitative research based on statistical analysis using tools like regression analysis to be carried out to determine the actual quantitative relationships of RM and profitability and company growth in the tyre manufacturing industry to support the findings of this study.

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