

WHO OWNS THE CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP?

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ABSTRACT

Relational marketing has enjoyed a rich literature stream since Dwyer, Schurr, Oh (1987) wrote one of the discipline's seminal articles. As reported by Gruen, Summers, and Acito (2000), most of the research studies on relationships in marketing have centered on relationships between members of a marketing channel (c.f., Brown, Lusch, and Nicholson 1995; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994). In the relationship marketing literature, it appears as if most researchers assume that the relationship exists between organizations. Specifically, it is assumed that the relationship exists between the selling organization and the buying organization. For a positive relationship to develop between two entities, it is logical to assume that the relationship evolved due to a series of positive outcomes. Looking at relationship marketing from the buyer's perspective, the buyer must have experienced positive outcomes with some combination of the seller's product(s), the seller's boundary personnel (salesperson/people) or the selling organization as a whole. The question becomes "to whom does the buyer attribute the positive outcomes. In addition, the buyer has two levels at which the relationship can lie, the individual buyer, or the entire buying organization. Therefore, the possible permutations of relationships in this scenario are:

1. Individual Buyer With Salesperson
2. Individual Buyer With Product
3. Individual Buyer With Selling Organization
4. Buying Organization With Salesperson
5. Buying Organization With Product
6. Buying Organization With Selling Organization

The importance of determining the ownership or level of the relationship cannot be over stated. From the seller's perspective, it is imperative that the organization attempt to insure that the relationship exists at the organizational level (assuming that the relationship is positive.) Any positive relationship somewhere below the organizational level presents a less-than-optimum situation for the seller.

While most authors assume that relationship marketing occurs at the organization-to-organization level, Hunt (1995) illustrates that while the organization-to-organization relationship is desirable, not all relationships mature to this level. According to Hunt, some relationships exist at the boundary personnel level, and some at the organizational level. The key to determining where the relationship exists depends on the target of the attribution and the degree to which the attribution has developed into an organizational schema. Only mature relationships develop into an organizational schema. Therefore, before it can be determined who owns the relationship, it must be determined the level of maturity to which the relationship has evolved. This manuscript presents the argument that not all relationships between channel members evolve or mature to the organization-to-organization level. Indeed, many, if not most relationships in the business-to-business arena exist between individuals. It is further argued that it is in the best interest of the selling organization to do all that is possible to insure that the relationship evolves to the organization-to-organization level