

ANALYSING RELATIONSHIP QUALITY PERSPECTIVES IN INDIAN RETAIL

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Abstract Heightened competition and increasing customer sophistication compel marketers to explore sustainable ways of gaining competitive advantage. The dynamics of market forces coupled with information and technology changes makes it difficult for the service organisations to crave a position in the marketplace. Service providers have realised that building and sustaining long-term relations with customers can not only grant success and profits to an organisation but also ensure its survival in a highly competitive environment. In the light of thriving significance of retail services in Indian context, retailers need to invest in customer relationships. Retail relationship quality can prove to be a key element for building and strengthening bonds with customers both at the employee as well as at the store level and thereby create a loyal customer base for firm. The present paper seeks to contribute theoretically and empirically to the literature pertaining to retail relationships by analysing the construct of relationship quality across demographics of modern retail stores in Indian context.

Keywords: Customer Relationship Management, Relationship Quality, Retail

INTRODUCTION

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has emerged as a critical element of corporate strategy for many organisations. Also known as relationship marketing, customer relationship management aims at developing, sustaining and improving targeted customer relationships in order to maximise customer satisfaction and customer lifetime value. Growth in services sector worldwide coupled with the rising competition had led to the transition of marketing towards relationship orientation (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Lehtinen, 1996). Service organisations are relying on relationship marketing strategies for building competitive advantage (Sharma *et al.*, 1999). Wong & Sohal (2002) contributed the rising acceptance of relationship marketing as a critical success factor to forces such as globalisation, dynamic consumer behaviour, and competitive markets.

The contribution of services to the economies has been acknowledged all around the world. Over the past few decades, researchers, academicians as well as practitioners have been drawn towards the development of successful, long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with customers (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Customer ownership contributes towards customer loyalty and thereby accords profitability to the company. Healthy and sustained relationships with customers create advantages for both customer and the service provider. While the task of customer acquisition requires a lot of expenditure, maintenance of high relationship quality grants benefits to service providers in the form of savings that come across through customer retention.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

India has emerged as one of the most opportunistic markets in terms of retail growth and advancement. In the context of fierce competition and increasing pressure on retail services, both domestically as well as globally, the issue of relationship quality assumes great significance. The literature on relationship quality in retail is not extensive. Relationship quality as a construct has not been deliberated extensively in the literature (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Sheaves & Barnes, 1996; Barnes, 1997; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Naude & Buttle, 2000). Although several retailers implement relationship building programs in order to boost store loyalty, yet the field of relationships in retailing has not received adequate consideration (Zimmerman, 1992). The relevance of relationship retailing in the present day competitive scenario has been asserted by Berry & Gresham (1996) who highlight the potential of high retail relationship quality in simultaneously increasing sales to current customers while reducing the chances of losing those customers to competitors. Vesel & Zabkar (2010) contend that retail being one of the important sectors in marketing should be supported by effective relational strategies (Egan, 2000). This calls for additional research on retail relationships (Athanasopoulou, 2009).

The management of customer relationships in the service industry is vital (Wong & Sohal, 2002). These relationships grant assurance and confidence to customers while dealing with the intangible services (Lovelock, 1983). However, the basic nature of these services makes it difficult for the customers to develop parameters for judging these services.

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Even though relationship marketing has been identified as an effective way to succeed in the present day challenging scenario, the literature lacks functional clarity with respect to the relationship quality construct (Wong & Sohal, 2006). Thus, the phenomenon of relationships needs to be studied thoroughly in context of services (Gronroos, 1990; Berry, 1980; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993; Gummensson, 1987; Sheaves & Barnes, 1996; Pressey & Mathews, 2000). A comprehensive understanding of relationship quality construct requires its evaluation in terms of relationship concerning employees and the organisation (Machintosh & Lockshin, 1997).

Relationships being so critical for an organisation's success and survival, research in the area of relationship quality can contribute significantly to the marketers. Increasingly, relationship quality is emerging as a strategy for retaining customers in a highly competitive environment (Meng & Elliot, 2008). Relationship quality in retailing demands attention and continuous research efforts. The present study purports to assess customers' perceptions on relationship quality in the Indian retail sector (Indian studies are lacking in this area and there is a deficiency of measurement scales for the "relationship quality" concept) and thereby gives suggestions and recommendations for building healthy and sustainable relationships. This research work strives to fill in the gaps in retail relationship quality literature in Indian context. The empirical results would therefore assist the retailers in developing useful strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship marketing has transpired as a crucial weapon to succeed in a competitive environment. To gain competitive advantage, it is critical for business professionals to understand the methods for developing long term relationships with consumers (Bejou *et al.*, 1996). Relationship marketing has gained recognition due to the fact that customer relationship building capitulates positive returns in the form of customer satisfaction, loyalty, word of mouth, and purchases (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999).

The word relationship lacks a proper definition both in operational and theoretical terms (Bagozzi, 1995). The qualification of an interaction into a relationship depends on the perceptions of people (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Primarily, in an operational context, a series of interactions (episodes) lead to a relationship, this necessitating at least two service encounters for a relationship to exist (Lijander & Strandvik, 1995; Storbacka *et al.*, 1994). Consciousness about the relationship on part of both the partners in a transaction is essential for the relationship to get recognised. Relationship development is a continuous process based on multiple interactions with customers strengthening customer faith and creating customer loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Relationship quality is delineated as a construct which adds value to organisation's offering and opens up opportunity of exchange with the customer (Levitt, 1986). Relationship quality is determined by the extent to which the association (customer-organisational bond) has been able to meet the customers' standards (Jarvelin & Lehtinen, 1996). Relationship quality is defined as the ability of the perceived relationship to conform to customer demands (Henning-Thurau & Klee, 1997).

Gummensson (1987) was one of the first academicians to consider the issue of relationship quality (Keating *et al.*, 2003). He identified relationship quality as one of the four forms of quality encountered by customers. He regarded that the high level quality of interaction with the customer lays the foundation for healthy and sustained relationships with customers. This definition is the focal point in the work of the so-called "Nordic School" in the field of relationship marketing, and has led to the fundamental hypothesis that repeated service quality at a transactional level leads to increased satisfaction and value at a relational level (Keating *et al.*, 2003). Relationship quality in the context of services has two perspectives: professional and social (Gummensson, 1987). Professional relations depend on the operational efficiency of the seller and social relations develop out of the communication with the customer. Relationship quality is customer's satisfaction with the salesperson performance indicative of salesperson honesty and reliability (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

Relationship Quality Measurement

Studies on relationship quality reveal that relationship quality is a second order construct consisting of multiple dimensions (Dwyer & Oh, 1987; Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Customer's contentment, faith and minimal opportunism determine whether the relationships are quality based or not (Dwyer & Oh, 1987). On the basis of examination of the nature, consequences and antecedents of relationship quality in context of selling services, relationship quality is viewed as a higher order construct composed of at least two dimensions: trust and satisfaction (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Based on the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust and commitment are the two primary constructs in the theoretical conceptualisation of relationship quality. Literature on relationship marketing proposes numerous definitions for "Trust" and "Commitment" (Wong & Sohal, 2006). Morgan & Hunt (1994) define trust as one party's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity and Schurr & Ozanne (1985) define it as the belief that a partner's word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfil his/her obligations in the relationship. Customer's interest in taking an appreciated relationship forward

defines commitment (Moorman *et al.* 1992). Commitment arises when customer as well as merchant subscribe to the relationship either in an expressed or implied manner (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987).

Lagace *et al.* (1991) developed a model of relationship quality and conceptualized relationship quality as buyer's trust in a salesperson and satisfaction in the relationship. Trust implies the confident belief in the salesperson behaviour promoting long-term interest of the customer. Satisfaction is an emotional response to the assessment of buyer-seller interaction experiences (Westbrook, 1981). Storbacka *et al.* (1994) developed a conceptual model of the dynamics of relationship quality, indicating relationship strength as the indicator of relationship quality. Storbacka *et al.* (1994) observed that relationship strength is reflected in both purchase behaviour and communication behaviour (e.g., word of mouth, complaints, etc.). Repeat purchase behaviour based on positive commitment by the customer indicates a stronger relationship. Relationships in turn are strengthened by the presence of bonds between the customer and the provider. Henning-Thurau & Klee (1997) asserted that reflecting the customer's assumed perception and evaluation of a relationship as a whole, where product or service related and relational aspects are blended into one outcome, relationship quality is thus conceptualised as comprising the three dimensions: (a) the customer's overall quality (product-service) perception, (b) trust, and (c) commitment. A high-quality relationship then would be one with high levels in all three dimensions.

Retail Relationships

The inherent complexity of retail relationships makes it difficult to study these mix of relationships existing at several different levels (Crosby & Stephens, 1987). In retailing, interpersonal relationships exist between retail salespeople and customers, but customers also establish relationships with the stores themselves and with the brands that stores carry (Dodds *et al.*, 1991). The possibilities of relationship between the customer and organisation are higher than the relationship between the customer and the goods (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Although different types of relationships share commonalities, real differences exist between person-to-person, person-to-firm, and firm-to-firm relationships (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996).

A customer-salesperson relationship exists when there is an ongoing series of interactions between a salesperson and a customer and the parties know each other (Czepiel, 1990). Employees represent the organisation in a service interaction and therefore courteous and helpful employees can render a positive shopping experience to the customers. Relationship parameters concerning relationship levels are

distinct in nature (Machintosh & Lockshin, 1997). Trust and commitment are used to assess the quality of relationship between the customer and the salesperson (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). While evaluating the relationship between customer and organisation, commitment reflects the extent of loyalty to the store (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Since the peculiarities governing the relation between customers, with employees and, with organisation, differ (Wong & Sohal, 2002), an understanding of these divergent relationships can give useful insights to the marketers towards targeting attributes critical for relationship advancement in the two arenas and thereby bring the two relationships closer in perceptions to contribute to the ultimate aim of winning devoted customers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to examine the perceptions of retail store customers towards relationship quality. Specifically, the paper analyses the relationship quality dimensions with respect to different demographic bases and uncovers the significant differences between different customer groups on the critical relationship attributes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample Design

Data for this study were collected via a structured, non-disguised questionnaire in well-known chains of retail stores in Delhi. The reason for the choice of the case was that the retail sector in India is in its booming period and the modern retail stores are replacing mom and pop stores. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed, of these, 555 usable questionnaires were obtained, thus constituting to a response rate of 79.3%. The respondents were sampled at the retail stores utilising Convenience sampling method.

Context of Study

As opposed to a pure service setting, a retail store represents a complicated retail environment that offers a mix of merchandise and services as opposed to a pure service setting. Thus, for the purpose of the study, three major retail store chains- Big Bazaar, Vishal Mega Mart and Spencer's (Delhi) were selected as they offer a mix of merchandise and services and fall under the "Hypermarket" category of the retail stores. Specifically, one branch of each of these stores in Delhi was selected so as to increase the generalisability of the results. The target respondents were current customers of the retail store. The questionnaire was administered prior to the respondents' shopping experience.

Procedure

The questionnaire was self-administered at the location of retail stores, the reason being that the questionnaire is filled more attentively and more meaningfully by the respondents present in the environment that they are evaluating (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996). The shopping setting is more conducive for a retail survey as the shoppers will be able to assess the dimensions under survey in a better way. The questionnaire was administered just prior to the respondents' shopping experience in order to obtain an evaluation of previous shopping experiences at the store. Assessment of customers' perceptions after a shopping experience may tend to reflect satisfaction rather than service quality (Rust & Oliver, 1994). A seven-point Likert scale {Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7)} was used to assess customers' perceptions concerning relationship quality parameters.

Scale Used for the Study

The Relationship Quality scale developed by Roberts *et al.* (2003) was taken as the base and was modified with respect to retail settings. Roberts *et al.* (2003) measured relationship quality among the following dimensions: Trust in partner's honesty, trust in partner's benevolence, affective commitment, satisfaction and affective Conflict.

Firstly, all the dimensions of the scale were measured on two levels of retail relationships: the employee level and the company level. The first and the second dimensions: trust in partner's honesty and trust in partner's benevolence were taken as "trust". For example, in order to measure trust at the employee level, 2 items were used 'The employees .can be trusted at all the times' and 'The employees have high integrity'. Trust at the company level was assessed with the items such as 'The store is concerned about my welfare' and 'The store can be counted on to do what is right'. Commitment of the customers towards the employees and towards the retail store was measured using the items such as 'Relationship with the employees is important' (*Employee Commitment*) and 'I intend to continue shopping at this store' (*Store Commitment*). All the items of the RQ scale with respect to 'Satisfaction' and 'Affective Conflict' dimensions provided by Roberts *et al.* were taken for assessing satisfaction and affective conflict both at employee level as well as at company level. Finally for assessing overall relationship quality both at the employee and the company level, single items were taken.

Thus, relationship quality was assessed with respect to employee and store using trust, satisfaction, commitment, affective conflict and an overall level.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, taking the whole sample, with the help of mean and standard deviation, perceptions of customers on relationship quality parameters were analysed (see Table 1).

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Relationship Quality Dimensions

Relationship Quality Dimensions (N = 555)	Mean	Standard Deviation
RQ1: Employee Trust	4.38	0.80
RQ2: Store Trust	4.96	1.11
RQ3: Employee Commitment	3.87	1.54
RQ4: Store Commitment	5.08	1.01
RQ5: Employee Satisfaction	4.97	1.07
RQ6: Store Satisfaction	5.17	1.01
RQ7: Employee Affective Conflict	2.44	1.06
RQ8: Store Affective Conflict	2.27	1.11
RQ9: Overall Employee Relationship Quality	4.65	1.28
RQ 10: Overall Store Relationship Quality	4.97	1.18

By comparing the mean values of the Relationship quality dimensions (see Table 1), it is found that "RQ6: Store satisfaction" scores highest. As compared to "Employee satisfaction", "Store satisfaction" scores more (mean score of 4.97 and 5.17) implying that customers are not much happy or delighted with the performance of the employees. This reflects that employees may not be adequately trained in customer management; problem solving, providing assistance, speaking softly etc. The second highest score is of the dimension "Store commitment", whereas "Employee commitment" scores very low. This could be due to the reason that customers do not have much interaction with the employees of the store and probably they are not interested in maintaining relationship with the employees. Similarly "Employee Trust" scores lower than "Store Trust" (mean score of 4.38 and 4.96).

Furthermore, the mean scores of 'Employee Affective Conflict' and 'Store Affective Conflict' are 2.44 and 2.27 respectively implying that customers are not angry, frustrated or annoyed either with the employees or with the retail stores

Finally, customer's overall perceived quality of the relationship with the employees in this study has a mean score of 4.65 while in comparison, the mean score is slightly higher (4.97) in case of customers' relationship with the company. Both the scores however suggest that the shoppers in this study have positive perceptions of how well the relationship lives upto their presumptions on an interpersonal level as well as company level. Standard deviation values signify not much variation within respondents between the various dimensions.

Table2: Comparison of Relationship Quality Dimensions among Age, Educational And Income @ Categories Of Respondents – DUNCAN'S Mean Test

Relationship Quality Dimensions	A1 Mean (N=134)	A2 Mean (N=228)	A3 Mean (N=193)	A1 V/S A2	A1 V/S A3	A2 V/S A3	F-Value	E1 Mean (N=134)	E2 Mean (N=228)	E3 Mean (N=193)	E1 V/S E2	E1 V/S E3	E2 V/S E3	F-Value	I1 Mean (N=134)	I2 Mean (N=228)	I3 Mean (N=193)	I1 V/S I2	I1 V/S I3	I2 V/S I3	F-Value
RQ1	4.31	4.45	4.33	-	-	-	1.82	4.38	4.43	4.27	-	-	-	1.94	4.48	4.40	4.30	-	-	-	2.91
RQ2	4.79	5.10	4.90	*	-	-	3.50*	4.92	5.02	4.85	-	-	-	1.26	5.06	4.90	4.97	-	-	-	0.83
RQ3	3.96	3.98	3.67	-	-	*	2.50	3.64	3.93	3.83	-	-	-	1.15	4.00	3.85	3.81	-	-	-	0.51
RQ4	5.00	5.12	5.07	-	-	-	0.65	5.09	5.09	5.05	-	-	-	0.10	5.03	5.11	5.07	-	-	-	0.32
RQ5	4.72	5.06	5.01	*	*	-	4.47**	4.94	4.96	4.99	-	-	-	0.06	5.08	4.94	4.93	-	-	-	0.91
RQ6	4.99	5.26	5.15	*	-	-	2.92	5.20	5.15	5.17	-	-	-	0.07	5.21	5.16	5.14	-	-	-	0.20
RQ7	2.35	2.41	2.53	-	-	-	1.15	2.49	2.35	2.63	-	-	*	3.74*	2.23	2.47	2.56	*	*	-	3.84*
RQ8	2.14	2.20	2.42	-	*	*	3.13*	2.19	2.17	2.52	-	*	*	5.50**	2.12	2.24	2.40	-	*	-	2.52
RQ9	4.39	4.76	4.68	*	*	-	3.44*	4.60	4.64	4.69	-	-	-	0.12	4.69	4.62	4.65	-	-	-	0.13
RQ10	4.72	5.11	4.95	*	-	-	4.62**	5.00	4.98	4.92	-	-	-	0.16	5.02	4.97	4.92	-	-	-	0.29

* significant at 0.05 level**significant at 0.01 level

@ age categories: A1- respondents below 25 years, A2 – respondents between 25-35 years of age, A3 – respondents of age 35 years and above

@ educational categories: E1-secondary/senior secondary respondents, E2 –graduate respondents, E3 – post-graduate respondents.

@ income categories: I1- respondents earning below Rs1.5 lakh, I2 – respondents earning between Rs 1.5-3 lakh, I3 – respondents earning above 3 lakh

According to Webster (1989), there is a need to examine the demographic characteristics of customers when evaluating relationship quality in non-professional service such as retailing. Therefore, the demographic data were analysed to examine their association with various dimensions in order to facilitate comparison among different age, education and income categories of respondents through DUNCAN's mean test (see Table 2).

By comparing the relationship quality dimensions among three age categories (see Table 2), it is found that the following differences exist at 0.05 level between the respondent groups: A1 and A2 (for "Store Trust"), A1 and A3 (for "Employee Commitment"), between A1 & A2 and A1 & A3 (for "Employee Satisfaction"), A1 and A2 (for "Store Satisfaction"), (for "Store Affective Conflict"), between A1 and A2 and between A2 and A3 (for "Overall Employee Relationship Quality") and between A1 and A2 (for "Overall Store Relationship Quality"). Furthermore, with respect to individual relationship quality dimensions and overall relationship quality (both at the employee and the company level), the store has higher mean values as compared to the employees for all three respondents' categories. The respondents below the age of 25 years have highest positive perceptions about 'Store Commitment', while in case of respondents between 25-35 years of age and respondents above 35 years of age; the highest mean score is of the dimension 'Store Satisfaction'.

With respect to the three educational categories (see Table 2), it was found that with respect to the mean scores, all the relationship quality dimensions at the store level scored higher than the relationship quality dimensions at the employee level. Thus, the respondents of all educational categories had more positive perceptions about the store as compared to that of employees. Also, the respondents of all the three educational categories had highest positive perceptions about 'Store Satisfaction'. Under relationship quality dimensions, all the respondents disagreed that they were frustrated or annoyed with the employees or the retail store. But, significant differences were found between E2 and E3 with regard to 'Employee Affective Conflict' at 0.05 level and between E1 and E3 and between E2 and E3 for 'Store Affective Conflict' at 0.05 level. Graduate respondents had lower level of disagreement with respect to "Employee Affective Conflict" as compared to post-graduate respondents. Also, secondary/senior secondary and graduate respondents had lower level of disagreement for the dimension "Store Affective Conflict" as compared to post-graduate respondents.

The comparison of relationship quality dimensions among the three income categories of respondents (see Table 2) revealed that there were significant differences between I1 & I2 and I1 & I3 for the 'Employee Affective Conflict' dimension of relationship quality and between I1 and I3

for the 'Store Affective Conflict' dimension at 0.05 level. Although, the respondents in the different income categories disagreed that they were annoyed either with the retail store or with its employees, but, for the dimension "Employee Affective Conflict", respondents earning less than Rs 1.5 lakh and between Rs. 1.5-3 lakh had lower level of disagreement than respondents earning above Rs. 3 lakh. Furthermore, respondents earning above Rs. 3 lakh had lower disagreement level than respondents earning below Rs. 1.5 lakh with respect to the dimension "Store Affective Conflict". The dimension 'Store Satisfaction' emerges out to be the one with highest mean score in all the three income categories. Again, all the store related dimensions are higher in their scores as compared to their respective employee dimensions.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Customer orientation has taken precedence in organisations worldwide so as to survive amidst the challenging forces of stiff competition, globalisation and modernisation. Customer satisfaction has become the ultimate objective for marketers. Relationship quality has been recognised as an instrumental construct in making the firms carve a strong position in the marketplace through establishment of healthy and long term relationships with customers. An accurate assessment of relationship parameters can help organisations formulate effective plans and strategies for success and growth.

Creation and maintenance of dynamic relationships with customers by the service organisations can accord financial benefits as well as competitive superiority. Retailers need to pay special attention towards relationship quality in terms of relationship building as well as preserving relationship with customers. The dynamic nature of these relationships should be comprehended efficiently and the relationship quality framework should be harnessed for long term advantage of the organisation. The present study highlights the differences in customers' perceptions towards relationship quality attributes on the basis of demographic characteristics. The findings reported provide insights for the retailers on how to strengthen relationship quality in a competitive retail environment.

From the analysis, many important implications can be outlined. Based upon our survey findings, the comparisons based on relationship quality dimensions (both at the store level and the employee level) revealed that the respondents were more positive about the stores as compared to that of employees. Thus, the retail stores under consideration need to focus on their staff. The employees should be trained to respond to relevant customer needs and priorities. In this respect, employees should be trained to deal with customers effectively and to be efficient in solving any service problem that the customer faces. Employees should be receptive,

sensitive and convincing to the customers in case customers feel dissatisfied with any of the service parameters.

Training programmes should be conducted at regular intervals in order to make the employees proficient in tasks as well as emotions. Employees should be provide individual attention to the customers and guide them competently. Such capable employees are the asset for an organisation as they not only help in nurturing customer relationships but also win customers' credence and contentment paving the path for sustained associations. Customers, on the other hand, feel assured by interacting with the trained staff that provides the best solution in response to the customers' requirements. Finally, the service organisation with the help of a skilled and dynamic workforce, harnesses the high level quality relationships to build a loyal customer base and stand strong in the highly aggressive marketplace.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

Though the present study brings forth interesting findings, still it has various dimensions yet to be explored. Research could be undertaken to examine the transferability of these results to different contexts and viewpoints such as cross-cultural study of retail stores. This would help in testing the validity of the modified scale used in this study. Research could also be undertaken using alternative methodologies such as a longitudinal design to examine the changes over time. The factors leading towards the relationship quality parameters could have been analysed to assist marketers in gaining high scores on different relationship quality dimensions.

The present study has few limitations. The study is restricted to the retail services, particularly hypermarkets. Only three retail stores of Delhi have been examined as the context of study. This poses difficulty in generalisation of results. It could be a nation based study. Some elements of inaccuracy might have crept in because of misinterpretation of questions on the part of respondents. The inherent limitations of the statistical techniques used cannot be ruled out. 'Expectations' were not included in the assessment of service quality due to possible questionnaire complexity.

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