The CRM imperative — Practice vs theory in the telecommunications industry

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Abstract

This paper examines various issues raised by the idea of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and how it has affected traditional views on marketing. It uses three case studies from European telecommunications companies to illustrate the points made, focusing on how information technology in the form of the Internet and business intelligence solutions have enabled large businesses to focus on the customer as well as on their products and sales levels. CRM is a attitude that needs to pervade the company, but it needs a solid foundation of knowledge of customers. This knowledge comes not only from customer-facing employees but also from the vast amounts of data collected by companies today. It is the technological infrastructure that allows this knowledge to be distilled from data about customers and their interactions with the company, facilitates better business decisions and encourages customer loyalty and retention.

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MARKET ORIENTATION AND CRM

The marketing philosophy is fundamentally based upon the satisfaction of the needs of customers by their suppliers and the needs of organisations in meeting expectations of profits and efficient management for the good of both their customers and the people they employ.

Essentially, it has always been an inclusive aspect of the marketing orientation that there should therefore, be customer care and satisfaction in order to meet customer needs. The terms customer care and customer satisfaction, however, have had their share of being overused and abused.[1] CRM has no clear paradigm and many definitions in its field.[2] The problems of using customer data in practice are often under-estimated, as recent work has shown.[3] The understanding of definitions (such as 'customer retention' and 'cross-selling') and their application in practice is often weak.[4] There has also been a growing trend towards postmodernism and critical theory in marketing, adding to the many and varied approaches taken. Saren concluded that, 'it may be that "better theory" in the subject will inevitably be partial'.[5] In the meantime, customer relationship management (CRM) has developed as an important field in its own right.[6] While incorporating many fundamental aspects about good customer care and relationship marketing the thrust of CRM has been to cater for them. CRM systems, as Kleindl has put it, 'combine software and management practices to serve the customer from order through delivery and after-sales service'.[7]

OBJECTIVE

It is, therefore, not the intention of this paper to add to the debate about what constitutes good theory for market orientation or for relationship marketing. Rather than adding to the debate in order to provide yet another critique of theory this paper takes a different approach. The main objective of this paper is to take a case study approach to show examples of how companies are pushing the frontiers of their experience and gaining knowledge in building their CRM efforts. In building a CRM strategy major issues to be taken account of are discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the perils of not adapting to dynamic market conditions and the need for companies to implement good CRM systems.

CRM, within the work of companies in the private sector or for other organisations even in the public sector, goes further than merely looking at building relationship marketing or customer care initiatives. CRM provides an integrated approach to the efforts of organisations in developing their own online businesses and IT platform while building in elements of customer care and loyalty. Case studies have usefully shown how maximising customer relationships and improving responsiveness using the Internet as the ultimate tool for communication could be carried out.[8]

GROWTH OF CRM

Using CRM to generate improved profits from marketing efforts and long-term business stability also takes companies beyond the traditional 4Ps of the marketing mix: product, price, promotion and place. CRM is a concept that adds value to the meaning of customer orientation with the application of information technology (IT) to marketing through IT software, e-commerce and other initiatives. The traditional 4Ps, as a marketing mix concept, were around in the days when the Internet was still very much in its infancy. Companies would manipulate the variables within their control in the 4Ps to design product and service offerings to markets. This was, however, not enough. For example, environmental changes, such as international competition, economic recession, the speed of technological advances and deregulation of certain nationalised industries, made their impact on suppliers and customers. These are only some of the reasons for changes taking place in industries and markets and which have affected relationships between supplier organisations and their customers. There are obviously a host of other reasons that are too many and varied to be given here.

Contributory factors to the growth of CRM since the early 1980s are given below:

- the Internet broke down many barriers, often reducing a company's ability to restrict an offer to a target market, but also allowing many new patterns of intermediation. It also allowed firms to adopt CRM to focus upon the effective management of their relationships with their customers, such as those of building customer loyalty and enhancing customer experiences as well as harnessing the application of online technologies to facilitate customer–supplier relationships
- there has been a growth in electronic commerce (e-commerce) and the emergence of mobile commerce (m-commerce) such as those of wireless communications applications for businesses. They have led to the introduction of new products, new ways of selling products to customers and new learning curves for companies, their business partners and suppliers in terms of how to manage interaction with customers. Customers, too, are learning new ways of managing their relationships with their suppliers
- large volumes of data generated by interaction with customers have increased the potential for knowledge accumulation for CRM though there is also the size of the gap between what is possible and what is actually achieved. There are also many issues of integration between the different administrative and technological systems that have the functions of gathering, manipulating and using data
- there are the inevitable problems relating to managing the service experience for customers due to the intangibility, variability and inseparability of services. The issue of quality is also important because it is dependent upon how organisations and their processes of delivery of products and services could affect relationships with customers
- companies need to pay more attention to how they handle their relationships with their customers, to gain their trust and commitment, and the need to comply with the increasing amounts of legislation and regulation relating to managing customers, eg data protection and sector-specific regulation as in financial services.

These notions of trust and commitment in relational exchanges and long-term relationships have received increasing attention in the marketing literature. For example, Rokkan and Hauglan[9] have argued that relational exchange 'is based upon effectiveness and power considerations' with a need to create a 'symmetrical dependence structure that fosters trust and long-term commitment'.

In a small company employing few people, the integration of processes and a dependence structure to foster trust and commitment to underpin marketing efforts, might be easier to implement. In a larger organisation, employing many people in different locations nationally and internationally, investments are needed in information systems and trained personnel to facilitate the integration of customer management operations. Failures in the above area can lead to complete failure in implementing a CRM-based approach to marketing. This paper therefore examines some case studies of how large companies have tried to use CRM to create a more stable, higher-value customer base.

Many businesses have looked to the Internet as a new channel and medium for managing customers. For many customers, however, the Internet has not been a customer acquisition dream, but a nightmare. Greater choice can create greater fickleness among customers. Customers can shop around for better bargains quite happily on the Internet, trade in their service providers for new ones or switch away to alternative suppliers before the final transactions can be completed. Corporations can advertise their tenders or demands for new information, products and services over the Internet. Unless carefully used, the Internet can attract a very large number of customers of variable quality, perhaps with small and infrequent orders, providing poor returns and raising costs. This experience has led many companies to shift the focus of their Internet activity from customer acquisition to efficiency and customer retention.

The following case studies provide examples of implementations by different companies to build in elements of good CRM practices. In-depth case studies have been used in the work of other authors[10] to show the factors that influence the successful deployment of CRM applications.

EXPLANATIONS OF THE CASE STUDIES: KEY ELEMENTS OF GOOD CRM

Many telecommunications companies are now attempting to use CRM techniques to focus on the development and retention of higher-value customers. The following cases show changes in marketing thinking and tactics towards customer acquisition and retention. Each company has used new ways to reach customers and to monitor and reduce the costs of managing customers through products and systems harnessed to the Internet. Effective customer support is delivered online. The short cases illustrate how traditional telephony companies and a new-entrant cable firm have applied new technologies to winning and retaining customers in the residential telephone market. They are based on large European telecommunications companies.

COMPANY X

Key activities

Telecommunications services, mobile communications, satellite communications, networking solutions, Internet service provider, cable and satellite television.

Market position

Market deregulation by the government has resulted in many regional telecommunications companies starting up in competition to Company X. Therefore it has branched out into product areas that complement its core competencies, give opportunities for cross-selling into its existing customer base and taking advantage of the new and fast-growing youth markets.

Improved knowledge of customers and prospects

Using a business intelligence solution that included data mining to drill down through the enormous amounts of data held, has enabled Company X to gain valuable insight into their customer base and combat the increasing competition. Key areas concentrated on are increased customer retention, cross-selling, attrition and loyalty building. The company now has an in-depth understanding of how its customers use the various products and services on offer and can therefore build some very targeted loyalty programmes. The systems also enable the company to understand why the best customers defect to competitiors and allow its marketing teams to put in place counter-promotions to encourage them to stay. The company also uses targeted promotions to encourage competitors' customers to move across to it when they fall into the higher-value segments of the market.

Measuring effectiveness

A key aspect of the CRM system is measurement. Detailed analysis of the outcomes of contacts enable the company to understand which are its most effective campaigns, which products and services are the most successful and what the effects are of key aspects of customer service such as fault reporting.

Future plans

The business intelligence solution is still very new. It was used first by the company in fixed-line telephony, and it is now being applied in other key areas such as mobile and cable. The company does not expect huge improvements overnight and accepts that CRM needs the entire company to participate, which can take some time to happen. The IT systems enable customer-facing departments to have the knowledge they need when in contact with customers and permit rapid analysis of data to help the company understand the behaviour patterns of its customers and then determine their needs. Long-term strategies are now in place to ensure that the company remains customer-focused and flexible in the long term.

COMPANY Y

Key activities

Telecommunications services, mobile communications, IT solutions, Internet service provision.

Market deregulation

The monopoly position of Company Y was challenged. Market deregulation by the government brought forth competitors, now numbering over 100 regional telecommunications companies. Cable operators took market share from Company Y, especially in urban areas. By the year 2000 other companies had taken 21 per cent of the market.

Hangover from years of monopoly

Company Y had a bureaucratic structure and had problems responding quickly to new technical developments and competitive events. There were frequent changes in senior management and thus in direction and style of leadership. Limited attention was given to customer retention, with consequent gradual and persistent loss in market share. New customer acquisition policies suffered from uncompetitive pricing structures, un-innovative product ranges and competitive retaliation.

Improved customer focus and relationship marketing

A customer campaign and analysis team was established. A data warehouse with data mining software was set up to provide the necessary analytical techniques. Data mining was used to support market segmentation and in-depth customer profiling. This contributed to improved rates of responses in direct marketing campaigns because of greater accuracy in the use of customer data. The company studied customer attrition and this led it to simplify pricing structures, reduce prices and give greater choice and increased value to its customers. Telephone calls are now made to existing customers on a regular and rotating basis to check satisfaction with the company's service, to give information about new offers and to encourage their uptake by customers. Relationships with customers have been improved by a systematic approach to improving customer care and monitoring. The company has invested in market and consumer studies and created new customer databases. These are updated by including responses from existing customers. More effective targeting of market segments has led to new offerings being designed for residential customers, such as inclusive call allowances. There are add-on benefits including a free answering service that stores messages for up to 20 days to all residential customers, some of whom could be busy on other calls or logged onto the Internet. Those using the new options now constitute over 50 per cent of the company's call traffic. The company's best tariff compares well with other competitors. Joint schemes with television broadcasters, such as the bundling of television services with telephony with more than 70 channels, have helped it to diversify from its traditional telephony market. The company has also now won back many of its lost customers.

Exploiting online presence

A strong online presence has made it easier for the company to cater for the increasing number of residential and business customers, eg for information and billing inquiries, handling of faults and complaints, orders of products and services. This has helped to increase the speed and effectiveness of handling inquiries and transactions between the company and its customers.

The future with CRM

There is still a need to focus more strategically on CRM initiatives to help the company to grow. Suppliers from other industries, eg utilities, are selling discounted telephony services. The company could respond by offering to bundle gas, electricity and other utility sales to its huge base of residential and business customers. Other differentiated products and services from other industries could also be offered.

Business intelligence solutions

Company Y's experience has shown the importance of developing CRM initiatives in customer acquisition and retention. Data warehousing and advanced analysis, including data mining, have played an important role in enhancing the effectiveness of its CRM.

COMPANY Z

Key activities

Telecommunications and Internet services.

Market performance

As a new entrant in the telecommunications market after government deregulation, this company achieved rapid growth and gained 17 per cent of the residential market. This was achieved through heavy investment in new telecommunications technology, bundled services to drive market penetration and annual advertising spend of around £36m. Its residential customer base reached 3 million customers in seven years. Penetration in the domestic telephone market reached above 50 per cent in its original franchises. It ranks among the top five telecommunications companies in the country.

Problems in customer acquisition

The focus on customer acquisition in the rush to increase market penetration caused problems. It could not meet the expectations it raised about its free Internet promise or its service. The huge demand for its free Internet service created long customer queues. Some had to wait for several months for connection. Problems caused by too many people attempting to register at the same time meant that customers had to resort to the company's expensive premium-rated helpline. Customer complaints about the difficulties of contacting the company mounted. This led to high customer attrition rates — around 20 per cent annually.

Improvements with CRM

Company Z is moving to a single customer management system. It has invested in creating a company-wide data warehouse to support personnel in managing customers. Improved CRM has helped cut the attrition rate significantly. A national approach to dealing with customer complaints was introduced, involving an e-mail process and e-care systems to deal efficiently with faults and to shorten delays for customers. Examples include shortening waiting times for Internet connections, and cutting call centre response times. Customer retention activity focuses on achieving revenue growth from existing customers and reducing acquisition costs for new customers. Even when basic prices were raised for its combined telephone and Internet service by 50 per cent and connection charges were applied to its previously free local calls, the company's research showed that these had not significantly affected customer loyalty. Most customers accepted the price increases as reasonable.

Strategic directions

Company Z improved customer access by making high-speed digital services and broadband media available on demand. It aggregated its entire range of products and services, simplified pricing structures and moved to highly competitive rates supported by efficient delivery.

To sustain and enhance the customer experience, the company focused on delivery of content. Its strategy is summarised in Figure 1.

BUILDING THE CRM STRATEGY

There are certain key points that arise from these case studies. These are that companies are not alike in their development or in their adoption of CRM practices. Often there are changes brought about in their industries, such as those from increased competition and the applications of new technologies that have led to problems. The focus on building CRM practices has been a contributory factor to improvement in the companies. Each company has dealt with its problems and introduction of CRM practices in different ways and at different rates. There is also the realisation by management that customers are increasingly looking towards improvements, not just in products bought, but also in satisfaction from their service encounters with their suppliers. So there is no intended prescription for

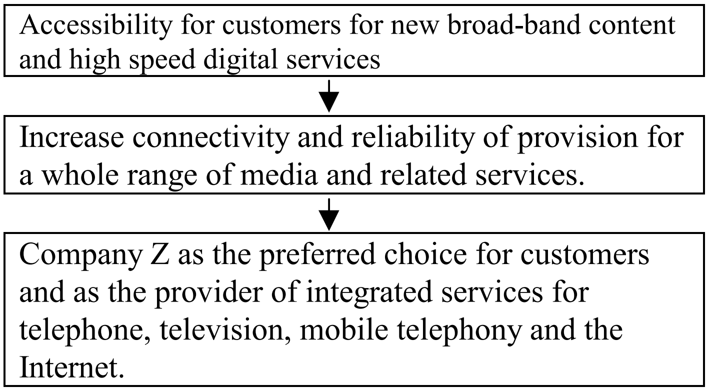

Figure 1: Company Z strategy

CRM in this paper. Therefore, the following eight points are intended to show areas where the adoption of CRM could enhance organisational practices.

Market orientation

There are always new opportunities to implement CRM-based approaches — witness the growth in the shift from mass marketing to one-to-one marketing, renewed emphasis on customer care and service, and changing work practices to reflect customer focus. In a perfect world in which businesses embrace the marketing concept and customers are satisfied, it is assumed that both parties will commit to strengthening their bonds. The reality is that this is an imperfect world. Different rates of development in economies and markets, in competitors' activities, and in lifestyle changes plus fickleness in end-users' choices will ultimately force changes in strategic directions for companies, creating gaps in competitive armour that can be exploited using CRM-based approaches.

Improve collaboration

Find new ways of collaborating with others to build strengths and contacts. From the company intranet to the global Internet it is possible to draw upon the core of knowledge and expertise that exists across the company and its business partners (suppliers, distributors etc.).

People management and commitment

Humans and not technologies are the most important assets. In applying the principles of strategy there is a need to rely on the knowledge, skills and expertise of company personnel. So companies need to develop good working environments and incentives for their personnel in order to keep good managers and their staff.

Knowledge acquisition and knowledge management

Knowledge is power and getting people to share knowledge can be difficult. Standardisation for IT protocols, buying systems and processes, and better use of internal communications systems can help to avoid duplication of efforts. Just as customers like the familiarity of brand names that encapsulate notions of quality, so they like the familiarity of company websites, ease of access and navigation on and around them.

Data proliferation and data management

The Internet provides cost-cutting opportunities combined with the potential of mass customisation to reach very large numbers of people. A CRM strategy relying on integration of different databases should aim to develop efficiencies in accessing and analysing data. The 'garbage in, garbage out' principle applies so companies need to avoid being swamped by increasing amounts of information from databases. An efficient and standardised CRM system is necessary to apply the guidelines and practices for those involved in sorting out what is crucial and directly relevant when faced with a vast array of information from databases.

Efficiency and effectiveness

The CRM focus is not only on new and more cost-effective ways of keeping customers. There is a need to distinguish between efficiency in day-to-day operations and effectiveness in delivering applications to create benefits in the implementation of CRM strategies. There are compelling reasons for developing new ways of looking at CRM or new CRM business models to improve dramatically 'the customer experience' for consumers. New media and channels of delivery can be found for business customers by reducing relationship marketing, transactional and logistical costs via new business applications. Customers also reap real gains from common practices in procurement such as cheaper prices.

Speedy solutions

Customer satisfaction and company profits are often closely related to the speed of solving problems. A CRM strategy should use the analytical techniques of data mining. Data mining helps to identify trends, patterns and relationships of data, eg prediction of customer value.

Profitability

The revenues from implementing e-CRM systems must be greater than relationship management costs. There is, therefore, a need to examine closely two major groups of customers. The first group consists of those buyers or customers who are relatively undemanding in their relationships with their suppliers for various reasons, eg where trust has been built up over a number of years or where the immediate costs of switching suppliers are greater. The second group consists of other types who are more demanding, requiring their suppliers to reduce prices while at the same time expecting continual innovations to sustain their own competitive positions. Both groups of buyers are essential to the generation of significant revenues for their suppliers. The art of CRM is to keep both groups and to retain their business. A modified CRM strategy to adapt to the needs of both groups is potentially more enriching than one strategy for all. It is important to identify such customers with the possibility of de-selecting others who generate poor revenues, add to costs and take up a lot of time.

CONCLUSIONS

It is healthy from time to time when examining new principles and strategies for marketing to employ the Cartesian method of systematic doubt. This involves getting rid of all the existing assumptions, prejudices and habits to start again on virgin ground. What was accepted in the past as relevant may now require new solutions in a dynamic and competitive world where technologies, processes, information, products, services and customer need are constantly evolving or proliferating. The three company cases illustrate the different situations and issues faced by their management and how they started again on building new ground and new solutions to develop customer retention and loyalty.

In wider terms the burst of the Internet bubble caused dreamers to understand that addition of one more channel of communication and distribution rarely revolutionises all business everywhere, despite the occasional dramatic successes in financial services and travel. The legacy of the 'irrational exuberance' of managers or consultants who persuaded their companies or clients that the choice was 'CRM/Web or dead' is a rapidly growing conservatism about all IT investments other than the most routine. Is all this conservatism appropriate? Certainly, realism is always good — but it is not the same as inaction. To understand why, it is necessary to probe the fundamental nature of competition and innovation in a capitalist economy. The case studies have shown how management could move firms forward from the conservatism of their past to facing a future of increased competition, dynamic changes in markets and more demanding customers.

Companies and markets move forward through innovation. This is of two main kinds — product innovation and process innovation. For example, the many new CRM software packages are product innovations for their suppliers. A company that uses this software to change the way it manages its customers is making a process innovation. Process innovations typically occur in 'long waves', with 'innovators' or 'early adopters' running ahead of the crowd, taking risks and often failing or at least not achieving all their objectives. The process of innovation is stimulated by visionaries and advocates and, where it is dependent on outside help, especially in the form of product innovation, by the 'hyping up' of the gains to be made by various stakeholders (in the case of CRM, software companies, consultants and of course investors). The same processes were clearly visible in the early stages of the age of steam railways. The case studies have also shown that firms, when faced with the dilemma of what to invest in — new technologies, new businesses, new products or new services — could also choose simultaneously to follow the route of improving their customer relationships skills. This is in order to grow their existing businesses more appropriately in line with their existing company philosophies and businesses.

After a period in which dramatic successes and failures appear, and in which most investments could have been made much more efficiently, a solid period of diffusion of innovations to the later adopters takes place. The gains are more certain for these later innovators, but they are usually smaller because the successful early-process innovators have often captured a large market share or better customers. If, however, the results of the process innovation have been well accepted by the companies making them, or by their customers, expectations are changed for ever, so no company has the choice about whether to adopt the innovation unless they exist in a small niche where they are able to use an alternative process. In the case of CRM, and as the case studies have shown, customers' expectations and experiences have changed, and they want to manage their relationships with their suppliers much more smartly.

What does this all mean? It means that

analysing the causes of CRM failure — and success — and what companies need to do to ensure that their investment in CRM pays off is not a waste of time. Viewed historically, early adopters who fail with CRM (between 30 and 50 per cent according to different consultancies) failed not due to adoption of the wrong product innovation for their process innovation, but for inappropriate application of the product innovation. The conclusion is that companies that are having trouble with their CRM implementation should look carefully at why it failed, and what they can do to reduce the chances of failure next time. In particular, it is important to consider where the company might have failed to address the factors most closely associated with CRM success — people, processes and day-to-day customer management activity, while over-investing in the factors which are, after all, only CRM-enabling systems and data.

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