

CUSTOMER LOYALTY PROGRAMS: FROM SINGLE PARTNER TO MULTI PARTNER

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes are taking place in the overall business environment. Due to a proliferation of similar looking and performing products the competitive advantage that organizations achieved due to product differentiation is now not possible for longer time. Now a day's only differentiated product is not sufficient but there should be some additional means to retain their customers. Customer loyalty is a much discussed topic among retail managers in all kind of businesses. Academic research on loyalty has received considerable attention and is largely focused on measurement issues. Customer Loyalty Programs can be considered as one of the popular tool for building loyalty in their customers. So now it is the very important for all firms to have or to plan the implementation of customer loyalty initiatives such as loyalty cards or frequent user programs. In this paper detailed information about loyalty programs are given. We also explained important benefits of loyalty programs. This paper also explains how there is evolution of loyalty program from single vendor / partner to Multi partner loyalty programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Few decades ago the limited competition and increasing consumer demand allowed companies to neglect the thinking about relationship since consumers were buying anyway. The traditional view on marketing had an emphasis on acquiring new customers and by doing so, gaining market share. Today due to the current economic crisis, the competition is intensive it is now very important for companies to struggle to maintain their customers and earn as much profit as they can.

Further customers have more buying options and their tastes are highly fractionized. In other words, customers have become more demanding and harder to satisfy. Various trends such as shortening of product life cycles, increased specialization in some service areas and the need to currently focus on customer preference are the reasons for which customer relationship management (CRM) methods are implemented in the most creative ways up to date (Lee et al, 2010). One of the CRM tool employed by various firms is the loyalty card and companies link it to their enterprise resource management (ERM) and CRM databases.

Fornell (1992) mentioned that switching barriers makes it costly for the customer to switch brand, vendor or store. To accomplish switching barriers companies' make it difficult, expensive and sometimes even illegal for customers to switch. There are various examples of switching barriers like, search costs, transaction costs, loyal customer discounts, customer habit, emotional cost etc. Basically any pursuit from the company to limit the customers brand alternatives, to achieve repeated purchases can be equivalent to a strategy for building up switching barriers for customers.

Customer satisfaction on the other hand makes it costly for the competitors to entice other companies' customers. A common example of satisfaction and switching barriers is the airline companies and their frequent flyers program, which are designed to enhance repeated purchases by providing economic incentives for the customers to remain loyal. A measurement for successful customer satisfaction is high customer retention leading to loyal customers. According to (Fornell, 1992) Benefits of high customer satisfaction are increased profits and that customer satisfaction can generate a favorable word of mouth.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION TO CUSTOMER LOYALTY:

A Harvard Business Review study found that **48% of customers who had negative experiences with a company told 10 or more people**. As unhappy or dissatisfied customers cost more than you think (Paul G Linnel) so firm must focus on customer satisfaction. Many empirical studies have shown that customer satisfaction secures future revenues (Bolton, 1998; Fornell,1992), reduces future transactions costs (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), decreases price elasticity

(Anderson, 1996), and minimizes the likelihood of customers defecting if quality falters (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993). Customer satisfaction is regarded as customers can get more benefits than their cost (Liu and Yen, 2010). As the satisfaction precedes the loyalty marketer must find means to increase satisfaction for their customers. Loyalty can be achieved through various means. If we think in numbers, some of the reasons why it pays to invest in loyalty management was identified by Singh (2009) as:

- A cost of 7-10 times higher to recruit a new customer than the cost of maintaining the existing;
- A customer retention rate increased by 5% can increase earnings by up to 85% total;
- An increase of 2% loyalty is equivalent in some sectors with a cost reduction of 10%.

LOYALTY PROGRAMS AS A MEAN TO ACHIEVE CUSTOMER LOYALTY:

In the context of maintaining long term relationship with customers (popularly known as CRM) the loyalty programs have become a popular marketing tool to encourage loyal customer behavior (Tuzovic and Mangold, 2008). Over the years, consumer enthusiasm to enroll in these programs has rapidly grown (Liu and Yang, 2009). During the 1990s, many American and European grocery retailers established loyalty programs. According to ACNielsen (2005), more than 60% of European and American consumers belonged to at least one grocery store loyalty program in 2005, and memberships have experienced double-digit annual growth rates (11%).

Customer loyalty programs can be a gift and a curse. When done well, they can keep customers coming back for repeat purchases, potentially turning a passerby customer into a loyal brand advocate.

WHAT IS LOYALTY?

Loyalty has been widely researched in the domain of marketing. It has been found by researchers that a satisfied customer tends to be loyal. Customer Loyalty is a "retention with attitude" (Knox & Maclan, 1998) "Consumer Loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand (store) or the same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause a switching behaviour." (Oliver, 1999). "Loyalty is the commitment of customer to a particular brand or company." (Consumer Loyalty Research Center, 2001).

Customer loyalty is defined as a customer who repurchases from the same service provider whenever possible, and who continues to recommend or maintains a positive attitude towards the service provider (Bloemer et al. 1999, Gremler and Brown 1999, Shoemaker and Lewis 1999, Kandampully and Suhartanto 2000). Customer loyalty appears to consist of three separate dimensions, namely, the behavioral, attitudinal and cognitive dimensions (Wong and Sohal, 2003). Customer loyalty has been generally described as occurring when customers: 1- repeatedly

purchase goods or service over time, and, 2- hold favorable attitudes towards goods or service, or towards the company supplying the goods or service (Wong and Sohal, 2003b). Customer loyalty has been studied for several decades by marketers but it is not a well understood phenomenon (Gremler, 1995). Furthermore, there is no consensus on the most appropriate way to measure loyalty.

There are three groups of studies which reflect both the major approaches to defining and/or measuring customer loyalty and the limitation of these approaches. These three groups are: (1) loyalty as repeat purchase behavior (e.g., Liljander and Strandvik, 1993), (2) a composite approach of repeat patronage combine with an attitudinal component (e.g, Dick and Basu, 1994), and (3) a psychological state of loyalty (e.g, Czepiel, 1990a). The first approach consider loyalty is either actual purchase behavior or repeat purchase intention and /or behavior. But this approach has long been criticized for leading to spurious loyalty (Day, 1969) while the another approach i.e. composite approach lacks theory (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). Due to lack of real alternatives and high switching barriers Customers may be loyal. Further Customers may also be loyal because they are satisfied and thus want to continue the relationship.

In the business context, loyalty is the customer's commitment to do business with a particular organization which effects in repeat purchases of goods and services of that organization. It also results in recommending the goods and services to friends and associates (McIlroy, Barnett, 2000). The key to the successful adoption of relationship marketing lies in the building of client loyalty in dynamic business environments (Morris et al., 1999).

LOYALTY & SATISFACTION

The Marketing literature already mentioned that customer satisfaction is a key antecedent to loyalty and repurchase behavior. The widely accepted view among the marketing scholars and practitioners is that customer satisfaction has positively impacts on purchase intentions as well as behavior. However, it has been found that customer satisfaction, in no way, can guarantee customer loyalty. Therefore, much research has been done in this area and with interesting results. However it is found that in households that face service problems, only 54% would maintain brand loyalty even after satisfactory resolution of the problems (Chandrasekaran et al, 2007). They also conclude that strongly held satisfaction will only lead to loyalty. In addition, prior relational experience with the service provider would also translate into loyalty. This shows positive effect of satisfaction on loyalty.

It is also found that customer satisfaction explains less than twenty five percent of the variance in repeat purchase which is considered to be major cue for customer loyalty (Henard, 2001).

They also point out the possibility of other factors excluding satisfaction that have an effect on loyalty. There are many such key influencing factors like customers' perceived value, brand trust, customers' satisfaction, repeat purchase behavior, and commitment. Commitment and repeat purchase behavior are considered as necessary conditions for brand loyalty followed by perceived value, satisfaction, and brand trust. Normally unsatisfied customers are not loyal customers, therefore customer satisfaction is important for businesses.(Boundless, 14). Customer satisfaction has significant relationship with some of the loyalty dimensions. These dimensions include emotional, motivational, and trust dimensions (Arash Shahin, Ali Asghar Abandi , 2011)

. As the nature of these dimensions indicates, they are due to customer satisfaction of products, services, and organization. Other loyalty dimensions that include attitudinal, behavioral, cognitional, and commitment are somehow indicators of customer understanding and recognition of products, services, and organization that results in creating customer commitment and repeated buying. These dimensions do not have significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Thus, it can be said that satisfaction impacts on customer's feelings towards an organization and its products, but it cannot be a factor that makes customers loyal and committed towards organization.

As shown in the above figure there are also contradictory finding for few service providers like local telephone service provider has initially no relationship between satisfaction & loyalty rather loyalty comes first and the satisfaction.(Prof. Ken Homa, Georgetown University)

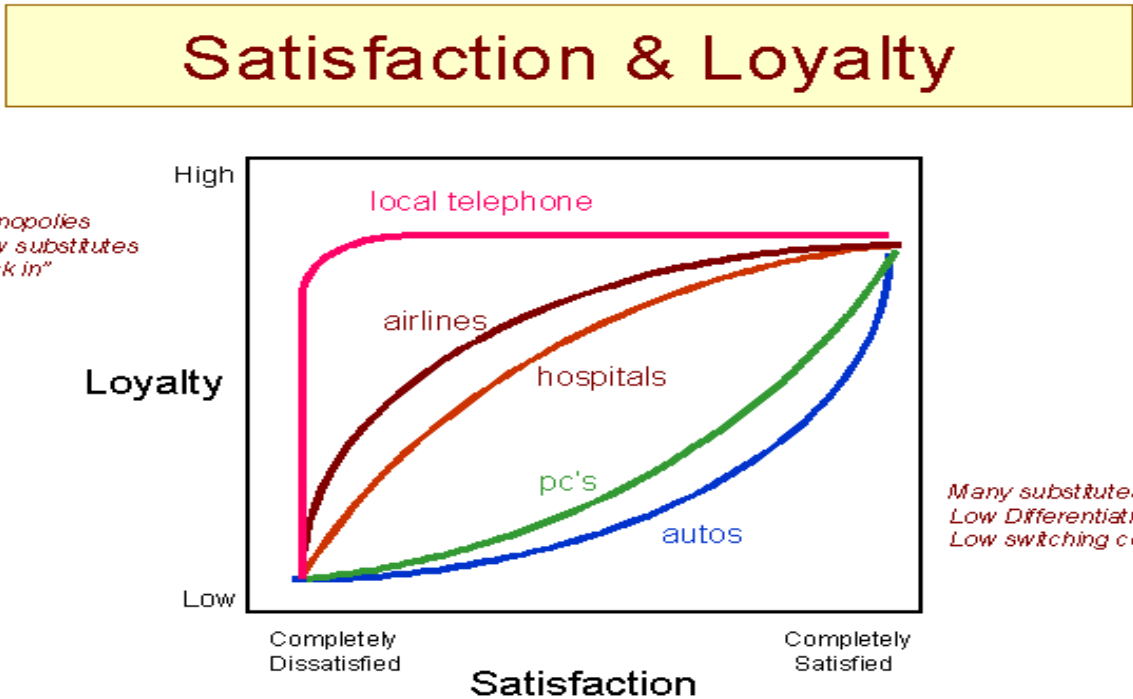


Fig: 1-Relationship between Satisfaction & Loyalty Business Strategy

CUSTOMER LOYALTY PROGRAMS:

Loyalty among customers can be considered to be susceptible as customers tend to shift products and services on their perception of getting better value, convenience or quality elsewhere. It is therefore, of crucial importance to a marketer to ensure the minimization of customer shift. In order to provide suitable solution for the same, there is emergence of various loyalty programs. These programs are found useful for retaining customers. In marketing generally and in retailing more specifically, a **loyalty card, rewards card, points card, advantage card, or club card** is a plastic or paper card, visually similar to a credit card, debit card, or digital card that identifies the card holder as a member in a loyalty program. By presenting the card, the purchaser is typically entitled to either a discount on the current purchase, or an allotment of points that can be used for future purchases.

WHAT IS LOYALTY PROGRAM?

Many researchers have defined loyalty programs in various ways. They had revealed importance of various aspects of programs in their definitions. Any institutionalized incentive system that attempts to enhance consumers' consumption behavior over time beyond the direct effects of changes to the price or the core offering. (De Wulf, et al., 2001 & Palmatier, Gopalakrishna, & Houston, 2006). "Loyalty programme can be defined as a programme that allows consumers to accumulate free rewards when they make repeated purchases with a firm." (Yuping Liu, 2007).

Loyalty programs are structured marketing efforts that reward, and therefore encourage, loyal buying behavior – behavior which is potentially beneficial to the firm (Sharp, Byron and Anne Sharp, 1997) Loyalty cards are a system of the loyalty business model. In the United Kingdom it is typically called a loyalty card and in Canada a rewards card or a point's card. In the United States it is known as a discount card or a club card or a rewards card. Cards typically have a barcode or magstripe that can be easily scanned. There are also few chip cards or proximity cards.

OBJECTIVES OF LOYALTY PROGRAMMES:

There are various objectives of loyalty programs such as to build long lasting customer relationship, to gain and maximize profit through extended product usage & cross selling, to gather information about customers, to strengthen loyalty, to defend, to preempt competition, This objectives can be fulfilled by loyalty program (Preeta H. Vyas, Piyush K. Sinha, 2008).

BENEFITS OF THE LOYALTY PROGRAMS:

Loyalty programs yield benefits both to the firm as well as consumers (Merlin Stone, David Bearman, Stephan A. Butscher, David Gilbert, Tess Moffett and Paul Crick, 2004), therefore

these benefits of loyalty programs can be categorized in to two categories. Firstly benefits to the firm & secondly benefits to customers.

A) Benefits to the firm:

Firm will get following benefits from loyalty programs / cards.

- i) Customer loyalty programs leads to lower price sensitivity & stronger brand/store attitude which create switching barriers.
- ii) It will allow the firms to access of important information on consumers & consumer trends enables to design appropriate reward and communication programs leading to greater satisfaction, commitment. This gives competitive advantage to a firm.
- iii) Loyal customer brings higher average sales due to cross selling & up-selling opportunities than a non loyal member.
- iv) They enable targeting special consumer segments as purchase history can be analysed relating to demographic and other information. It facilitates implementation of product recalls as the database is available, and it is believed that loyal customer is profitable as, servicing existing customer is less costly compared to new one.
- v) The profitability is generated by reduced servicing costs, less price sensitivity, increased spending and favorable recommendations passed on to potential customers(Grahame & Uncles;1997).
- vi) Loyalty programmes increase referrals/advocacy. It is assumed that satisfied customers are not only loyal but they advocate and refer to their social circle, family/friends/reference groups.
- vii) Long term relationships with customers can be built through such programs.

B) Benefits to Consumers:

- i) Consumer's risk is reduced as some incentive is offered to stay loyal. Psychological reassurance is experienced dealing with the same firm.
- ii) Consumer also gets a feeling of a smart shopper.
- iii) Consumer's social need –a sense of belonging gets satisfied as, a customer becomes a part of loyal group.
- iv) Communities get formed which share similar values. They get something for nothing (free)-economic benefits are accrued by staying loyal.
- v) Once consumer is convinced about the value he derives from purchase, repeat behaviour becomes a habit or inertia and this reduces time in evaluation, comparison and search. Advocating the firm to peers also gives satisfaction and motivation to act as an opinion leader.
- vi) Trust & commitment is reflected in future dealings with the firm. Relationships are observed as for mutual gain and not as being viewed as purely on commercial basis.

- vii) Customers evaluate loyalty programs by considering relative awards/points and likelihood of achieving/getting rewards.

HISTORY & EVOLUTION OF LOYALTY PROGRAM:

In the context of maintaining long term relationship with customers (popularly known as CRM) the loyalty programs have become a popular marketing tool to encourage loyal customer behavior (Tuzovic and Mangold, 2008). Loyalty programs came into existence 31 years ago i.e. on 1 May 1981, Robert Crandall, the former CEO of American Airlines has launched its first modern loyalty program with name “frequent flyer program” as a vehicle to promote the brand among repeat customers, track frequent flyer consumption patterns and create targeted offers for the most loyal customers. He had taken reference of the idea of William Bernbach, the legendary founder and CEO of Doyle Dane Bernbach, American’s advertising agency, based on his observation of commercial banks who were wooing their best customers with free products such as electric toasters and blankets. Even before that it is believed that in mid 1800s, co-operatives pioneered this concept namely Green Shield Stamp—a co-operative dividend programme. After that firms across various industries such as financial services, travel and retail (Singh et al., 2008) quickly followed American Airlines’ example and engaged in the development of loyalty programs to foster customer loyalty and enhance long-term profitability. Over the years, consumer enthusiasm to enroll in these programs has rapidly grown (Liu and Yang, 2009). During the 1990s, many American and European grocery retailers established loyalty programs. According to ACNielsen (2005), more than 60% of European and American consumers belonged to at least one grocery store loyalty program in 2005, and memberships have experienced double-digit annual growth rates (11%).

MULTIPARTNAR LOYALTY PROGRAMS:

Emergence of Multi Partner loyalty programs:

As the Organized Retail sector is growing significantly all over the world the number of retail stores increased tremendously. Many of them spend significant amount to reward the customers. According to past study in Western economies, more than 80% of adults participate in a loyalty programs, and oftentimes in multiple, competing LPs (Clark 2008; Consumer Reports 2008). The LP membership of U.S. consumers reached 1.8 billion in 2008, where cardholders on average are enrolled in more than 14 LPs, but remain active only in six of those (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2009). So many loyalty programs launched during the subsequent time but many of them abolished due to their poor performance. So it was found that these efforts rarely meet expectation (Ferguson & Hlavinka, 2007). It was very difficult to low volume customers to

maintain many loyalty cards or produce particular card during purchase. By considering convenience to customer individual loyalty programs evolved into to multivendor or multi-partner loyalty programs. These programs really increased the customer's convenience over the time. There are empirical evidences that usage of loyalty programs increased due to conversion of individual loyalty programs in to multivendor (Multipartner or Multistore) loyalty program. It was obvious that competitors had not participated in same loyalty program but many related firms came together and started Multi Partner Loyalty Program. Today, customer loyalty programs have become an integral part of the customer relationship management strategies in various industries including financial services, retail, and travel.

What is Multi Partner Loyalty Program?

A specific form of loyalty program which includes a coalition of companies with a specialized operator independent of the coalition partners that manages the LP. (Blattberg et al. 2008, 578). Such coalitions are known as coalition LPs or multi-vendor or multi-partner loyalty programs.

Typically, they comprise partnerships of noncompeting firms, usually in frequently purchased sectors (e.g., grocery, fuel, apparel, credit card services). Nectar, Air Miles, FlyBuys, and Payback are prominent examples of MVLPs around the world.

Multipartner loyalty programs succeed in various markets as particularly effective tool for customer loyalty. Apart from generic benefits of regular stand-alone loyalty program, multipartner program provides many additional benefits for program partners and consumers.

It is also sometimes referred as coalition loyalty program or multi-vendar loyalty program is a multi-company shopper rewards program. Consumers who participate in these programs are rewarded with a common currency for shopping at exclusive (or co-exclusive) sponsors within each major consumer spending category: e.g., a single supermarket sponsor, a fuel sponsor, a department store sponsor, a credit or debit card sponsor, etc. The points" are earned by consumers for shopping across the sponsor network and accumulate in one common account in a singular currency. The consumer can then redeem their points for a variety of rewards such as travel, events, merchandise, gift cards or discounts at coalition sponsors.

The most widely known coalition programs include AIR MILES in Canada, Nectar in the UK, Dotz in Brazil, Fly Buys in New Zealand and Payback in Germany. At maturity, these programs have reached penetration of over 60% of households. The value of these coalitions is clearly demonstrated by the majority of households in the target countries choosing to take part.

World's Leading Coalition Loyalty Programs			
Coalition Loyalty Program		Country	Household Penetration
	Travel Club*	Spain	70%
	AIR MILES Canada*	Canada	70%
	Nectar*	U.K.	68%
	Payback	Germany	60%
	Fly Buys	Australia	60%
	AIR MILES Netherlands*	Netherlands	60%
	Dotz	Brazil	46%**
	Avios (f/k/a AIR MILES UK)*	U.K.	18%

* Coalition loyalty programs developed by Sir Keith Mills, SLI Chairman
 ** Based on markets where Dotz operates as of 9/19/13
 Source: SLI estimates based on publicly available data

Fig 2: World's leading multi-partner loyalty programs

Major benefits for consumers:

- More benefits from many partners
- Faster points accumulation and redemption
- Have to carry only one loyalty card
- Various special offers at many partners

Major business benefits for partners:

- Lower costs of loyalty program management due to cost-sharing among partners
- Possibility to run more individualized marketing communication
- Customer acquisition platform due to marketing communications across program partners
- Deeper analysis of data and more detailed customer profiles
- A solution less prone to copying by competitors
- Wider range of marketing communications involving all program partners

ADVANTAGES OF MULTIPARTNER LOYALTY PROGRAM OVER SINGLE VENDOR LOYALTY PROGRAM FOR RETAILERS:

There are various factors to be considered for studying advantages of MVLP. We can consider few as a primary like. (1) greater consumer engagement and behavior change, (2) more efficient, data-rich platform for customer-centric initiatives, (3) value enhancing partnerships with non-competing companies potentially through a third-party operator, and (4) sustainable competitive advantage through differentiation.

1. Greater consumer engagement and behavior change:

MVLP is a stronger value proposition for consumers than a single vendor loyalty program. It increases the possibility of rewards / points more since many products are available with loyalty program. Consumers engagement is more due to more brands are linked and it also leads positive change in psychology of card holder. MVLP offers a stronger value proposition for consumers as compared to a single vendor loyalty program and drives greater consumer engagement, it follows that the longer and more loyal the customer relationship, the more a customer will spend, resulting in greater behavior change. So in conclusion, more consumers will actively participate in a coalition program and will spend more at participating retailers over a sustained period compared to a standalone loyalty program. Below table shows comparison between MVLP/ Coalition program over standalone / single vendor loyalty program.

Consumer Value Proposition Comparison: Coalition vs. Standalone Loyalty Program		
Program Design:	Coalition Program	Standalone Program
Earn Reward Currency From	Many/ all spending categories	Single spending category
Eligible Household Spend	40-60%+	5-25%
Rewards Inventory	Broad & rich	Limited
Value of Total Reward (after 12 months based on same underlying consumer spend)	High (\$150+)	Low (typically <\$50)
Expiration of Points / Reward Offer	Typically never expire or long-dated expiry (5 years+)	Often short expiry window for many retailer loyalty programs (1-3 months)

Fig 3: Multi partner loyalty programs Vs standalone loyalty programs

2. More efficient, data-rich marketing platform for customer-centric initiatives

When consumers are engaged in the MVLP and motivated to maximize their points / earning, retailers have created a significant lever to further influence their customers. MVLP provides various marketing offers and promotions for customers to earn reward points result in higher response rates. Since administration and rewards costs are shared among sponsors, coalition points are typically lower cost as compared to discounts. The resultant sales lift is also greater compared to straight product discounting. This leads to a more efficient marketing and promotional platform to lift sales at a low cost. Below is an illustrative example of how triple bonus points in a coalition program drive greater sales lift at lower cost vs. straight product discounts.



Fig 5: Coalition Bonus points Vs Discount promotion.

In addition to that MVLP provides a very rich and detail database of consumers that can be used to develop sophisticated, permission-based, targeted and highly profitable marketing campaigns. Data collected via MVLP over time increases the data richness, level of insights so that in depth analysis / analytics is possible. The insights/data may include:

- Customer centric coalition platform which enables creation of cross-category lifestyle segments (premium, frugal, local, health)
- Offer / response / channel profile enhancement
- Accurate defector validation to fund win-back appropriately (e.g. consumers who still shop elsewhere but not grocer vs. those shoppers who have moved)
- Cross-category correlations
- Contact information and shopping patterns of non-customers

As indicated in the last bullet above, coalition data can help to better identify and target high potential non-shoppers who join the program within a participating retailer's trade area. Thus, the program becomes **an efficient new customer acquisition tool** as well. The charts below provide an illustrative example of how a coalition bonus point offer is lower cost, results in greater new customer response rate, and leads to higher retention of these new customers over time.

Deeper, Richer Data Sets: Coalition allows for a holistic customer view that offers insights across shopping categories

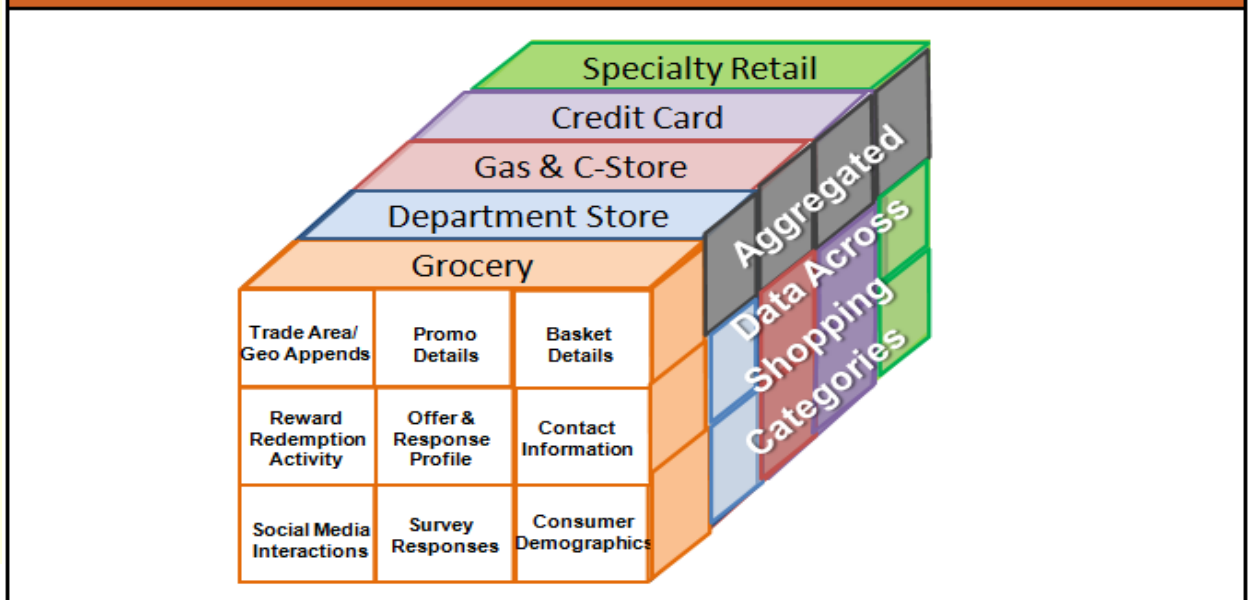


Fig 5: Data collected via Coalition loyalty programs.

3. Value enhancing partnership with non-competing companies and potentially a third party operator

In MVLP participating retailers / partners shares not only reward costs but also **many of the fixed costs associated with like**, including marketing and operational costs, rather than bearing the entire expense load as they would within a standalone program

Coalition Loyalty Programs result in lower costs to retailers through shared infrastructure and marketing expenses, while providing greater value to customers

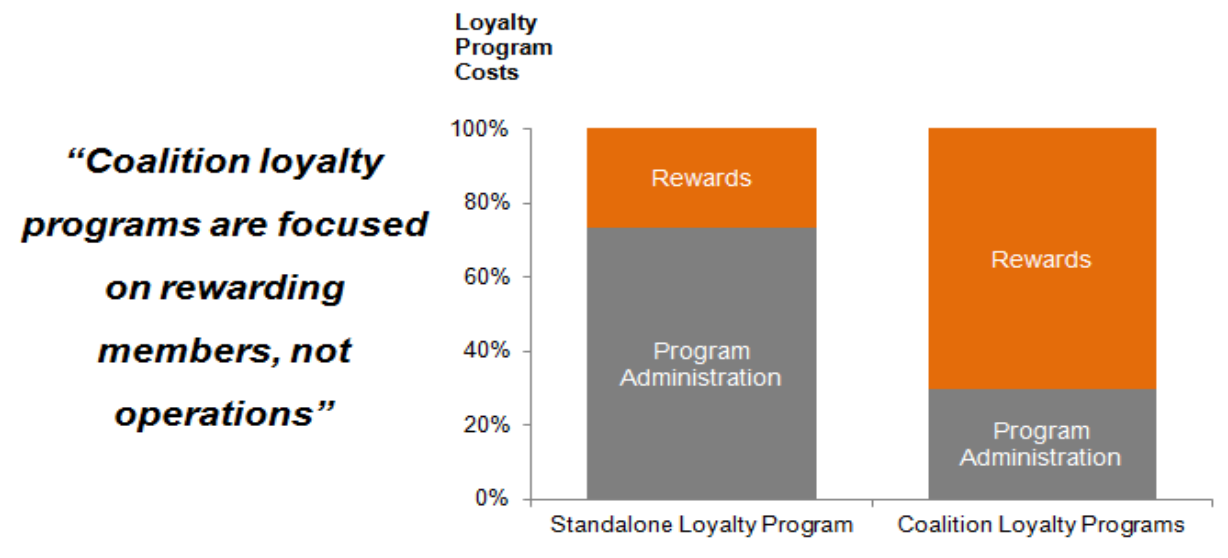


Fig 6: Cost to retailer Standalone L.P. Vs Multivendor Loyalty Program.

In MVLP associated retailers can also benefit from a **“brand halo” effect through their association with other strong sponsor brands** and the coalition program’s brand. We can consider the example of AIR MILES who has built one of the Canada’s most respected brands. According to the report of Institute of Communication Agencies and Ipsos, brands with less recognition can reap instant benefits from associating with the coalition’s brand.

It is also observed that many MVLPs are operated by a third party that specializes solely in the management of multi-partner loyalty platforms(like Payback), which can provide additional value and advantages to the participating retailers. These third party operators provide various intellectual capital and marketing expertise. This is also valuable to retailers looking to benefit from well-designed MVLP.

These **third party can also take responsibility of effective management of the rewards redemption liability**, taking this significant financial concern off of retailers’ balance sheets. This liability can be managed professionally by an operator with his own experience. It can also allow them greater program design flexibility such as extended or no points expiration parameters. Consumers generally prefer longer expiration dates for reward points, which allows

them the choice to redeem points when they are most valuable, not when forced to by short expiration periods.

4. Point for differentiation to get Sustainable competitive advantage:

Unlike most standalone loyalty programs, a MVLP is very difficult for competitors to replicate. Designing a program with the right approach to the market and a strong coalition of fully committed sponsors can be extremely challenging to execute successfully. When competing coalitions do develop within the same market, which is rare, the first-mover retailers associated with the initial coalition to launch often can have first mover advantage if they secure the strongest partners ahead of the competition.

Further MVLP have proven to be sustainable – creating value for retailers over many years. MVLPs such as AIR MILES and Nectar have created value for retailers such as Safeway Canada and Sainsbury's in the UK over decades. These well known retailers have continued their participation in these programs since their inception because they not only produce bottom line results but also provide a point of differentiation and strategic advantages over their competitors.

CONCLUSION

From all above this discussion Customer Loyalty Programs are having significance for keeping long term relationship with customers. Further it also shows that loyalty programs increase satisfaction. Customers find it difficult to use single vendor loyalty programs because they have to carry different loyalty cards for different stores. A customer prefers Multipartner Loyalty Program over Single / Standalone loyalty programs. MVLP provides many advantages to firms as well as customers.

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