

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Technology Impact On Business-To-Business Customer Relationships: Development Of A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

The development of a conceptual model that depicts the impact of CRM technology on B2B relationships is explored. CRM technology adoption is considered as a possible antecedent to relationship strength and relationship performance. A conceptual model is developed and presented depicting both market and technology orientation as impacting the adoption of CRM technology and subsequent relationship strength and performance. Relationship strength is the dependent variable while relationship performance is a secondary dependent variable.

Keywords: CRM, customer relationship management, conceptual model, information technology, business-to-business, relationship strength, relationship performance

Introduction

The marketing, management, IT, and practitioner literature make numerous references to Customer Relationship Management's (CRM) impact on business orientation and performance (Almquist, Heaton and Hall, 2002; Goodhue, Wixom and Watson, 2002; Payne and Frow, 2004; Rigby and Ledingham, 2004). The rapid growth of CRM can be attributed to (a) fierce business competition for valuable customers, (b) economics of customer retention (i.e., life-time value) and (c) technology advances (Buttle, 2004; Winer, 2001).

Although CRM is available today from a variety of suppliers, the increased adoption of CRM systems (IDC, 2004) to help manage customer information and knowledge is perceived by some practitioners and researchers as not delivering proven business value (Raman and Pashupati, 2004). In many cases CRM faces serious difficulties and implementation failures (Davids, 1999; Raman and Pashupati, 2004). These include the inability to deliver profitable growth and in some cases even damaging existing customer relationships (Reinartz, Krafft and Hoyer, 2004; Rigby, Reichheld and Scheffer, 2002).

Underlying the growing acceptance and adoption of CRM technology in business are the concepts of marketing orientation (MO) and relationship marketing (RM) (Grönroos, 1995; Kohli, Jaworski and Kumar, 1993). However, differences in CRM technology adoption and outcomes within a firm may also reflect the firm's technology orientation and IT management sophistication (Karimi, Somers and Gupta, 2001).

CRM involves IT to a significant degree, yet little research exists on the design, use or success of systems to support CRM from the marketing perspective (Reinartz *et al.*, 2004). CRM research is considered by many researchers as limited in nature and scope (Reinartz *et al.*, 2004; Romano and Fjermestad, 2003), due to the lack of empirical and generalisable research (Gummeson, 2004; Stefanou, Sarmaniotis and Stafyla, 2003). Much of the IT related research is focused on the functional aspects of implementation and there continues to be a call from marketers for additional research in order to understand, explain and benefit from the CRM phenomenon (Reinartz *et al.*, 2004). The limited number of CRM specific empirical studies and theories available today needs to be expanded and explored further (Goodhue *et al.*, 2002).

This paper explores the development of a conceptual model that depicts both market and technology orientation impacts on CRM technology adoption and subsequent effects on relationship strength and performance using dyad data collection methods (Kim, 2000;

Medlin, 2003).

CRM Technology Adoption (CA)

Conceivably the type and magnitude of CRM technology adopted by a firm would have an impact on business performance, and relationship development, strength and performance (Dishaw and Strong, 1999; Venkatesh, Davis, Morris *et al.*, 2003). A firm adopting contact management software as a CRM initiative is less likely to dramatically improve business or relationship performance. However a firm implementing highly sophisticated CRM analytics and collaborative CRM applications may find improvement in both business and relationship measures. Supported by the IT technology adoption literature (e.g., Dishaw and Strong, 1999), CRM technology adoption (CA) is a higher order construct comprised of acceptance (user), functionality and integration within the firm. Acceptance relates to the habitual use of the technology as part of the job function and to achieve results. For example using that customer information on a regular basis to complete the job requirements (Kim, Choi, Qualls *et al.*, 2004). User acceptance is also influenced by a number of factors including perceived ease of use, attitude toward the system, and usefulness (Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989).

CRM functionality refers to the type of CRM technology adopted and is often overlooked by researchers or not considered as a primary factor affecting the successful adoption of CRM within a firm and by users. Variety in functionality include Sales Force Automation, Customer Service Functions, Marketing Automation, Collaborative Communication and Customer Analytics (Raman and Pashupati, 2004; Speier and Venkatesh, 2002).

The integration of CRM technology within the firm refers to the integration with legacy IT systems, and business processes. CRM technology integration has been identified by IT researchers as an important factor in the successful adoption of CRM within a firm (Ling and Yen, 2001). There is a significant difference between a standalone customer contact application for individual sales people, and an enterprise wide centralised customer database accessible by all users. The integration aspect reflects how well the CRM technology is linked to other aspects of the business to provide a seamless customer experience.

Firm Orientation

In this study firm orientation is comprised of market orientation and technology orientation.

Market Orientation (MO)

Market orientation “. . . represents the foundation of high-quality marketing practice” (Kohli *et al.*, 1993). Kohli *et al.* determined through personal interviews with managers that three components adequately comprise a MO. They are (a) intelligence generation, (b) intelligence dissemination and (c) responsiveness. The authors also believe that MO can be managed into a business through communication, resource allocation and culture. More importantly MO has been shown to positively influence customer satisfaction (Singh and Ranchod, 2004) which in turn leads to customer retention and increased profitability (Storbacka, Strandvik and Grönroos, 1994). The most common MO characteristic is the degree of “focus on the customer” (Gray, Matear, Boshoff *et al.*, 1998; Helfert, Ritter and Walter, 2002).

Although MO is widely viewed as the current basis of marketing philosophy (Hunt and Morgan, 1995; Sanzo, Santos, Vázquez *et al.*, 2003) the underlying logic and evidence may be suspect and even counter-productive (Henderson, 1998). Nevertheless MO is considered an adequate indicator of the level of market philosophy within a firm that guides the firm’s customer orientation (Day, 1994; Slater and Narver, 1995).

The degree of MO within a firm may influence the functionality (analytical, operational, collaborative), acceptance and level of integration (departmental or enterprise-wide) of the

CRM solution and well as have an impact on the use of CRM technology to develop and maintain customer relationships.

Technology Orientation (TO)

A firm's technology orientation (TO) has been demonstrated to influence the acceptance and adoption of information technology solutions (Karimi *et al.*, 2001). In particular the firm's IT management sophistication and IT leadership role reflects the technical orientation of the firm and may be important in the decision to implement CRM technology. In addition IT management sophistication and leadership practices have been shown to affect the organisation's ability to utilise technology in support of marketing (Karimi *et al.*, 2001).

Firms that have strong IT leadership and demonstrate IT management sophistication through technology use benefit more from technology (Karimi, Gupta and Somers, 1996). It follows that IT management sophistication and IT leadership may influence the functionality, acceptance, and level of integration of the CRM solution within firms (Karimi *et al.*, 2001; Ling and Yen, 2001). Therefore IT management sophistication and leadership is expected to play an important role in the implementation, utilisation and adoption of CRM within the organisation (Karimi *et al.*, 2001).

Relationship Strength

Business relationships are generally considered higher-order constructs and have been investigated previously through a number of distinct factors and dimensions (e.g., Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relationship quality and relationship strength have been researched as similar, if not synonymous, constructs (e.g., Lages, Lages and Lages, 2005; Storbacka *et al.*, 1994). In particular relationship strength, consisting of trust, commitment and shared norms, has been shown to vary significantly between firms depending on the level of the individual sub-constructs (Hausman, 2001).

Marketing and IT researchers have attempted to measure relationship strength by focusing on specific key relationship constructs. These include components of trust, commitment, conflict, social bonds, communications quality, customer satisfaction and information flow (Dorsch, Swanson and Kelley, 1998; Lages *et al.*, 2005; Lang and Colgate, 2003; Roberts, Varki and Brodie, 2003; Wong and Sohal, 2002). However trust, commitment and communications quality appear to be robust and consistent measures of relationship strength.

Trust

Trust is commonly considered the primary and fundamental requirement for successful relationship development and enhancement (Grönroos, 1996; Medlin, Aurifeille and Quester, 2005). RM theory proposes that business relationships are based on trust (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987; Fontenot and Wilson, 1997). Numerous studies have investigated the components, antecedents and outcomes of trust with respect to business relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Narayandas and Rangan, 2004).

Although there is some controversy over what exactly constitutes trust, what it means and what is measured (McKnight and Chervany, 2000; Young and Wilkinson, 1989), Sako (1992) proposes a simplified typology of trust for management of buyer-supplier relations incorporating contractual trust, goodwill trust and competence trust.

Commitment

Commitment is considered by many researchers as the second most common variable theorised as necessary to create, build and maintain relationships (Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar, 1998). Commitment is considered essential for relationship success and affects relationship performance (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). To this end the underlying motivation for

relationship commitment is important in order to better understand, investigate and predict ongoing relationship performance (Gounaris, 2005).

A summary of the commitment research has considered commitment to be an attitude and/or a behaviour (or intention) (O'Malley and Tynan, 1997). However a useful typology to study relationship commitment involves measures of affective and calculative commitment (Gounaris, 2005). Affective commitment reflects the desire to continue a relationship because of a psychological attachment, kinship or bond. Calculative commitment, on the other hand, is based purely on cost – benefit analysis, separate and distinct from the relationship context. This type of commitment manifests itself in the perceived need to maintain the relationship, due to the calculated investment and/or termination costs of leaving the relationship.

The majority of buyer-seller commitment research has focused on the single construct, affective form of commitment (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Communication Quality

Communication has been “... defined broadly as the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms . . . [focused] on the efficacy of information exchange rather than the quantity or amount, and . . . inherently taps past communications” (Anderson and Narus, 1990, p. 44). This form of communication definition has been used extensively in the RM literature (Lewin and Johnston, 1997; Sharma and Patterson, 1999).

RM researchers view communications effectiveness and quality as important factors in relationship development and performance (Fontenot and Wilson, 1997; Selnes, 1998), if not key factors (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998), significantly affecting the initiation and development of trust and commitment directly (Geyskens *et al.*, 1998). Hence communication quality is considered important in developing and maintaining relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Key dimensions of communications quality include timeliness, frequency, openness and accuracy. However the research investigating the potential affects of CRM technology adoption on communications quality and effectiveness within a business relationship environment is sparse.

Relationship Performance

Relationship performance considers the overall relationship behaviour and reflects the ongoing quality of the relationship, encompassing customer satisfaction in addition to relationship outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2004). Holm, Eriksson and Johanson (1996) identify Relationship Profitability as an indicator of relationship performance, influenced by Relationship Commitment, similarly Medlin (2003, p. 5) broadly defines relationship performance as “ . . . the perceived economic performance of the jointly acting relationship parties, relative to expectations . . . ”

Other researchers (Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar, 1999) have suggested that under certain circumstances satisfaction with business performance may outweigh a lack of trust within the relationship and that more research needs to be conducted on performance and satisfaction. Customer loyalty (i.e., exhibited through positive referral behaviour) is generally considered a desired outcome of successful RM and is considered a measure of overall relationship performance (Reichheld, 1996). Customer retention reflects relationship performance through the willingness to maintain or invest in the relationship (Gounaris, 2005; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997) and is also considered an outcome of affective commitment (Verhoef, 2003).

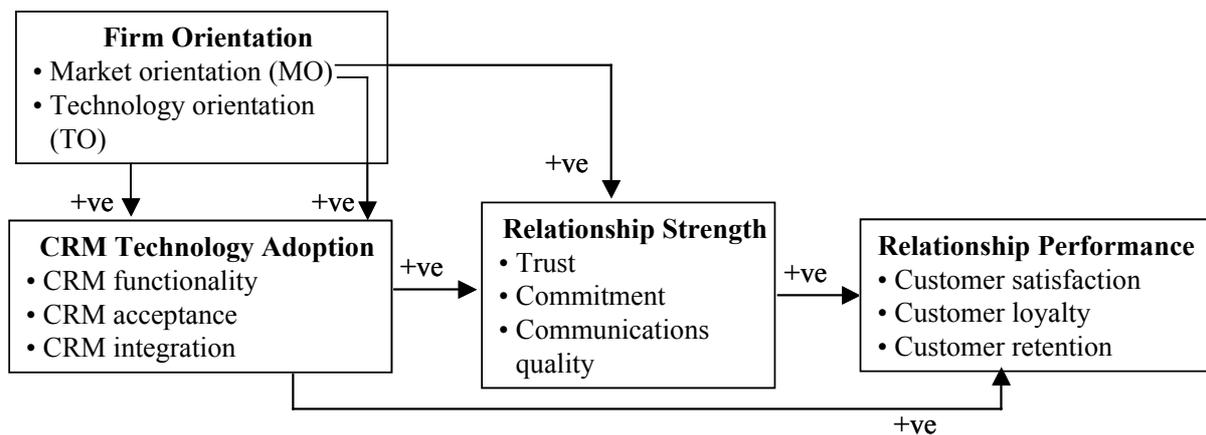
Relationship performance can be considered as observed behaviour partially resulting from

relationship strength. For this study the RP measure will be comprised of customer satisfaction, loyalty intention and customer retention (Jutla, Craig and Bodorik, 2001), measured from both the firm and customer perspectives. Dyad data collection has been used successfully in marketing relationship research (Anderson and Weitz, 1989; John and Reve, 1982).

Conceptual model

A common theme throughout the IT and marketing literature is that CRM technology is viewed as a RM enabler (Almquist *et al.*, 2002; Bose, 2002; Buttle, 2004). Through technology; tracking, customising, integrating, communications, minimising errors, augmenting core services and personalising can be implemented quickly and cost effectively (Berry, 1995).

Firm orientation, consisting of market orientation and technology orientation positively affects a firm's decision not only to adopt CRM technology, but what to adopt and how to integrate it. The degree of CRM technology adopted positively affects relationship strength – measured through trust, commitment and communications quality. CA is measured from the Firm's perspective. Relationship performance is positively affected by the degree of CRM technology adoption yet may be independent of relationship strength.



CRM – RM conceptual model

Conclusion and areas for future research

CRM is an exciting and topical area, but there are limited numbers of rigorous studies exploring the phenomenon within the RM framework. The popular press shows varying levels of success in implementation and the IT and marketing research indicates that CRM technology may not actually assist in the creation or maintenance of customer relationship (Peters and Fletcher, 2004). Yet CRM technology is considered by some academics as the practical implementation of RM theory (Gummesson, 2004). These differences in findings and opinion focus the current research. In particular there exists little published empirical research around the level of CRM technology adoption and relationship strength and performance (Raman and Pashupati, 2004; Reinartz *et al.*, 2004; Stefanou *et al.*, 2003). This study has potential to make a strong contribution toward understanding factors that might shape and influence success or failure of CRM technology implementation in different firm settings (MO and TO). Developing a measure of the impact of CRM technology adoption on B2B relationships provides an empirical method for academics to better understand and predict the relationship between CRM technology and RM. Marketing and IT practitioners ought to benefit from a better understanding of the relationship between CRM technology adoption (i.e., CRM functionality, integration and acceptance) and customer relationship

performance.

Future research will involve developing a CRM technology adoption instrument and testing the conceptual model.

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