

Relationship Marketing: Understanding and Implementing the Concept

Abstract: Even though marketing has always been based on relationship, *Relationship Marketing* (RM) is thought to be a new phenomenon in the province of marketing. The advent of *mass marketing* and *mass production* obscured the idea of RM for quite a long time. Fierce competition, eroding brand loyalty, dirty price war among competitors and heightened expectation of the customers have been instrumental for the recent emphasis on RM. However, RM as a marketing approach is still ambiguous to many practitioners. This paper is set out to provide a conceptual framework of RM. It describes the concept, elements, and functions of RM as a marketing tool. It also offers a brief note on the existing practices of RM in Bangladesh and highlights the growing needs for such approach in the current competitive milieu.

1.0. Introduction

Marketing is the delivery of customer satisfaction at a profit, (Kotler 2002) or even in simpler words things that is done to attract and retain customer at a profit can be called **marketing**. This simple definition tells that marketing is basically customer oriented in nature. However, looking back at the history of marketing indicates that the idea of marketing was different and it took many different shapes at different ages. The four major marketing management philosophies i.e production concept, product concept, selling concept and marketing concept are in fact, related to this evolutionary nature of marketing.

This conceptual development of marketing implies that initially *marketing* was associated with the mass production and efficient delivery of the products (**production concept**) and now it is viewed as a customer oriented essential business activity (**marketing concept**). But an inquisitive mind may ask a simple question: before even production concept what was the form of marketing? If the job of marketing was to sell products, obviously there was some sort of marketing activities practiced even before that point of time. The answer can be the very concept of *relationship marketing* where it is believed that. the idea of marketing started with simple thing named as relationship between buyer and seller. At its beginning, if marketing was meant to make a sell, that deal was closed only through the act of relationship between the buyer and the seller. For example, at that age if a person knew how to weave a cloth, say a “shirt”, he used to sell it to the people whom he knew and had some sort of relationship with. This was probably because of low level of promotional activities/opportunities from the sellers’ point of view. On the other hand, the buyers were more concerned about there after sale services regarding the products they buy and naturally they used to look for a known seller. Therefore, then the job of the marketers was to create some sort of relationship with their customers, so that the customers come to him over and over again. Basically this process of attracting and retaining the customers was the job of marketing, which is now termed as “Relationship Marketing” (RM).

After *mass marketing* came into being, the use of relationships started to fade away. The new technology and the advent of mass marketing [mass production, mass distribution and mass promotion] made it less important to develop a cemented relationship with the consumers. But now with the general shift to information highway, IT, database management paved the way to

RM once again and the marketers started to take advantage of this new technology to create closer ties with their customers. For example, Ritz-Carton hotel provides service at pinpoint accuracy just because they have the detailed database of more than 240, 000 repeat customers. The company trains each of its employees to note guest's preferences and to record these into a computerized guest history profile. So it is found that these new technologies are helping the marketers to start RM once again.

Relationship marketing is now immensely used by the B-to-B marketers. Here the salespeople maintain and develop close relationship with their customers. Even sometimes the companies appoint a relationship manager to take care of their valued customers. Recognizing the value of continuous relationship in building customer loyalty, **Caterpillar** credits much of its success to its strong dealer network and product support services offered throughout the world. Emphasizing the knowledge of the local market and close relationship with the customers, David Fites, the CEO of Caterpillar contends, "Our dealers tend to be prominent business leaders in their service territories who are deeply involved in community activities and who are committed to living in the area. Their reputations and long-term relationships are important because selling our products is a personal business" [Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000 p. 155].

It has been almost thirty years that the concept of relationship marketing came into formal practice. But still many scholars feel that the marketing practitioners lack understanding about this concept. In the face of the fierce competition in today's business the internalization and practice of RM is becoming overwhelmingly important. Sometimes the competition gets so heated up that many scholars don't hesitate to call it a "corporate war". As a reason these marketers are always coming up with new tools and strategies so as to ensure their survival and growth. In this array of new tools RM is considered as a powerful instrument for the marketers.

The objective of this paper is to review the basic concept of the term *relationship marketing* so that it would help the marketers understand what relationship marketing really means and hence will help them to implement the concept in their organizations. An attempt will be made to define what relationship marketing is, boundaries of RM, how and why it evolved in the market place and what are the avenues of marketing that can be exploited with this concept. Finally, the importance of relationship marketing in the context of Bangladesh is highlighted.

2.0. RM defined:

Marketing is to establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises. (Gronroos, 1994). Such relationships are usually but not necessarily long term. Relationship with a customer can be divided into two parts: to attract the customer and to develop the relationship with that customer so as to achieve the economic goal of the marketer.

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) RM is a philosophy of doing business, a strategic orientation that focuses on *keeping and improving* current customers, rather than acquiring new customers. This philosophy assumes that consumers prefer to have an ongoing relationship with one organization than to switch continually among providers in their search for value.

Berry and Parasuraman (1991) identified RM as a marketing approach that concerns *attracting, developing, and retaining customer relationships*. From the view point of Coviello (1997) RM is a multifunctional and integrative approach, which describes marketing as “an integrative activity involving functions across the organization, with emphasis on facilitating, building and maintaining relationship over time”. One comprehensive definition of RM states, “RM refers to all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Thus the overall objective of relationship marketing is to facilitate and maintain long-term customer relationships, which leads to changed focal points and modifications of the marketing management process. The common superior objectives of all strategies are enduring unique relationships with customers, which cannot be imitated by competitors and therefore provide sustainable competitive advantages, (Berry and Gresham, 1986).

Building on these assumptions and the fact that it is usually much cheaper to keep a current customer than to attract a new one. Marketers should emphasize more on retaining current customers than to attract a new one.

3.0. Transaction Marketing and RM

One particular thought regarding the Relationship Marketing is that it is the extension of simple transaction marketing or rather simple buyer-seller relationship. There is no doubt in the mind of the researchers that RM goes far beyond the theory of transaction marketing, though most of the researchers say RM is the opposite of transaction marketing. So in order to understand the term RM a distinction between these two terms is required. A *transactional exchange* involves a single, short time exchange with a distinct beginning and ending (Bagozzi, 1979; Gundlach and Murphy 1993). In contrast, a *relational exchange* involves multiple linked exchanges extending over time and usually involves both economic and social bonds (Wilson and Jantrannia, 1994; Lehtinan and Mitilla, 1995). The comparison between the concepts is given below:

Figure 1. Comparison between transaction marketing and RM: Some implications:

The strategy continuum	Transaction marketing	Relationship marketing
Time perspective	Short-term focus	Long-term focus
Dominating marketing function	Marketing mix	Interactive marketing (supported by marketing mix activities)
Price elasticity	Customers tend to be more sensitive to price	Customers tend to be less sensitive to price
Dominating quality dimension	Quality of output (technical quality dimension) is dominating	Quality of interactions (functional quality dimension) grows in importance and may become dominating
Measurement of customer satisfaction	Monitoring market share (indirect approach)	Managing the customer base (direct approach)
Customer information system	<i>Ad hoc</i> customer satisfaction surveys	Real-time customer feedback system
Interdependency between marketing, operations and personnel	Interface of no or limited strategic importance	Interface of substantial strategic importance

The role of internal marketing	Internal marketing of no or limited importance to success	Internal marketing of substantial strategic importance to success
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Source: Christian Gronroos, *From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing*, 1994.

4.0. Evolution of RM theory

Bund Jackson is recorded as having used the term “relationship marketing” in 1970’s in the field of industrial marketing (Gummesson et al., 1997). Since than the researchers, both in the USA (Wilson 1976, Jackson 1985); and Europe (Ford 1980, Gummesson, 1987; Hakansson, 1982; Johanson & Mattsson, 1987) came to understand the importance of relationship building in the field of marketing and came up with different theories at the same time. The term RM emerged as an influential issue in the marketing literature during 70s and early 80s. The transformation to the RM took place and the researchers started looking beyond the simple *dyadic transaction* to the more complex nature of relationship, that constitutes RM (Healy 2001). Gronroos (1994) identified things this way; “*RM is the one leading new approach to marketing which eventually entered the marketing literature. A paradigm shift is underway. In services marketing, especially in Europe and Australia but to some extent also in North America, and in industrial marketing, especially in Europe this paradigm shift has already taken place.*” One important argument that he gave in favor of RM is a *paradigm shift* from *marketing mix theory*-, which is the universally accepted theory of marketing.

A note on the background that made the concept of RM so popular within the marketers in the 1970’s is worthwhile to mention. One interesting outcome that can be correlated is the emergence of service marketing in the 1970’s. In Scandinavia and Finland, the Nordic school of Services, looked at the marketing of services as something that can’t be separated from overall management. Gronroos brought quality into marketing context by introducing the *perceived service quality* concept in 1982. He introduced the concept of the interactive marketing function to cover the marketing impact on the customer during the consumption of usage process, where the consumer of a service typically interacts with systems, physical resources and employees of the service provider. In France, Langeard and Eiglier (1987) developed the *servuction* concept to describe this system of interactions. These interactions occur between the customers and

employees, who normally are not considered marketing people and who do not belong to a marketing or sales department. Because of these interaction and the importance of service in marketing the need for RM has also grown at a rapid pace, as both the researchers and also the managers came to understand the value of RM in their overall marketing approach.

The concept of “customer lifetime value” (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991; Customer lifetime value is the value of the individual customer over his/her lifetime; it can be calculated by multiplying the customer’s average dollar purchases by the average lifetime of the customer in a particular company) was also developed so that marketers emphasize more on customer retention than on attracting new customers. By looking at the figure of the value, which is very large most of the time, the marketers can realize why they should put more importance to each and every single transaction with their customers. It is believed that a single small mistake or a mishap with the customer will disappoint him and he may never visit the service provider for the rest of his life causing loss of enormous amount of revenues to the marketer.

5.0.Elements of RM

Elements of RM are the operational tools for implementing RM in an organization. Different researchers have taken multiple views regarding the elements. Synthesizing these various views the following elements of RM can be identified.

5.1. Financial bonds

Financial bond is tying the customers primarily through financial incentives that may be in the form of lower prices for greater volumes purchases or lower prices for customers who have been with the firm for a long time. In airline industry and related travel service industries like hotels and also in car rental companies, the example of RM is easy to find. *Frequent flier programs* provide financial incentives and rewards for travelers who bring more of their business to a particular airline. Long-distance telephone companies in various parts of the world have engaged themselves in similar battle, trying to provide volume discounts and other price incentives to retain market share and build a loyal customer base.

Unfortunately, financial incentives do not generally provide long-term advantages to a firm, especially if it is not combined with another relationship strategy, as they don’t serve to

differentiate the firm from its competitors in the long run. For instance, many travelers belong to several *frequent flier programs* and don't hesitate to trade off among them and there has been considerable customer switching every month among the major telecommunication suppliers.

5.2. Social bonds

Social bonds are more personal than organizational. Social exchange is viewed as a dynamic process and plays a central role in ongoing exchange episodes by fostering symbiotic adaptation (Pelton, 1997). Social bonds are investments of time and energy that produce positive interpersonal relationships between partners, although this can range from formal organizational contacts to informal, personal contacts (Sally, Perry; 2002). This bond can be strengthened through multilevel contacts between parties. The most important elements of social bonds are: *promise, trust and commitment*.

5.2.1. Promise

An integral element of the relationship marketing approach is the *promise concept* that has been strongly emphasized by Henrik Calonius (1988). According to him marketers should not only give promises and then persuade the consumers for a certain desired outcome. Apart from making only promises they should attract new customers and initially build relationships. However, if promises are not kept, the evolving relationship cannot be maintained and enhanced. Fulfilling promises is equally important as means of achieving customer satisfaction, retention of the customer base, and long-term profitability.

5.2.2. Trust

Trust can lead to the commitment to a relationship that results from an exchange partner exerting all his/her efforts to preserve an important relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). "The resources of the seller – personnel, technology and systems – have to be used in such a manner that the customer's trust in the resources involved and, thus, in the firm itself is maintained and strengthened" (Gronroos, 1994). In a study of relationships on the market for one industrial service, Moorman defined trust as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". This definition means, that there has to be a belief in the other partner's trustworthiness that results from the expertise and reliability of that partner. It can be added that

maintaining and strengthening trust is essential to the long-term success of a relationship. Where trust is absent relationship will deteriorate (Palmer, 2001).

5.2.3. Commitment

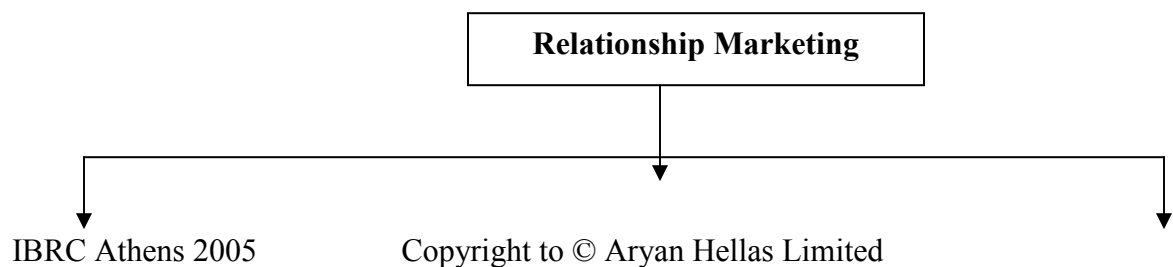
Another key element of social bond is *commitment*. Both *affective commitment* (which is based on a sense of liking and emotional attachment to the relationship) and *calculative commitment* (which is based on a cognitive evaluation of the worth of the relationship) (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) are constructive for developing mutually beneficial relationships, with *affective commitment* being the more effective (Kumar, 1994).

5.3. Structural Bonds

Structural bonds are developed when two organizations adapt to each other in some economic or technical way such as product or process adjustments (Wilson and Mummalaneni, 1986). These bonds are forged when two parties adapt themselves to the other by making investments that are difficult to retrieve when the relationship breaks down, and are often strengthened through joint investment in products and process development (Turnbull and Wilson, 1989). For example, in a business-to-business context, information and resource sharing and/or adoptions, (Gordon, 1998; Haekansson and Snehota, 1995; Mattsson, 1985; Ulrich, 1989), mutual knowledge (Haekansson and Snehota, 1995), contractual arrangements (Mattson, 1985), and integrated competence and investment by two organizations (Perry, 2001).

Adam Lingreen (2001) provided a comprehensive framework of RM, where he identified *objectives*, *defining construct* and *instruments* as three major conceptual constructs of RM. This framework can be explored using a simple analytical model (figure 2).

Figure 2. Breakdown of relationship marketing into, objectives, defining constructs and instruments.



Objectives
a. customer satisfaction
b. customer delight
c. share of customer
d. customer retention
e. loyalty

Defining construct
a. trust
b. commitment
c. co-operation
d. communication
e. shared values
f. conflict
g. power
h. non-opportunistic behavior
i. interdependence

Instruments
a. direct marketing
b. database marketing
c. quality management
d. services marketing
e. customer partnering

Source: Adam Lingreen, *A framework for studying relationship-marketing dyads. Qualitative Market Research, Vol 4. No. 2; 2001.*

6.0. Relationship marketing in Bangladesh

As part of the business process, the organizations both service and manufacturing in Bangladesh have been practicing various marketing activities. But in most of the cases, these are of transactional nature. However, in the face of intense competition and heightened customer expectations, many companies have started introducing various relationship-marketing approaches. Developing customer databases, promotions such as using greeting cards and arranging parties (specially in B-to-B situation), joint promotion by two or more organizations, molding the service process for a particular customer segment, appointing financial advisors in some banks etc. are now practiced more frequently in Bangladesh. However these efforts are yet sporadic and practiced at a low scale, which indicates that the marketers in Bangladesh have some way to go to understand the value of developing strong relationship with their customer base.

Some of the existing RM practices in Bangladesh are illustrated below:

Activity	Organization	Extent of RM	Interpretation
Operation of Pepsodent	Lever Brothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Bond 	It creates awareness among the customers and by availing the service

Free Dental Clinic	Bangladesh Ltd.		they feel a sense of obligation to the company.
Recipe Competition	Abul Khair Group of Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Bond 	The competition brings the name of the company at the forefront and the participants subconsciously develop a psychological attachment to the company and its products.
Package “Cell Phone services” to the Corporate clients	Pacific Telecom with Bashundhara Group of Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Bond • Structural Bond 	This deal provides a low price, better service to the client in one hand and ensures a large-scale sale of the marketer on the other hand.
Sending Greeting Cards to individual Clients	Dhaka Bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Bond 	It develops a sense of membership in the same family and creates sense of belongingness among the clients.
Volume based trade discount to the retailers	Many consumer goods marketing companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Bond 	The retailers are given progressive discount on the basis of volume sold. It encourages the retailers to carry and sell more of the company’s products and benefit financially.
Sibling plan of Schools	Many private Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Bond 	Some school offers zero or 50% tuition fees for the third child from the same family admitted in the same school. It helps the guardians to reduce their cost of education and develops a lasting relationship the school.

Considering the socio-economic changes in the business environment one can identify many valid grounds for relationship marketing to be given more emphasis as a means of survival and growth in the long run. Some of the important reasons are as follows.

- In terms of volume, Bangladesh is a tiny market for most of the products and services. So in the face of growing competition, the marketers encounter the real challenge of protecting their existing share in the market. It indicates that they should pay more importance to retaining the current customer base. One industry that is going to suffer the consequence if they fail to understand the importance of Customer Lifetime Value and the need for long-term relationships with existing customers is the mobile phone industry.
- The customers are getting educated and conscious now-a-days and they are always looking for better service. Introducing strong RM strategies with these customers can solve this problem.
- Due to fierce competition from both domestic and international sources the business organizations should pay more importance to create strong relationship with their clients. The more the competition, the more the options to the customers, so if a company wants to retain their own customers it needs to practice RM.
- Less brand loyalty of the customers is another reason why the marketers in Bangladesh should emphasize more on RM. With the help of strong RM strategies one can make his customers brand loyal to ensure their repeat purchase.
- People in Bangladesh have less purchasing power and hence most of them are price sensitive buyers. It means that before buying a product the customers give most importance to its price rather than any other issue of the marketing mix and according to Gronroos customers are less price sensitive if they have a strong relationship with the marketer. “Of course price is not unimportant but it is often much less an issue in RM. RM makes customers less price sensitive” (Gronroos, 1994.)

7.0.Conclusion

Relationship Marketing is considered to be a *paradigm shift* from the conventional *marketing mix approach*. In this age of social Darwinism where companies, in all senses, are indulged in “corporate war” the traditional transaction oriented marketing propelled by mass production and mass marketing is no more a valid response. Now the issue of retaining the current customer base is more important than the attraction of new customer. Consequently, the marketers are now concerned more of developing a strong and lasting relationships with their customers by using different Relationship Marketing tools. As part of the RM an organization can tie up its customers by *financial bonds* through financial incentives, or by establishing *social bondage* through keeping promise, developing trust and maintaining affective commitment, or by creating *structural bondage* by molding their business process in line with the requirements of their customers.

In the face of severe competition, increasing customer expectation, eroding brand loyalty and price sensitivity of the customers in Bangladesh, the need for RM has been more and more important. And considering the reality, many companies in Bangladesh are now religiously pursuing different tools of RM to develop financial, social and structural bonds with their existing customers. An organization, be it service or manufacturing, that will practice RM will definitely gain a competitive advantage over its rival that practices the traditional *marketing mix approach*.

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