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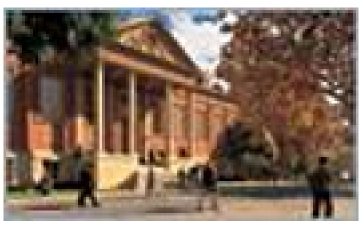

Relationship marketing readiness: theoretical background and measurement directions

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to develop the foundation of a model for assessing relationship marketing readiness (RMR) and provide directions for such an assessment.
Design/methodology/approach – Based on the promise theory and service logic, the importance of the customer–firm touchpoints and interactions to relationship marketing as an equivalent to the product variable in a conventional marketing approach is discussed. Then, a relationship marketing model and an RMR assessment model are developed.
Findings – The paper suggests an RMR assessment model based on two variables, namely, whether management's focus is on the customers' or the firm's resources and processes and whether it is on the customers' or the firm's definition of quality. An indicative list of measurement factors is proposed.
Originality/value – The paper emphasizes the need to broaden the scope of marketing and offers a novel measurement approach, which both in theory and practice helps the development of relationship marketing understanding.

Keywords Relationship marketing, Service logic, Measurement directions, Promise theory, Relationship marketing readiness

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In 2015, I described the purpose of relationship marketing as:

> [. . .] to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers (and other parties) so that the objectives regarding economic and other variables of all parties are met. This is achieved through a mutual making and fulfilment of promises (Grönroos, 2015, p. 281).

This purpose statement is based on a relationship marketing definition, which I first suggested in 1989 (Grönroos, 1989) and which then was considered the most comprehensive definition in the literature (Harker, 1999). To the best of my knowledge, this is still the case. In 2006, based on the promise theory (Calonius, 2006), I added a promise management description of marketing:

> Marketing is a customer focus that permeates organizational functions and processes and is geared toward making promises through value proposition, enabling the fulfilment of individual expectations created by such promises, and fulfilling such expectations through support to customers' value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation in the firm's as well as its customers' and other stakeholders' processes (Grönroos, 2006, p. 407).

Originally, the relationship marketing concept and term were introduced by Leonard Berry in a conference paper at the American Marketing Association's second special conference on service marketing in 1982 (Berry, 1983).

Today, relationship marketing is considered a field of marketing, but no common view seems to exist in regard to what it really is and what it includes. This hinders a firm analysis and development of the field. As Storbacka and Lehtinen (2001, p. 23) has emphasized, in relationship marketing, it is not only a matter of getting a larger share of the customer's wallet but to "[. . .] win as large share as possible of the customer's heart, mind, and wallet". This is also one key avenue forward proposed by Sheth (2017) in his recent commentary on the future of relationship marketing. The purpose of this commentary is to present an approach to relationship marketing based on the service logic and promise theory (Calonius, 2006) that develops a model of relationship marketing readiness (RMR) analysis. Because the main challenges in relationship marketing relate to maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers, and not to establishing them, this commentary and the RMR analysis focus on the firm's readiness to maintain and enhance relationships. The approach is managerial, and only the supplying part's readiness for relationship marketing is included. In a next phase, a reciprocal RMR analysis should be developed.

Promise theory and relationship marketing

In 1986, Henrik Calonius published the *promise theory* for marketing in a conference publication from the 15th annual conference of the European Marketing Academy. Two decades later, this publication was republished in a marketing journal (Calonius, 1986/2006). According to the promise theory, marketing is based on the exchange of promises as well as on the fulfillment of promises, where the interplay between

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promise making and how promises are kept is critical to successful marketing. In a conventional marketing approach, based on the marketing mix notion and, for example, the 4 P model, the promise theory has not been explicitly voiced. The model includes the product variable, which is expected to fulfill promises that have been made through the other variables more or less automatically. Hence, keeping promises has not been considered a problem, and marketing has predominantly been a promise-making function.

When moving from a conventional marketing context to a relationship context, the situation changes. In firm–customer relationships that continue at least for some time, the interface between the actors widens and includes many touchpoints, actions and interactions. The scope of the interface grows far beyond a singular product. Products and tangible resources are, of course, part of what is delivered to a customer, but the relationship may include much more, such as deliveries, information, personal contacts, invoices, installing and maintenance, complaints and recovery, navigating websites and a host of other possible elements. In such a context, it is critical from a marketing point of view, to raise the question as to how promises are fulfilled. Because the usefulness of even the best product can be diminished or destroyed by, for example, late or faulty deliveries and bad maintenance and complaints handling, or even by people whose behavior is not acceptable to the customer, there is no singular product to rely upon.

For the development and management of relationship marketing, understanding the promise theory is essential. In the same way as a product variable in conventional marketing models fulfills promises, and is considered part of the marketing mix, the whole process of actions and interactions in a host of touchpoints that goes on over time between relationship partners is part of relationship marketing as a promise-fulfilling process. From a marketing perspective:

> [. . .] the promises have to be kept on both sides if the relationship is to be maintained, developed and commercialized [. . .] for the mutual benefit of the seller and the buyer (Grönroos, 1989, p. 57).

To emphasize the importance of a firm's employees interacting with customers in a relationship, such as delivery truck drivers, maintenance technicians, call center employees, consultants, bank tellers and restaurant waiters, Gummesson (1991) introduced the concept of *part-time marketer*. A part-time marketer is an employee who has dual responsibilities, namely, one of a technical nature and one of a marketing nature. For example, a maintenance technician must be able to take care of the technical problem at hand, but at the same time his or her way of interacting and communicating with the customer has a distinct marketing impact, which often can even be central to a customer's decision to stay in the relationship and continue buying.

Service logic and relationship marketing

Berry (1983) introduced relationship marketing in a service context. Services are processes that include a series of actions and interactions by the service provider and the customer, where tangible resources and physical and digitalized systems as well as people form the service in interactions. The importance of service to relationship marketing was recognized early on, for example, in the Nordic school research tradition (Grönroos, 1989). Relationships are based on service, and service is relational. "Customer relationships are not just there; they have to be earned" (Grönroos, 1990, p. 4)ba. They are earned through service.

Research on the service perspective on marketing and business since the early 2000s has further reinforced the importance of service for marketing. On a macro level, Vargo and Lusch (2008) emphasize the fact that products and other tangible resources are carriers of service and influence the customers' value perception through the service they provide. From a management perspective, in a micro-level analysis discussed in the *service logic* literature (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), this means that to develop and maintain relationships with customers, a firm must support its customers' everyday processes with all the tangible and intangible resources and all the physical or digital processes that it provides in a way that enables these customers to achieve their goals (Grönroos and Voima, 2013).

Value for a customer is facilitated by the firm, and, in direct interactions between the firm and its customers, the customers jointly co-create value with the firm. When customers use resources provided outside such interactions, value is further created by them independently from the firm (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). "By providing service, firms make themselves meaningful to their customers" (Grönroos, 2015, p. 1). This applies to relationships with individual as well as with business customers.

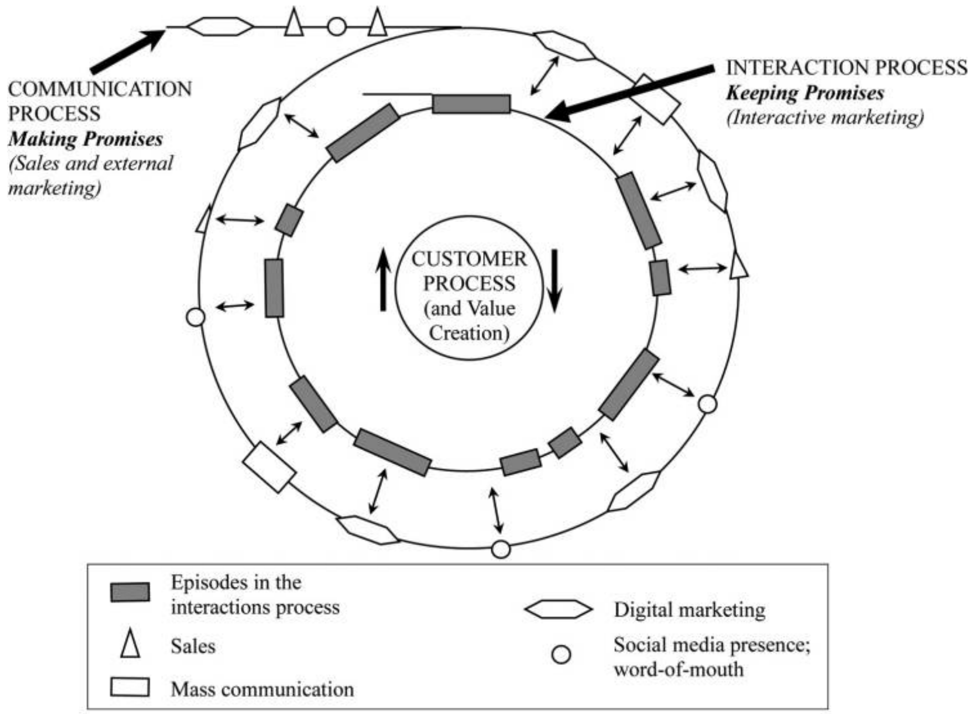
A relationship marketing model

In the Nordic school research approach, the marketing requirement of the promise theory and the notion of the importance of service in forming and especially maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers were recognized early on. Subsequently, a formal relationship marketing model was published; Figure 1 illustrates an updated version of this model (Grönroos, 2015).

To manage relationship marketing, the scope of marketing has to be broadened from that of conventional models. To put it more directly, the borders of conventional marketing that basically restrict marketing to a separate one-function process have to be broken. All processes and actions that aim to fulfill promises made by, for example, sales, marketing communication and price offers are part of the marketing process in the same way as a promise-keeping product element is that in conventional marketing.

The relationship marketing model consists of three processes, illustrated with three circles in the figure. The innermost circle depicts the customers' value-creating process, including a set of everyday processes. As Storbacka and Lehtinen (2001, p. 9) point out, for the firm, "[. . .] it is a question of offering customers something that enables them to derive benefits from the relationship for their own value creation". The customers' process is not illustrated in detail. However, this process, where value emerges for the customers, takes place in a *customer ecosystem*, to use a concept introduced in *customer-dominant logic* (CDL) (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). In CDL, the customer ecosystem is described as "a system of actors and elements related to the customer and relevant to a specific service" (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015, p. 480). Examples of actors "related to the customer" are

Figure 1 A relationship marketing model



Source: Grönroos (2015)

service providers, such as service firms and product manufacturers, other customers and other actors, such as communities. Examples of other elements are installed structures, such as office facilities and administrative and production processes and routines.

The two outer circles depict two parallel marketing processes. The double-sided arrows between these two processes indicate that they have to support each other. According to the promise theory, marketing includes a promise-making process and a promise-keeping process. The outermost circle, labeled *communication process*, represents the former marketing process. Through sales and marketing communication, such as direct and digital marketing, mass communication and formal offers, and other traditional external marketing activities, promises are made to customers. In addition, word of mouth and interactions on various social media reinforce, mediate or distort such promises. When studying relationship marketing, this process is often the primary one considered.

However, making promises is only part of marketing. In the absence of a singular product, the middle circle, labeled *interactions process*, including a host of actions and interactions, illustrates the promise-keeping process. This process is the "product" (Storbacka and Lehtinen, 2001; Christopher *et al.*, 1991). In the figure, a series of episodes depicts the flow of promise-keeping processes, which aims to maintain and enhance the relationship. In service marketing, this is called *interactive marketing* (Grönroos, 2015). Such episodes may include products, but there are also other elements related to, for example, deliveries, repair and maintenance, call center activities, invoicing, complaints handling and sometimes even joint R&D and product and service development. The customer, an individual customer or a representative of an organization, may interact with persons representing the firm as well as with various physical, automated and digital processes. Depending on how well the firm manages to support the customers' processes and adjust to their specific processes and wishes, the more willing the customers will be to continue the relationship with the firm. In other words, the better the firm services its customers, the more favorably the customers will perceive the quality of the relationship, the more value in the customers' processes will emerge and, in the final analysis, the more successful the firm's marketing will be.

After having established the scope and content of relationship marketing, in the next sections, I will propose a model for analyzing a firm's readiness to implement relationship marketing. This model covers the promise-keeping interaction process. Such an assessment will contribute to the development of relationship marketing in theory as well as in practice.

Relationship marketing readiness factors

As the relationship marketing model shows, successful marketing requires that the service provider's resources and processes help its customers create value in their processes (value-in-use). Two factors are enough to assess a firm's readiness for relationship marketing, namely, whether management's focus is dominated by an insight into the customers' processes and resources or by the firm's resources and processes and, on the other hand, whether or not management has a thorough focus on the customers' definition of quality.

According to service logic, the firm should gear its resources and processes, as well as the competencies to manage them, toward supporting its customers' everyday processes such that the customers' goals are reached in a value-creating manner (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Only through such an approach can promise keeping succeed and relationship marketing be implemented successfully. This means that a firm must have enough customer insight and understand its customers' resources and processes well enough to be able to support them and enable the customers to achieve their goals. An aspect of this is that management must understand which customer processes have an impact on a business customer's commercial goals or an individual customer's life goals. This requires a mental interest among the firm's management to focus decisively on its customers' resources and processes and not be more focused on the firm's own existing resources and processes, such as products, service concepts and established operational routines. This mental focus influences managerial actions regarding, for example, how budgets and resources are allocated, what actions are supported and rewarded, what thinking and behavior are encouraged and how much managerial attention is given to internal marketing. In the end, this determines whether the firm will focus more on its own or on its customers' processes and resources.

Consequently, the first factor determining a firm's readiness for relationship marketing relates to *whether its management is mainly focused on its own resources – such as its products, service concepts and processes – or on its customers' processes and resources*. The more the focus is on the firm's own resources and processes, the less customer-oriented the firm's operational performance is likely to be, and the less ready to implement relationship marketing the firm can be expected to be. According to the promise theory, promise making may still be successful, but because the capability to fulfill promises that have been made is low, marketing will be less successful or fail.

Supporting the customers' processes to enable favorable goal achievement in a value-creating way requires that the customers perceive the quality of the service provider's support on a high enough level. Unless the price and/or other customer-perceived sacrifices are inhibitive, the better the perceived quality, the more value can be expected to emerge for the customers. As service quality research demonstrates, the customers' perception of quality is a function not only of their perception of the *technical quality* of the resources and the outcome of what a firm provides them with but also of their perception of the *functional quality* of the process of interacting with the firm (Grönroos, 1984). Also, the quality determinants of the Servqual instrument reinforce the importance of the process-related functional quality perception (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991).

For relationship marketing to be successful, the definitions of quality by the firm and the customers should meet. The customers' definition of quality includes both an outcome-related technical quality dimension and a process-related functional quality dimension. In contrast, firms tend to focus on the technical specifications of products, service concepts and other resources at the expense of behavioral aspects and how interactions with the customers function. Hence, the firms' definition of quality is geared toward the technical quality dimension, whereas the customers' definition of quality is broader, including the behavioral, process-related aspects of the relationship. From a competitive point of view, the functional quality dimension may sometimes even dominate. As Strandvik and Heinonen (2015) observe, what firms consider to be details in their offerings and ways of operating may not be details for their customers. Instead, they may be important quality factors for them. Therefore, firms should take a more holistic approach to understanding how customers experience the way they are served (Bolton *et al.*, 2014).

As a consequence, the second factor determining a firm's readiness for relationship marketing relates to *whether the firm's and its customers' definitions of quality meet or diverge* and whether management's focus is dominated by the customers' or the firm's definition of quality. The more the firm concentrates on technical issues, and functional, process-related issues are marginalized, or in the worst case neglected, the wider the gap between the firm's and the customers' definitions of quality can be expected to be.

The relationship marketing readiness assessment grid

In the upper part of Figure 2, the two factors developed in the previous section are combined into a RMR grid. The expected position of customers is in the upper right quadrant. The customers can be expected to be focused on their processes and resources (toward the right-hand side of the horizontal axis; the focus on the firm's or the customers' resources and processes) and on their definition of quality (toward the upper side of the vertical axis; the focus on the customers' or the firm's definition of quality). Because the customers expect the firm to support their processes to a high enough degree, such that wanted value emerges for them, this is a natural customer position in the grid.

To be able to support the customers' processes successfully, the firm should mentally position itself close to the customer in the grid. The dominating focus of the firm should be on the customers' processes and resources, such that the quality perceived meets the customers' definition of quality. Of course, this does not mean that interest in the firm's existing resources and process and its technical quality aspects are of no importance, on the contrary, but the dominating focus should be on the customers. In the figure, an extreme but not too uncommon position of the firm is indicated, toward the lower left corner of the grid. If the service provider is mentally positioned there, or in that direction of the corridor from the upper right to lower left, indicated by the two parallel dotted lines in the figure, a conflict with the customers' expectations occurs. Consequently, promises made by, for example, sales and marketing communication are not properly fulfilled by the many episodes in the interaction process, and relationship marketing fails. Using traditional terminology, the firm's focus would be called product-oriented.

The firm's ideal position is, of course, close to the customers' position. Any actions taken by the firm to make itself more customer-focused would move the firm toward the upper right in the grid. Again, using traditional terminology, this would mean that the firm becomes more customer-oriented. This requires an outward orientation, what could be called outside-in management, where the management's focus is dominated by an understanding of the customers' processes and of their definition

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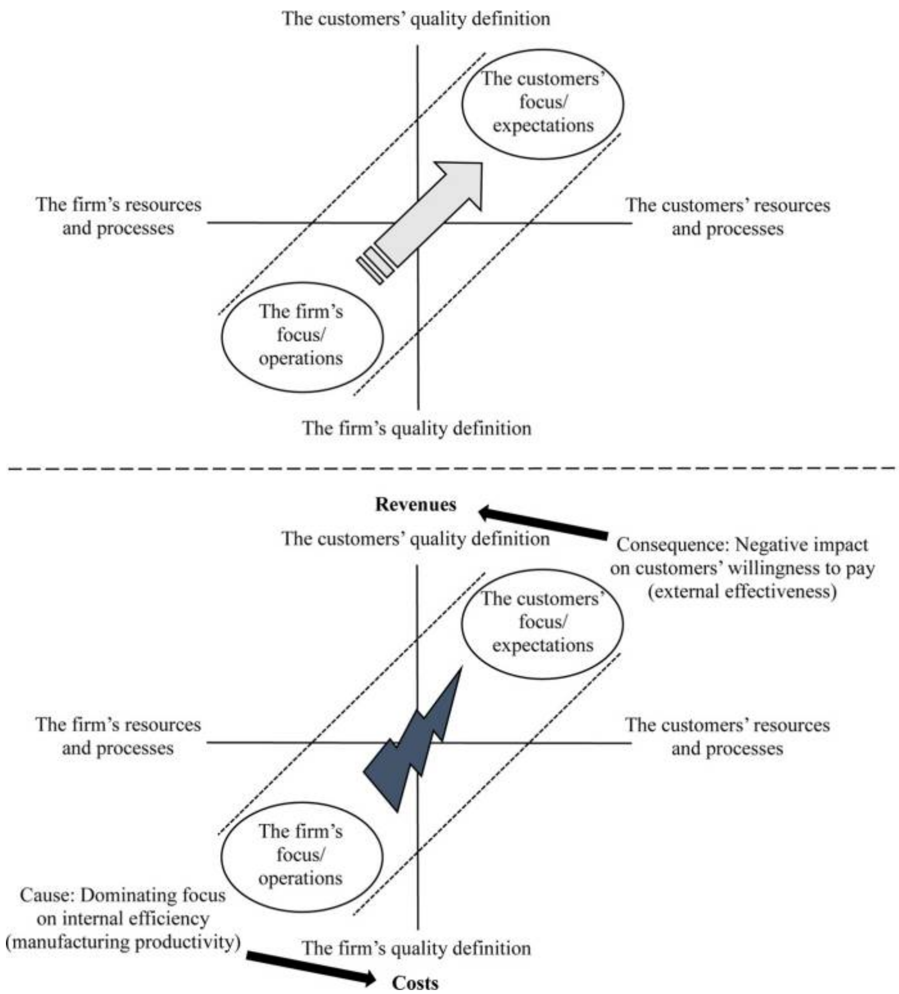
Figure 2 The RMR grid



of quality, of course without neglecting the technical resource and process capabilities needed to provide good technical quality.

Outside-in vs inside-out management

The reasons why firms position themselves, both mentally and operationally, toward the bottom left corner in the grid may be many. On one hand, a firm may be genuinely product- and technology-oriented. On the other hand, this may also be caused by the management approach taken. Maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers require a service perspective, and as *service profit logic* (Grönroos, 2015) states, unlike in conventional product manufacturing, when adopting a service logic, many business processes outside the fields of sales and traditional external marketing are simultaneously cost and revenue drivers. The whole host of interactive processes and back office support processes do not only influence the cost level, or the firm's *internal efficiency*, but they also have an impact on the quality perceived by the customers and therefore also on customers' willingness to pay for what they get. In other words, these processes drive revenues as well, and influence the firm's *external effectiveness*. In conventional marketing, managers are used to a situation where sales and marketing drive revenues, and other business functions only drive costs, as long as these processes provide sales and marketing with a marketable product. In relationship marketing, as in service marketing, this is not the case.

Management guided by conventional models easily puts internal efficiency and cost management first, and this, then, becomes the dominating management focus. Managing revenues is mainly considered a sales and marketing responsibility and receives less management attention. At the same time, focus on the customers' processes is downplayed, often unconsciously, at the expense of an inward orientation toward the firm's resources and processes. Such an approach pushes the firm toward the bottom left quadrant of the relationship management readiness grid.

In the lower part of Figure 2, such a focus and its consequences are depicted. How well the customers' expectations are met determines their willingness to pay a given price. The more the firm's focus is inward-oriented and it provides the customers with low total quality, the more the customers' willingness to pay is hurt, and, as a consequence, the lower the firm's capability to generate revenues is. In the figure, this is indicated by the arrow in the upper right corner. This negative consequence on the firm's revenue generation capability can be because of many reasons, but often its cause relates to a dominating focus on internal efficiency. Conventional manufacturing productivity management models, which are still used in service and relationship contexts, drive this focus. The desired outcome of such a management focus is cost efficiency. This is indicated by the arrow at the bottom left corner of the figure. However, if the focus is not, at the same time, steadily on the customers' definition of quality and willingness to pay, the revenue generation capability declines. The business is managed through costs and not through the economic result, which, of course, is a function of both internal efficiency and costs and external effectiveness and revenues. This is *inside-out management*. The more the firm's focus is moved toward the customers' focus, the better the customers' willingness to pay. Because this requires a thorough understanding of the customers' processes and resources and of their definition of quality as the dominating starting point for management, this management approach can be labeled *outside-in management*.

After a discussion of the theoretical background in this and previous sections, in the next section, measurement directions for RMR assessment are proposed.

Measurement factors

In this section, a number of measurement factors within the two broad fields of quality focus and resource focus are proposed. Although the RMR grid is equally applicable to consumer and business-to-business relationships, for the sake of clarity, the proposed measurement elements are geared toward analyzing business relationships only. Detailed scales are not discussed. Instead, the elements of a measurement instrument that covers how management and the firm are focused are outlined. The list is not intended to be conclusive; it is only indicative of what types of aspects are important to think about when the firm plans to measure its readiness to implement relationship marketing. In any given situation, other factors might very well be included and some factors in the list be omitted. The following is the list of factors:

1. Focus on the customers' definition of quality
   - Analysis of how customers perceive the technical outcome of the elements of an offering (the core of the offering as well as other elements – e.g. deliveries, information, repair and invoice);
   - Analysis of how customers perceive the interactions with the firm's employees at all touch points;
   - Analysis of how customers perceive the interactions with physical systems (e.g. logistics and call centers) and digital systems (e.g. distant problem detection and the internet of things);
   - Analysis of *ad hoc* feedback from customers to service employees, salesforce and others;
   - Systematic gathering of information about customers' reactions to the firm's actions;
   - Systematic gathering of comprehensive information about the customers' satisfaction with how the relationship is maintained;
   - How much is invested in systems and processes supporting customer processes to make them customer-focused;
   - How much is invested in internal marketing (e.g. customer service training and keeping employees updated about developments);
   - How much employees are engaged in the planning of operational processes and routines;
   - How managers and supervisors support and reinforce customer service behavior; and
   - How customer service behavior is acknowledged and rewarded.
2. Focus on the customers' processes and resources
   - Getting an insight into the customer processes that have an impact on the customers' commercial outcome, relevant to the business at hand; processes in addition to the core process (e.g. a manufacturing, administrative or marketing process) to be supported;
   - Information about the customers' cost drivers (as much as possible);
   - Information about the customers' revenue drivers (as much as possible);
   - Information about the customers' way of servicing their customers;
   - Analyzing where (which customer processes; one or many) and how customers' cost level can be influenced favorably;
   - Analyzing where (which customer processes; one or many) and how customers' sales and revenue generation capability can be influenced favorably;
   - How well sales is geared toward value selling;
   - Do offerings include elements supporting other customer processes, relevant to the customers' commercial outcome, in addition to the core process (e.g. a manufacturing, administrative or marketing processes) to be supported; and
   - Is the firm's management and operational terminology geared toward outside-in management (e.g. "we facilitate/enable our customers' value creation" instead of "we deliver value/added value to our customers").

Focus on the definition of quality

First, the factors proposed for the measurement of how much a firm is focused on the customers' expected definition of quality relate to the analysis of how the customers perceive quality, both in a technical outcome-oriented sense as well as in a functional process-oriented sense. The customers' perception of the technical quality outcome and of functional, behavioral issues, such as how interactions with employees and systems are perceived, belong to this group. Second, somewhat similar factors relate to the systematic creation of customer insight regarding the many aspects of the technical outcome and functional process – for example, through the systematic use of the customers' feedback to service employees, salespersons and other persons representing the firm and through other ways of gathering data. Third, the amount of investments in digital and other systems and processes and in internal marketing efforts directed toward supporting the customers' processes to make such systems customer-focused are ways of measuring how well the firm is prepared to meet the customers' quality expectations. Internal marketing includes, for example, training the employees to handle customer interactions and to communicate with customers in a marketing-like fashion as well as communication with employees about critical issues needed to serve the customers successfully. Fourth, measurement elements include management issues, such as to what extent service employees are involved in planning processes, and leadership issues related to how managers and supervisors acknowledge, support and reinforce service-oriented behavior.

Focus on processes and resources

Factors for the measurement of how much the firm is focused on the customers' processes and resources are, first, related to the understanding of the customers' business and commercial processes. How much understanding exists about the many everyday processes that have an impact on the customers' commercial outcome? Such understanding is critical to support the customers successfully. Second, although this may often be difficult to do, obtaining as much information as possible about the customers' cost and revenue drivers is another necessary factor in the measurement process. Related to this is information about how the many customer processes drive costs and enable the customers to generate revenues. Third, the nature of the firm's sales process has an impact on how well the firm can direct its processes toward the customers' corresponding processes. If the sales processes are geared toward selling value, insight into the customers' processes and how they influence costs and revenues is critical. This, in turn, should direct the firm toward the customers' processes. Value selling should also be reflected in the offering to the customers. The more the offering includes elements that aim to also support other everyday processes relevant to the customers besides the core process the offering is intended to cover – for example, a production or administrative process – the more value-oriented and customer-focused the firm is. Fourth, how customer-focused is the management jargon used in the firm? Inside-out management terminology, such as "we deliver value or added value to our customers", which directs people's focus inwards toward the firm's resources and processes, should be avoided. Instead, managers should use outside-in terminology, such as "we facilitate or enable our customers' value creation".

Concluding remarks

As the promise theory demonstrates, for marketing to be successful, promises that have been made must be properly fulfilled. In relationship marketing, as an ongoing process, there is no singular product, as in a conventional marketing model, that guarantees successful promise keeping. Instead, the interaction process in the relationship marketing model, depicted in Figure 1, is responsible for how promises are fulfilled as well as how relationships are maintained and enhanced. Therefore, in the present commentary, I have concentrated on this critical aspect of a marketing process. Unless a firm is prepared to keep promises successfully – in conventional marketing through a product and in relationship marketing through an ongoing interaction process – it is not fully prepared to implement marketing. Because of its critical importance to the successful marketing process of how promises are fulfilled, the RMR assessment model presented here covers the firm's readiness to keep promises. In parallel, assessments of how well promises – made through, for example, sales, marketing communication and price offers – are fulfilled are of course also important.

For relationship marketing to be successful, marketing has to be reinvented. The management of the whole interaction process must be included in the marketing process. A singular product concept is not enough to encompass the many different facets of the promise-keeping process. To paraphrase Lynn Shostack's (1977) demand from 40 years ago, marketing must break free from product marketing. Doing this will lead to an almost revolutionary change in how marketing is conceptualized, organized, resourced, planned and managed (Grönroos, 2015). This is, however, beyond the scope of this commentary.

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