

## **THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL TRUST IN THE CLIENT - CONSULTANCY RELATIONSHIP: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As the concept of relationship marketing becomes the dominant paradigm in understanding business to business exchange, the role of trust has received increasing attention, indeed Spekman (1988) calls it the “cornerstone” of a strategic partnership. Trust is a word that has many interpretations. It has been considered in a number of academic disciplines, for example social psychology, sociology, psychology and marketing each focusing on the particular elements of the concept that they view as most salient. As a result, we can identify 3 broad categories of interpersonal trust: basic or fundamental trust, the personality trait that disposes an individual to be trusting; general trust, an individual’s general tendency to trust or not to trust another individual and finally, situational trust which is dependent on the situational cues that modify the expression of generalized tendencies (Dibben, Harrison and Mason 1996). Situational based trust is posited to be the most important of the trust types and is the focus for this research. In order to construct a framework for the understanding of situational based trust we firstly review the three main trust typologies described in the literature and then put forward a model of trust by (Dibben 1998) which attempts to extend the current conceptualization. This model identifies five theoretical trust types, faith based trust (c.f. Meyerson et al, 1996), dependence based trust (c.f. Lewicki and Bunker, 1996, and Murphy and Gundlach 1997) familiarity-reliance based trust (c.f. Lewicki and Bunker, 1996), situational cue (SQ) reliance based trust (c.f. Clark, 1993) and confidence based trust (c.f. Lewicki and Bunker, 1996, or Murphy and Gundlach 1997).

The model is then discussed in the context of a particular business service, public relations consultants. The results indicate that there are features of the client consultancy relationship that are trust based although not all trust types could be identified. There was no evidence for faith based trust in this relationship and very little evidence of confidence based trust. Rather the client consultancy relationship appears to be reliant upon dependence based trust, familiarity based trust and situational cue based trust. However, although familiarity and situational based trust both develop over time, according to the subjective perceptions of the individual client, situational based trust would appear to lead to more frequent switching whilst familiarity based trust is more likely to lead to long term relationships