

Relationship marketing defined? An examination of current relationship marketing definitions

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Abstract

Attempts to define "relationship marketing" have been varied and many, neatly reflecting the diverse academic and socio-political backgrounds of RM scholars. This paper lists 26 such definitions, collected as a by-product of a literature review. Presented alongside this resource are the results of applying a content-analysis-based methodology to these definitions. These results suggest that seven RM "constructs" enjoy general support. In a discussion of this, it is concluded that any integration of disparate RM theories implied by these findings is at best superficial and at worst misleading. It is further suggested that "true" and complete integration of RM theory must wait until a coherent understanding of these fundamental concepts has been developed. From the 26 definitions listed, one is judged as being more comprehensive and generally acceptable, and a new definition is presented as an inducement to further discussion.

Introduction

A review of current relationship marketing (RM) literature reveals a great many attempts by a pantheon of authors to define "relationship marketing" in terms of what they perceive as its key conceptualisations. Needless to say, different authors have differing opinions about what should and should not be at the core of what constitutes "relationship marketing". The reasons for these differences are twofold:

- First, as an emergent perspective, RM has had only a relatively short lifetime in which to develop into a fully-formed paradigm.
- Second, contributors to the development of RM theory are extremely varied, both in terms of socio-political heritage and academic background.

It is an almost inevitable result of this lack of established common ground that conflict should arise over something as fundamental as the "basic" meaning of relationship marketing. We have no *lingua franca*.

That a general definition of relationship marketing would be beneficial can be argued fourfold:

- First, it would promote shared understanding between separate streams of research.
- Second, it would begin the process of integrating these streams into a whole.
- Third, a definition represents the "essence" of an idea, containing its key concepts and critical abstractions.
- Finally, a definition would help in communicating the answer to the fundamental question, "What is relationship marketing?"

This paper presents the results of an attempt to bring a formal research methodology to bear on RM literature in the hope that it will begin to establish areas of conceptual "agreement" and to construct such a "general" definition of RM. This paper is divided into two sections. The first section outlines, criticises and discusses the results of the research methodology. The latter section consists of two appendices, the first of which reprints the collected definitions for use as a general resource and the second of which tabulates

the definitions through a categorisation of "substantive terms" (Zaltman *et al.*, 1982).

Methodology

This methodology – content analysis – has produced useful results many times in marketing research already (for example, Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Resnik and Stern, 1977; Stone *et al.*, 1966).

There is no room here to provide an in-depth critique of content analysis as a general, qualitative data research methodology. The specific research process used here is briefly outlined and criticised according to the five key criteria suggested by Kassirjian (1977) and endorsed by Kolbe and Burnett (1991). These are: sampling, objectivity, reliability, systemisation and quantification. For more in-depth information on the topic of content analysis, readers are referred to the two papers mentioned above and to Kassirjian and Robertson (1991) and Holsti (1969).

The underlying theory behind this research process is that, within RM literature, attempts to define RM are attempts to stipulate what concepts should form the essence of relationship marketing. Within these definitions, keywords represent critical abstractions. From the literature it is possible to extract attempts at defining relationship marketing. From the collated definitions it may be possible to cull these key ideas and attempt to place them on some form of perceptual/conceptual map, at which point content analysis can be used to generate categorisations of "similar" clusters.

According to Kolbe and Burnett (1991), "... content analysis is valuable in collecting data about communications when there are no theoretical underpinnings. Such atheoretical contents analyses are useful in fostering future research and theory-building efforts because they collect information about a communication form".

In this case, the "communications universe" (Kassirjian, 1977) is specified as RM literature, the sample selected being 117 sources read in preparation for a literature

review of current RM “thinking”. Three sampling issues need to be addressed here:

- 1 randomisation;
- 2 manageability; and
- 3 generisability (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991).

This sample must be considered convenient rather than random. Time and resource limitations permitted 117 different sources. Given these factors, are results obtained from this sample sufficiently general to transfer to the population as a whole? With the dynamism of the field, the answer is both yes and no. Yes, at this point in time the results are probably valid for RM literature produced to date. No, in the future new directions and concepts not highlighted by this process may gain strength and the seven concepts derived may lose favour or evolve new emphases.

The primary “content unit” was that of themed paragraphs – an attempt, whether explicit or implicit, to define RM in terms of its underlying conceptualisations.

Adopting these criteria, 26 definitions of RM were collected. These are reprinted in Appendix 1.

Once this initial separation of wheat from chaff was complete the unit of analysis shifted to individual word-concepts, providing a much sharper focus on the problem at hand. Examining each definition in turn, three judges[1] separately and independently underlined words that in their opinion represented RM conceptualisations. Zaltman *et al.* (1982) describe these as “substantive terms” and define them as “the basis of conceptual meaning”.

Each judge then compiled a list of the selected words. There was a remarkable degree of consistency between the three lists, with a correlation of 92 per cent. Holsti (1969) suggests an inter-judge agreement level of 85 per cent or better as the threshold for categorical data to be considered acceptable. Kolbe and Burnett (1991) refer to this as one of several types of “reliability index”. Negotiation between the judges produced a “standardised” list of 132 terms. Each of these terms is italicized in Appendix 1.

Working independently once again, each judge used this list to “group” these words into “conceptual clusters” on a perceptual map.

Again, results between judges were remarkably similar. Negotiation developed a final version, consisting of seven conceptual categories. These groups are outlined in Table I, and fully tabulated in Appendix 2, together with the words used by each author that fall within each classification.

Table I

Seven conceptual categories of relationship marketing

Primary construct	(Other common constructs)
Creation	Attracting, establish, getting
Development	Enhancing, strengthening, enhance
Maintenance	Sustaining, stable, keeping
Interactive	Exchange, mutually, co-operative
Long term	Lasting, permanent, retaining
Emotional content	Commitment, trust, promises
Output	Profitable, rewarding, efficiency

“Systemisation means that the inclusion and exclusion of communications content or analysis categories is done according to consistently applied rules” (Holsti, 1969). The primary researcher started the research process from a “naïve” position. Hopefully, this will have precluded any bias for or against certain sources.

The use of multiple, independently working judges working to specified rules for the latter half of the process should, according to Kassarjian (1977), help to improve the level of objectivity by “averaging” out individual subjectivity.

Content analysis is distinguished from ordinary critical reading by the extent to which derived results can be subjected to statistical analysis. Kassarjian (1977) refers to this as “quantification”. Given certain characteristics of the sample, (Grönroos’s “imbalancing” effect and its relatively small size for example) the results obtained here are not suitable for sophisticated statistical analysis. Some (Kassarjian and Robertson, 1991; Kracauer, 1952; Miles, 1979) feel that it is sufficient if quantitative phrases can be applied (for example: more, always, never) to categorical results. This is certainly possible.

Limitations

It is likely that definitions within the sample literature may have been missed or discarded. Definitions from sources outside the sample almost certainly exist but will not have been assessed[2]. These faults are an inherent symptom of the high level of subjectivity involved in any qualitative methodology. An individual researcher being responsible for the first half of the research process will have unavoidably compounded this subjectivity. *Mea culpa.*

Discussion

In the short to medium term, the objective of RM theory building becomes clear: Relationship marketing as a paradigm will remain undeveloped until its key conceptualisations have been identified and understood. This cannot occur until the constituent abstractions that combine to form each concept have in turn been recognised and a shared understanding of them developed. In turn, this will give impetus to the necessary process of integrating the various RM theories proposed by the “Nordic”, “IMP”, “Network” and “Channel Theory” schools of relationship marketing.

On a superficial level, the results presented in Appendix 1 seem to suggest some level of consensus on the key conceptualisations. A closer inspection, allied with simple logic, suggests otherwise. The argument that RM is defined by its key conceptualisations only holds if these concepts are in turn defined by a clear and shared understanding of their fundamental meaning. Currently, the level of shared understanding between RM schools is low, reflecting the diverse origins of these theories.

“Commitment” and “trust” are two substantive terms classified in Appendix 1 under the “Emotional content” conceptual category that neatly illustrates this point. Whilst only currently explicitly used by Bennett (1996) to define RM, the importance of these abstractions has been highlighted by Morgan and Hunt (1994) who convincingly argue that relational “trust” and “commitment” are critical in relationship development. O’Malley and Tynan (1997) develop this and tighten the level of focus by presenting 15 distinct definitions of “trust” and nine of “commitment”. Each of these definitions has its origin in any of several “underpinning” theories (social psychology, organisational theory, interaction theory etc.) and enters the realm of relationship marketing theory building through contributions to one of the existing RM “schools”. Each of these definitions of “trust” and “commitment” possess their own substantive terms which require analysis and understanding.

An acceptance of these results implies that one or more of these definitions could be selected as being both broad enough and “general” enough to be acceptable to all.

Some authors have presented definitions that specifically highlight certain conceptual “aspects” of RM rather than the “whole”. Examples of a narrow rather than broad focus include Berry (1983) who emphasises the “beginnings” of marketing relationships,

Christopher *et al.* (1991), who stress the importance of RM’s “customer keeping” orientation, and Paravatiyar (1996), who highlights the potential benefits of an RM strategy. Other “single-issue” definitions include Grönroos (1990), Gummesson (1994; 1997) and Sheth (1994).

While certainly valid, these definitions cannot be considered as serious candidates for a “general” RM definition. A conceptually “complete” definition would embody all seven conceptual categories derived here. No definition listed in Appendix 1A achieves this.

Several authors present definitions which “score” six from a possible seven. Bennett (1996) achieves this twice (A+B), although interestingly his most explicit attempt to define RM (C) dwells on its “emotional” component, rather than being a general definition. Grönroos has sole authorship of two subtly different definitions and a third in partnership with Ravald (compare Grönroos 1989; 1990; 1994; 1997; and Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). The last of the half-dozen “near-perfect” definitions collected here is from O’Malley *et al.* (1997).

No attempt is made here to establish any form of hierarchy for the conceptual constructs derived. No single one is invariably omitted from these six definitions, and three abstractions are consistently present (“interaction”, “maintenance” and “emotional content”). Given these limitations, is it possible to distinguish between these six definitions in terms of their relative strengths and weaknesses as “general” RM definitions? Those from Bennett (1996), while certainly being as broad as any of the others, must be considered descriptive rather than as explicit. Of those involving Grönroos, the version attributed to him by Mattsson (1997) seems superior to Grönroos (1989; 1990; 1994; 1997) and Ravald and Grönroos (1996) because of its developed awareness of the potential necessity for relationship “termination”.

The substantive terms culled from O’Malley *et al.* (1997) and Grönroos (1994; 1995) are very similar, with identical terms in four categories and the same category omitted from both (“temporal”).

Of the two, the definition presented explicitly by Grönroos (1994; 1995) seems both more elegant and more succinct.

Conclusions

This process derived from the RM literature seven “conceptual categories” fundamental

to defining relationship marketing, these being:

- 1 birth;
- 2 develop;
- 3 maintain;
- 4 temporal;
- 5 interaction;
- 6 outputs; and
- 7 emotional content.

If the validity of the research methodology is accepted, of all the definitions collated it can be argued that the definition presented by Grönroos (1994; 1995) is the “best” in terms of its coverage of the underlying conceptualisations of relationship marketing and its acceptability throughout the RM “community”:

Relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance and when necessary also to terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met, and that this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises (Grönroos, 1994).

The “melting-pot” of RM draws on a great variety of theories and schools of thought. In the long term this may well prove to be its biggest strength. In the short term, theory building is impeded by the lack of a shared understanding of key constructs. The problem is one of “fractal” concepts. Every increase in the level of focus reveals a further layer of abstractions to be defined in terms of their key concepts.

This research methodology reduced RM literature to its key conceptualisations. Purely as a spur to promote further academic discussion, it is possible to use the results to build a new definition of relationship marketing:

An organisation engaged in proactively creating, developing and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with selected customers [partners] overtime is engaged in relationship marketing.

Notes

- 1 The author is indebted to his fellow judges, Professor Paul Whysall and Angela Vickerstaffe, and also to Professor Caroline Tynan and other members of the NBS marketing writers group for their help and assistance in the preparation of this paper.
- 2 For example, Buttle, 1996; Evans and Laskin, 1997.

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Appendix 1: Twenty-six definitions of relationship marketing

RM is an emergent disciplinary framework for *creating, developing and sustaining exchanges* of value between the parties involved, whereby exchange relationships evolve to provide *continuous and stable links* in the supply chain, (Ballantyne, 1997 in Mattsson, 1997).

... *attracting, maintaining* and – in multi-service organisations *enhancing* customer relationships (Berry, 1983 in Payne and Rickard, 1993; Robicheaux and Coleman, 1994; Hunt, 1997; Mattsson, 1997; Payne and Frow, 1997).

RM concerns *attracting, developing, and retaining* customer *relations* (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991 in Hunt, 1997).

Consumer RM seeks to *establish long-term, committed, trusting and co-operative* relationships with customers, characterised by *openness, genuine concern* for the delivery of high-quality goods and services, responsiveness to customer suggestions, *fair dealing*, and (crucially) the willingness to sacrifice short-term advantage for long-term gain. Suppliers attempt to create and *strengthen* lasting bonds with their customers; they shift from attempting to maximise profits on each individual transaction towards the establishment of solid, dependable and, above all, *permanent* relationships with the people they serve (Bennett, 1996 A).

Consumer RM is the organisational *development and maintenance* of mutually rewarding relationships with customers achieved via the *total integration* of information and quality management systems, service support, business strategy and organisational mission in order to delight the customer and secure *profitable lasting* business (Bennett, 1996 B).

... fundamentally, RM involves the total fulfilment of all the *promises* given by the supplying organisation, the development of *commitment and trust* ... and the establishment (where possible) of personal contacts and *bonds* between the customer and the firm's representatives; the eventual emergence of feelings within each party of mutual *obligation*, of having common goals, and of *involvement* with and *empathy* for the other side (Bennett, 1996 C).

Relationship marketing has as its concern the dual focus of *getting and keeping* customers (Christopher *et al.*, 1991 in Daskou, 1997).

... relates marketing to the *development of long-term* relationships with customers and other parties ... (Grönroos, 1990).

... *establishing* a relationship involves giving *promises, maintaining* a relationship is based on fulfilment of promises; and, finally, *enhancing* a relationship means that a new set of promises is given with the fulfilment of earlier promises as a prerequisite (Grönroos, 1990).

Relationship marketing is to *establish, nurture and enhance* ... relationships with customers and other partners, at a *profit*, so that the objective of the partners involved are met. This is achieved by a *mutual exchange* and fulfilment of *promises* (Grönroos, 1996).

Marketing is to *establish, maintain and enhance* relationships with customers and other parties at a *profit* so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of *promises* (Bennett, 1996; Brodie *et al.*, 1997; Grönroos, 1989; 1990; 1994; 1997 in Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Gummesson, 1994; Hunt, 1997; Robicheaux and Coleman, 1994; Storbacka, 1997; Takala and Uusitalo, 1996).

RM is to identify and *establish, maintain and enhance* and when necessary also to *terminate* relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a *profit*, so that the objectives of all parties are met, and that this is done by a *mutual exchange* and fulfilment of *promises* (Grönroos, 1994; in Mattsson, 1997, *Please note that while Mattsson refers to the 1994 paper by Grönroos, that paper does not contain this definition, but the one more commonly cited – Grönroos (1989-1997). While the origins of this definition are not certain, it is most likely to originate from Grönroos (1995).*

... marketing can be viewed as the *building, maintenance, and liquidation* of *networks and interactive* relationships between the supplier and the customer, often with *long-term* implications. As a consequence marketing becomes first and foremost relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1990).

RM emphasises a *long-term interactive* relationship between the provider and the customer, and *long-term profitability* (Gummesson, 1994).

Relationship marketing is marketing seen as *relationships, networks and interaction* (Gummesson, 1994; 1997 in Mattsson, 1997).

... all activities by the firm to *build, maintain* and *develop* customer *relations* (Hammarkvist *et al.*, 1982 in Gummesson, 1987).

... they want to *build* and *maintain lasting* – and *profitable*–relationships with their customers (Jackson, 1985).

... is not directly aimed at immediate transactions but is based on *building, supporting* and *extending* customer relationships (Matthyssens and Van den Bulte, 1994 in Christy *et al.*, 1996).

Relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed towards *establishing, developing* and *maintaining* successful relational *exchanges* (Bennett, 1996 in Morgan and Hunt, 1994 Christy *et al.*, 1996; Hunt, 1997; Mattsson, 1997).

RM involves the *identification*, specification, *initiation, maintenance* and (where appropriate) *dissolution of long-term* relationships with key customers and other parties, through mutual *exchange*, fulfilment of *promises* and adherence to relationship norms in order to satisfy the objectives and *enhance* the experience of the parties concerned (O'Malley *et al.*, 1997).

RM is the process of *co-operating* with customers to improve marketing *productivity* through *efficiency* and *effectiveness* (Paravatiyar, 1996 in Mattsson, 1997).

the process whereby the seller and the buyer *join* in a strong personal, professional, and mutually *profitable* relationship *over time* (Pathmarajah, 1993 in Chan and McDermott, 1995).

The core of RM is relations, a *maintenance* of relations between the company and the actors in its micro-environment ... The idea is first and foremost to *create* cus-

tomers *loyalty* so that a *stable, mutually profitable* and *long-term* relationship is *enhanced* (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996).

... the understanding, explanation and management of the *ongoing collaborative* business relationship between suppliers and customers (Cravens and Piercy, 1994; Sheth, 1994 in Gummesson, 1994; Hunt, 1997).

establishing, strengthening, and developing customer relations was stressed. The focus was on the *profitable commercialisation* of customer relationships, and the pursuit of individual and organisational objectives. In particular, *long-term* and *enduring* relationships with customers were stressed (Takala and Uusitalo, 1996).

RM is the process of planning, *developing* and *nurturing* a Relationship climate that will promote a *dialogue* between a firm and its customers which aims to imbue an understanding, *confidence* and *respect* of each others' capabilities and concerns when enacting their role in the market place and in society (Tzokas and Saren, 1996 in Daskou, 1997).

The two definitions below were “discovered” at a point too late to be included in the research, and are included in order to improve the value of this appendix as a resource to others.

Relationship marketing is concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships with strategically significant markets (Buttle, 1996).

...the process whereby a firm builds long term alliances with both prospective and current customers so that both buyer and seller work towards a common set of specified goals (Evans and Laskin, 1994).

Appendix 2

Table A1
 Seven conceptual categories of relationship marketing with words used by authors that fall within each classification

Author	Birth	Developing	Maintenance	Temporal	Interaction	Outputs	Emotional content	Row total
Ballantyne, 1994	Creating	Developing	Sustaining, continuous, stable	Continuous	Exchange			5
Berry, 1983	Attracting	Enchanting	Maintain					3
Parasuraman, 1991	Attracting	Developing	Retaining	Retaining	Relations		Commitment,	5
Bennett, 1996, A	Establish, create	Strengthen	Solid	Long-term, permanent, lasting	Co-operative, fair-dealing		trust, openness, sacrifice	6
Bennett, 1996, B	Establish	Development	Maintain	Lasting	Mutually	Rewarding, profit	Total integration,	6
Bennett, 1996, C	Establish	Development	Maintain	Lasting	Involvement		Commitment, trust, promises, bonds, obligation	4
Christopher et al., 1991	Getting	Development	Keeping	Long-term	Exchange	Profit	Promises	2
Grönroos, 1991	Establish	Nurture, enhance	Maintain	Long-term	Exchange	Profit	Promises	2
Grönroos, 1996b	Establishing	Enhance	Maintain					5
Grönroos, 1990	Establish	Enhance	Maintain					4
Grönroos, 1989, 1990	Establish	Enhance	Maintain					6
1994, 1997	Establish	Enhance	Maintain					6
Grönroos, 1994, 1995	Establish	Building	Maintain	Long-term	Exchange	Profit, terminate	Promises	6
Gummesson, 1990	Establish	Building	Maintain	Long-term	Interactive	Liquidation	Promises	5
Gummesson, 1994	Establish	Build, develop	Maintain	Long-term	Interactive	Profit		3
Gummesson, 1994, 1997	Establish	Build	Maintain	Long-term	Network interaction			1
Hammarkvist et al., 1982	Establish	Build, support, extend	Maintain	Long-term	Relations			3
Jackson, 1985	Establish	Build	Maintain	Lasting		Profit		3
Matthyssens et al., 1994	Establish	Build, support, extend	Supporting	Extend				4
Morgan and Hunt, 1994	Establish	Develop	Maintain		Exchange			3
O'Malley et al., 1997	Initiation	Enhance	Maintain		Exchange			4
Paravatiyar, 1996	Initiation	Enhance	Maintain		Co-operating	Dissolution	Promises	6
Pathmarajah, 1993	Create	Develop	Maintain	Over-time		Productivity, efficiency, effectiveness		2
Ravald and Grönroos, 1996	Create	Develop	Maintain	Over-time	Mutually	Profit		3
Sheth, 1994	Create	Develop	Maintain	Long-term	Mutually	Profit	Loyalty	6
Takala and Uusitalo, 1996	Establish	Strengthen, develop	Nurturing	Ongoing	Collaborative			2
Tzokas and Saren, 1996	Establish	Develop, nurturing	Nurturing	Long-term, enduring	Dialogue	Profit, commercialisation	Understanding, confidence, respect	4
Column totals	14	19	17	13	19	12	10	4