

Commitment and Customer Loyalty in Business-To-Business Context

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Abstract

Understanding what makes business-to-business (B2B) relationships lasting and stable is one of the main areas of academic interest in the study of organizational relations. To retain the organization's current customers and to make them loyal is a critical component for a company to be successful. Customers should identify groups of suppliers based on develop strategies that are appropriate for further increasing loyalty under the conditions that exist for the product and service. In the current paper, the authors investigate the different factors, which influence commitment and customer loyalty on B2B context. The following paper explains the relationship between commitment and customer loyalty by investigating relevant theories and past studies. This paper uncovers that the literature proffer a affluent, yet fragmented, photograph of which variable or key success factor is, and how it can be increased and profitable to customer loyalty in automotive industry. The outcomes must lead management with the ability to map out a typology of loyalty using the available composite measures of loyalty, purchase intentions and attitudinal loyalty. The classification system can be useful to industrial customers as they try to increase their loyalty.

Keywords: Commitment, Customer Loyalty, B2B Context, Automotive Industry

1. Introduction

According to various researches in field of industrial marketing, there is significant mutual relationship between customer and supplier (Dwyer et al., 1987). The relationship between customer and supplier in B2B marketing is described as a close and long-term interaction with complexity (Håkansson, 1987). Loyalty is an objective that is quite essential for retaining such relationship, and it has been broadly determined in marketing literatures (Oliver, 1999; Schakett, 2010). Basically, loyalty considers as the main concept and primary goal in the relationship marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2002), and building loyal customers is a must for every organizations (Eakuru and Mat, 2008). It is an increasing interest in the world economy particularly on B2B environment to identify and study influences that affect customer loyalty (Fullerton, 2005). Increased comparativeness means that businesses must be able to react even faster and more specifically to individual customer demands to win customer loyalty for as long as possible (Afsharipour, 2006). With that said, marketers are focusing on their customer retention and loyalty initiatives.

In order to create competitive advantages and achieve better results, B2B relationships offer opportunities for several organizations (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). This makes the understanding of retention and loyalty an important area of research. Hutt and Speh (2004) stated that the essence of B2B marketing is to build long-term relationships with customers. The single most pressing and ongoing challenge to companies must establish a high level of customer loyalty, a core-marketing goal, which in order to establish and maintain long-term B2B relationships (Berry and Parasuraman, 1995). The study of relationship marketing concepts is paramount to understanding and managing industries, yet is not adequately covered by traditional management paradigms.

Relationship marketing is defined by Berry (1983) as an attempt of organizations to win over customers and to preserve and enhance that relationship. Based on the fact that the ultimate goal for companies is to build customer loyalty, retaining customers has become increasingly important task for organizations in order to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage (Li, 2012). For instance, one of the benefits of loyal customers is that companies can increase the revenue and in return customers acquire special benefits and feel secure (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005).

As Curtis (2009) mentioned, the historical research on loyalty started viewing loyalty as a repeat purchase behavior, and was further developed by including loyalty antecedents, consequences, and factors. Initially, we proffer a background review of the concepts of customer loyalty and commitment of relationship marketing theory. Then, investigate in what way to build the variables operative and attempt to recognize relations among variables. And we display some conclusions and make suggestions for management. Consequently, this paper utilizes commitment and customer loyalty among employees (Manager or non-manager), arguing that this approach is appropriate to the automotive industry.

2. Customer Loyalty

Over the last 80 years, loyalty has been received considerable amount of attention in marketing literature (Curtis, 2009). A research conducted by Boyt (1997) is identified as the first attempt to work on loyalty. Influences of loyal customers are more likely concentrated on long-term benefits of companies and engaged in cooperative actions beneficial to both partners in a relationship. Therefore, loyalty can enhance the competitiveness of both partners and reducing transaction costs in B2B environment (Ganesan and Hess, 1997). Furthermore, Fornell and Wernerfelt, (1987) claimed that the costs of customer retention are substantially less than those of customer acquisition which means retaining the current customer is an important business objective rather than just seeking the next or new customer (Chumpitaz and Paparoidamis, 2004). Despite the fact that there being numerous ways of defining and measuring loyalty in a consumer market context, the concept of loyalty in a B2B context has not been clearly defined (Gil-Saura, 2008). There is still a scarce amount of attempts trying to conceptualize loyalty and to research its antecedents (Lam et al., 2004).

Loyalty in the marketing literature has been referred to essential or indispensable action or element, condition, or ingredient (*sine qua non*) of an effective business strategy. Loyalty is a strategy that creates mutual rewards to benefit firms and customers (Li, 2012). Loyalty is considered to be a source of competitive advantage and it has proven to have a relevant impact on company performance (Woodruff and Gardial, 1996). In fact, there are several companies that have applied loyalty as a powerful tool to positively affect their performance and it becomes an important source of competitive advantage for them (Zineldin, 2006). Basically, having a high rate of loyal customer gains a competitive advantage for supplier, and loyal clients are willing to pay higher prices and are less price sensitive (Zineldin, 2006).

Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) as a construct that measures the probability the customer will return and is ready to perform partnering activities such as referrals define customer loyalty. Some scholars refer to a similar concept as behavioral intentions that include renewing the contract, making recommendations and increasing patronage (Čater and Čater, 2010). According to Jones and Sasser (1995) research, the willingness that customers will buy same products or purchase for the same service again in the future is called customer loyalty. It was proposed by Lee and Cunningham (2004) that the fundamental of customer loyalty is based on customers' past experience and future expectation, which dictates, customers intentionally and regularly purchase on the current company. Repeat purchasing behavior brought about by marketing efforts directed towards keeping existing customers is the definition of customer loyalty according to Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler (2002b). In this part, we concentrate on some important customer loyalty definitions, and go away from descriptions and definitions of the loyalty concept previous 1994.

In brief, customer loyalty is a strategy that creates mutual rewards to benefit firms and customers (Reichheld and Detrick, 2003b). In addition, customer loyalty as repeat purchasing behavior brought about by marketing efforts directed towards keeping existing customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002a). Furthermore, deeply commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product consistently in the future is another definition of customer loyalty (Ou et al., 2011). As mentioned in many relative published literatures there are three main streams of research in loyalty (Lin, 2009). These subjects include: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty and integrated or composite loyalty (behavioral and attitudinal loyalty).

2.1 Behavioral Loyalty

Behavior such as past purchases of a brand or product, as it suggested by Tucker (1964), completely accounts for loyalty. Alongside this point of view, Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) pointed out that the main focus in behavioral loyalty studies was on interpreting patterns of repeat purchasing in primarily panel data as a manifestation of loyalty. Uncles and Laurent (2003) argued that loyalty in this behavioral manner is believed to be stochastic not deterministic. Behavioral loyalty was identified by Rauyruen and Miller (2007) as the willingness of average customers to repurchase the service or the product, and to maintain a relationship with the service provider or supplier. They stated "In an early school of thought, Tucker (1964) argues that behavior (past purchases of the brand/product) completely accounts for loyalty". The main concern of behavioral loyalty studies is toward interpreting patterns of repeat purchasing as a manifestation of loyalty (Curtis, 2009).

2.2 Attitudinal Loyalty

Attitudinal loyalty is distinguishable from frequent purchasing which is in contrast to behavioral loyalty (Dekimpe et al., 1997). According to Zins (2001), customers' knowledge structures, mental and emotional work as mediators between stimuli and responses. The level of customers' psychological attachments and attitudinal advocacy towards the service provider or supplier is another definition of attitudinal loyalty (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). Basically, the degree to which a consumers' disposition towards a service is favorable is denoted by attitude. Positive word of mouth, recommendation the service to others and commitment to a preferred firm are all the different variables in attitudinal loyalty (Curtis, 2009). Therefore, attitudinal concepts can be identified as encouraging others to use the service and recommending the service to others (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

2.3 Composite Loyalty

Attitudinal and behavioral measures of loyalty are combined in composite loyalty and consider to have a better predictive power (Dimitriadis, 2006). Day (1969) was the first one who suggested an understanding of both behavioral and attitudinal components of loyalty. The main concern of this was that loyalty viewed in terms of purchase decisions may not distinguish between loyalty and spurious loyalty. Therefore, there was an undeniable need to extend typical definitions and measurement approaches of loyalty (Rajagopal, 2006). It was suggested that regarding additional understanding of the stochastic representation of behavioral loyalty, scholars should study the attitudinal components (Uncles et al., 2003). Loyalty based on Oliver's (1999) published literature is a dedication on the part of the customer to maintain a relationship and a devotion to buy the product or service repeatedly. Hence, loyalty considered as behavioral component, which suggests a repurchase intention but also includes an attitudinal component, which is based on preference and impression of the partner (Sheth and Sharma, 2006).

Regarding the strength of the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage, which could be compared with competing offerings, loyalty status can be assessed (Dick and Basu, 1994). Dick and Basu (1994) came up with the Attitude-Repurchase Relationship matrix, which shows strong versus weak attitudes toward the object combined with high versus low repeat patronage. Dick and Basu (1994) closely studied the relationship between loyalty and the antecedents of attitude. Although they claimed that the nature of relative attitude is likely to provide a stronger indicator of repeat behavior, the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage as Curtis (2009) suggested, may be influenced by many factors including social norms and situational factors.

3. Commitment

In the relationship marketing literature, commitment has been defined by Morgan and Hunt (1994) as the perceived likelihood that a focal firm will terminate the relationship with another firm in the reasonably near future. They identified relationship benefits as a key antecedent for the kind of relationship commitment that characterizes customers who engage in relational exchange in their "commitment-trust" theory of relationship marketing. The importance of the commitment construct has been widely acknowledged by many scholars. For instance, Berry and Parasuraman (1988) stated in a service marketing context that "relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment". Moorman et al. (1999) referred to commitment as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship".

The main belief in here is: a relationship is worth the effort to be maintained. Even if a competing supplier outperforms the incumbent's value offer, committed relationship partners are unlikely to switch. Thus, in order to stabilize the relationship, a high level of commitment would be quite helpful. In a comprehensive literature review on the commitment construct, Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that a common pattern emerges from the various literatures on relationships. They established that parties identify commitment among exchange partners as key to achieving valuable outcomes for themselves, and organizations try to develop and maintain this precious attribute in their relationships. In studies of customer-seller marketing relationships in B2B markets, commitment is undoubtedly the most frequently studied variables (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

Although, scholars of B2B relationships have an agreement about the importance of this construct, there are differences in its conceptualization and operationalization level (Sharma et al., 2006). Gilliland and Bello (2002) claimed that researchers study mainly commitment as a global construct that measures the intention to continue the relationship. Commitment has been referred to as an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners in the customer-and-seller relationship literature (Dwyer et al., 1987). Moorman et al., (1999) simplified this definition and referred to commitment as the motivation to stay with a supplier or suppliers.

Commitment in a business relationship is a psychological sentiment of the mind, which is basically forming an attitude concerning continuation of a relationship with a business partner (Wetzels et al., 1998). In any relationship, commitment is a vital factor and B2B purchasing transaction is not an exception (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This construct measures the commitment that the potential customers have towards the sales consultant of the supplier. It is shown that increased level of commitment will lead to increase loyalty (Pritchard et al., 1999). According to academic definition, commitment to the sales consultant is a desire to maintain a valued relationship and it is an affective commitment and a psychological attachment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), behavioral intention, that is, the intention to continue the relationship in the future will be derived from this kind of attachment to the sales consultant (Gundlach et al., 1995). An increase in acquiescence and a decrease in the propensity to leave are considered as the outcomes of high commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

4. Commitment influence Customer Loyalty

It was suggested by many scholars that there is no difference between commitment and loyalty (Hennig et al., 2004). However, the majority of researchers rejected this idea and suggested that these two constructs are related but different and that commitment is an antecedent to loyalty (Kelly, 2000; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Commitment, by definition of Berry et al. (1991) is a vital part of successful relationship, which is going to lead to loyalty. Although loyalty simply was considered as repeat purchase at the beginning, researchers in the field realized that repurchase alone is not sufficient evidence of loyalty (Newman et al., 2001). According to Bettencourt (1997), commitment has a strong positive effect on loyalty.

As Day (1969) showed, repurchasing goods can be derived from spurious loyalty. In conclusion, it was suggested that loyalty should be conceived as the commitment to the producer stimulated by certain positive attitudes because commitment indicates the motivation to maintain a relationship, while customer turnover among committed customers decreases (Gounaris, 2005). Research of Ulaga et al. (2006) showed a significant and positive association between commitment and customer loyalty.

Similarly, commitment was shown as an antecedent to loyalty by Shabbir et al. (2007). Commitment has been considered as one of the key factors affecting customer loyalty that played as a central role in B2B environment (Rauyruen et al., 2007). In addition, commitment has played as a mediating role with antecedents in order that leads to customer loyalty in relationship marketing (Hennig et al., 2004, Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Positive intentions to maintain and strengthen a business relationship are created by commitment, thus customer loyalty is positively influenced by commitment (Cater, 2010).

The various types of commitment have implications for how one relates to the customers in view of the different motives for their commitment. Commitment is thought to embrace a temporal dimension; highlighting the fact, that commitment means something over the long term (Becker, 1960). Therefore, one may expect a positive effect of both affective and calculative commitment on relationship length. It appears that little or no research has been done on the effect of commitment on service usage (Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef, 2008). It is believed that service usage behavior is mainly driven by the utility provided by the usage of the service. Calculative commitment, derived from economic motives is likely to be more important than affective commitment in influencing service usage, as consumers consider costs and benefits of the service (Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef, 2008). Based on previous studies there is a strong association between commitment and customer loyalty also, presence of a positive and direct impact of customer loyalty on B2B context by commitment was identified.

Initially, most researchers defined commitment similarly to Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé (1993) as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship”, and measured it as a global construct. However, in more recent studies several researchers (Sharma et al., 2006) conceptualize commitment with up to four components, namely affective, positive calculative, negative calculative, and normative commitment. Affective commitment reflects Bagozzi's (1975) “social man”. This “emotional, social sentiment” (Gilliland and Bello, 2002) pertains to attachment that is due to liking and identification (Geyskens et al., 1996).

According to Sharma et al., (2006: 65, 69), affective commitment includes “a desire to develop and strengthen a relationship with another person or group because of familiarity, friendship, and personal confidence built through interpersonal interaction over time”. Affective commitment originates from identification, common values, attachment, involvement and similarity (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor, 2004). In addition, affectively committed customers continue the relationship because they like their suppliers and enjoy working with them (Fullerton, 2005). Affective commitment therefore stems from a general positive feeling towards the relationship partner (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991). Customers with strong affective commitment will stay in the relationship because they want to, based on their positive affect toward the supplier (Kumar et al., 1995).

On the other hand, calculative commitment reflects Bagozzi's (1975: 316) “economic man” and relates to a “rational, economic calculation” (Gilliland and Bello, 2002: 25). Kumar et al., (1995) described this commitment as an attachment for instrumental reasons. Such commitment represents some kind of constraining force that binds the customer to its supplier out of need (Bansal et al., 2004). While affective commitment represents a positive motivation, calculative commitment chiefly represents a negative motivation for continuing the relationship (de Ruyter, Moorman, and Lemmink, 2001).

Recently, however, Sharma et al., (2006) propose that calculative commitment can be negative (locked-in commitment) or positive (value-based commitment). Locked-in commitment refers to staying in the relationship due to a perceived lack of alternative suppliers or perceived switching costs, whereas value-based commitment involves the rational calculation of benefits arising from continuing the relationship (Sharma et al., 2006). While customers with strong locked-in commitment stay in the relationship because they perceive they need to (Kumar et al., 1995), customers with strong value-based commitment continue their relationship because they benefit from staying in the relationship. In addition to affective and both calculative components of commitment, some researchers (Sharma et al., 2006) also discuss a fourth component, that is normative commitment, and describe it as an attachment due to felt obligations (Bansal et al., 2004).

In brief, if a customer is affectively committed to a supplier, they are likely to buy additional services from that supplier in preference to their competitors. However, since calculative commitment is based on economic considerations, a customer with calculative commitment will not necessarily purchase additional services. Berry and Parasuraman (1991) maintain that mutual commitment is the base on which relationships develop. One common theme that emerges from the various literatures is that: parties identify commitment among exchange partners as key to achieving valuable outcomes for themselves and they endeavor to develop and maintain relationships.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Automotive industry is one of the essential industrial sectors in the world. Today's global automotive manufacturers have a direct impact on a variety of other industries ranging from raw material and component suppliers, to machine manufactures, research and technology institutes, car repair shops, retailers, driving schools and financial intuitions. This paper has debated for the commitment have been recognized as one vital factor, which enable customers to overcome uncertainty and strengthen the relationship with companies and in return leads to customer loyalty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Also it is concerned with the role of main variable, which are recognized as the key success factor that influence on customer loyalty. The conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows.

Customer loyalty is a strategy that creates mutual rewards to benefit firms and customers. Customer loyalty is one of the factors that lead to creation benefit. With loyal customers, companies can maximize their profit because loyal customers are willing to purchase more frequently; spend money on trying new products or services; recommend products and services to others; and give companies sincere suggestions. Thus, loyalty links the success and profitability of a company. The study of customers staying with a firm as a result of loyalty is valuable, especially in the light of increasing academic and business attention being given to long-term marketing relationships rather than transactions. Hence, if suppliers want to promote longer-term customer relationships, and reduce customer exit because of disloyalty, it follows that an understanding of the phenomenon of "why customers stay" is essential. Further, this study may be important for those suppliers who have many prospective loyalties because it is important to understand why these customers stay, and to what extent such firms can discourage such customers from leaving in both positive and negative ways.

A field study for customers of automotive industry evaluate relationships between customer loyalty, commitment for a better understanding of the studied variable and its interrelations. This paper has evaluated commitment as the key success factor because of its impact on intention to continue and expand business with supplier. In this sense, the supplier should first create commitment, which it is the buyer's attachment to the supplier and that it leads to the development of stable, long-term relationships. In addition, using the literature, the present article recommended that suppliers should recognize the role of assessing and building relationship this factor with its partners, as it has an impact, direct, on intentions to stay in the relationship.

This article contributed to the literature in at least three significant points. First, from a theoretical perspective, the study integrates the construct of relationship between commitment and customer loyalty and then investigating relationship among them, which responds to a research gap noted in the literature. The findings of the present paper confirm the direct significant effect of commitment on leading customer loyalty, as proved in several previous studies.

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Table1: Summary of Definitions of Customer Loyalty

Author/ Year	Issue
Dick and Basu (1994)	Research into loyalty has developed from a perspective either of effective, manifest behavior, which implies repeat purchase or from the perspective of attitude.
Jones and Sasser (1995)	Customer loyalty divided into two types. One was long-term genuine loyalty that customers have indeed loyalty and won't change to other options, and the other was short-term loyalty, that is, customers will change to other options when they find better products or services.
Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)	Loyal customers would have high purchase intention, less price sensitivity, feedback to the firm (internal complaining behavior), do more business (frequent purchase and no switch)
Gremler and Brown (1993)	Loyalty is the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchasing behavior from a service provider, possesses a positive attitudinal disposition toward the provider, and considers using only this provider when a need for this service arises.
Oliver (1997, 1999)	Customer loyalty was a deeply held to commitment to rebuy or repatronize a referred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior (p. 3 92).
Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler (2004)	Customer loyalty as repeat purchasing behavior brought about by marketing efforts directed towards keeping existing customers.
Reichheld and Detrick, (2003b)	Customer loyalty is a strategy that creates mutual rewards to benefit firms and customers.
Gil-Saura, (2008)	Loyalty is a dedication on the part of the customer to maintain a relationship and a devotion to buy the product or service repeatedly.
Jamal and nastasiadou (2009); Ou, (2011)	Customer loyalty is defined as a held commitment to re-buy or repatronize a preferred product consistently in the future.

Table2: Several researchers proposed that commitment is the central construct to the development of successful service relationships in B2B markets.

Author/ Year	Issue
Chow and Holden (1997) ;Money (2004); Eriksson and Vaghult (2000); Boles et al. (1997); Lam et al. (2004); Bennett et al. (2005); Gounaris (2005)	Provide empirical evidence linking several constructs such as relationship quality, trust, satisfaction to influence B2B customer loyalty.
Lin and Wang (2006); Rauyruen and Miller (2007) Franco et al. (2009); Liu et al. (2011); Ou (2011)	The effects of relationship quality on customer loyalty
Ruyter et al. (2001); Gounaris (2005); Kumar et al. (1995); Sharma et al. (2006); Wetzels et al. (1998)	Relationship quality would be a predictor of B2B customer loyalty
Fullerton (2005); Garbarino and Johnson (1999); Geysken et al. (1996); Gilliland and Bello (2002) Wetzels et al. (1998)	A relationship exists between customer commitment and future purchase intentions and intention to stay in the relationship
Ruyter et al. (2001); Gounaris (2005); Kumar et al. (1995); Sharma et al. (2006); Wetzels et al. (1998)	Identified effective commitment as the strongest motivator for customer loyalty.
Berry and Parasuraman (1991)	Commitment is a vital ingredient of successful relationships leading to loyalty
Wilson (1994); Moorman et al. (1993); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Ulaga and Eggert (2006)	Commitment indicates the motivation to maintain a relationship
Anderson and Narus (1991); Ruyter et al.(2001); Gounaris (2005)	Commitment indicates the motivation to maintain a relationship while customer turnover among committed customers decreases
Pura (2005); Shabbir et al. (2007)	Commitment indicates the motivation to maintain a relationship while customer turnover among committed customers decreases
Dixon et al. (2005); Fullerton (2005); Garbarino and Johnson (1999); Hennig-Thurau (2004); Macintosh and Lockshin (1997); Rauyruen and Miller (2007); Curtis (2009)	Commitment has a strong positive relationship with repurchase or repurchases intent

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