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CHANGES IN BRAND-RELATED CONSUMER LOYALTY IN THE CURRENT PANDEMIC CONTEXT

DURALIA Oana

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract:

The current medical crisis and, implicitly, the economic one, generated by the Covid-19 pandemic have brought increased attention to the issue of brand-related consumer loyalty, as loyal consumers are the safest and most stable source of profit in the current economic and social context. It is well-known that there is no equality between the notions of consumer satisfaction and loyalty. The two notions are not synonymous, as consumer satisfaction is only a relative, but not sufficient condition to obtain consumer loyalty. This paper aims to take a systemic approach in discussing the issue of brand-related consumer loyalty, starting from the inputs, respectively the favorable factors that lead to consumer attraction, retention and, finally, to the desired output, respectively to their loyalty. The whole approach will be supported by the use of secondary data sources that will be used in order to pinpoint some essential aspects of the changes that took place in 2020 in what regards the consumer's attachment to the brand.

Key words: relational marketing, consumer satisfaction, brand equity, brand loyalty

1. Introduction

Since the 90s, the field of marketing has focused on the system of relationships that the organization has with consumers and suppliers, service providers, employees, and competitors, a focus which led to the development of a new concept known as relational marketing. This concept was followed by two other concepts relatively similar to relational marketing, namely one-to-one marketing (Peppers & Rogers, 1993) and customer relationship management – CRM (Ryals & Payne, 2001). Currently, the notions of relational marketing and customer relationship management are the most frequently used, although, according to experts in the field, there is no sign of equality between the two concepts, relational marketing being the broadest concept aimed at studying the entire network of relationships created between the organization and other market participants with special focus on the relationship with customers, while CRM focuses on the managerial component found in each function of the enterprise. The major objective of CRM is to translate relational marketing values and strategies into practice.

Summarizing the approaches found in the works of Berry (1983), Gronroos (1989) and Payne (1995), we can argue that relational marketing is based on the correlation of 3 elements, namely: relationships, networks and interaction.

Basically, relational marketing is defined as a transition from transactional marketing and focusing on attracting and retaining consumers, on the relationships established between participants, that are based on involvement and trust, and profitable for all involved (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Moreover, in transactional marketing, the emphasis is on the transaction itself, the consumer being persuaded to purchase various products, generally consumer goods, the bidder or distributor using for this purpose a series of tools to promote sales, but without being able to discuss a possible prediction of the future acquisition behavior, even if the act of purchase was repeated. Often, the consumer relapses into purchasing from the same supplier, but not because they are attached to that brand, but because the costs of switching and reorienting to another supplier may be higher.

Unlike transactional marketing, relational marketing places emphasis on establishing long-term relationships with the consumer by using in particular the tools specific to direct marketing, which involve personalized and interactive communication with each consumer, offering products with a high degree of differentiation and finding and consolidating partnerships between all those interested in the smooth running of the organization (employees, shareholders, collaborators, etc.)

The need to focus on a new approach in marketing, which highlights the functionality of cross-functional relationships, and finding flows of activities that connect internal processes to the needs and capabilities of both suppliers and customers, are approaches to be found in the works of both Kotler (1992) and of Ostroff and Smith (1992).

Specifically, the fundamental objectives of relational marketing can be summarized as follows (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2002):

- focusing on the “lifetime value” of customers by applying strategies aimed at retaining targeted customers, knowing that attracting new customers is more expensive in terms of finances and time, as compared to the retention of current customers;
- strengthening relationships in several areas, not just consumer relations. The success of an organization in maintaining and strengthening long-term relationships with current customers is also conditioned by the way the organization manages relationships with suppliers, employees, influencers, distributors and employees;
- transitioning to a cross-functional approach to marketing activity, which is no longer considered to be the responsibility of a single department – the marketing, but is found in the approaches of all departments at the functional level of an organization.

In the current economic context, obviously marked by the medical crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, “hypercompetitiveness” leads to finding competitive strategies that “paralyze, mislead or block competitors” (D’Aveni & Richard, 1994), an aspect that totally contradicts the fundamental values of relational marketing emphasized by Gummesson (2002) in his book entitled “Total Relationship Marketing”, namely:

- the management of marketing activities should be extended and transformed into marketing-oriented company management, at the level of an organization practically discussing full-time marketers and part-time marketers, both categories having

responsibilities in strengthening long-term relationships with consumers and other interesting parts;

- long-term collaboration based on the win-win principle. Relational marketing should focus primarily on retaining current consumers, and only after on attracting new consumers;
- all participants should be active and responsible. In relational marketing, unlike in transactional marketing, the supplier does not necessarily have an active role, but is rather determined to align with consumer requirements, which entails creativity and innovation in the products and services offered;
- value-added relationships and services are a priority for rigid, bureaucratic approaches.

In conclusion, it can be argued that in relational marketing the emphasis is not only on the “classic dyad” that focuses on the consumer-supplier relationship, or the “classic triad” (consumer-supplier-competitor), but on a whole system of relationships, respectively on no less than 30 categories of relationships classified and analyzed by Gummesson (2002), as follows:

- *Classic market relationships*: the classic relations being considered the consumer-supplier relationship, the consumer-supplier-competitor relationship and the classic network of physical distribution;
- *Special market relationships*: focus on certain aspects of classic relationships such as the interaction in the service encounter or the customer as a member of a loyalty program;
- *Mega relationships*: exist beyond market relations, constituting the support for the market relations that concern the economy and the society in general;
- *Nano relationships*: refer to the relationships that are under market relations, i.e. the relationships within an organization (intra-organizational relations, given that all internal activities influence the external relations of the organization).

The leitmotif of this relational system between the organization and the markets involves mutual gain for all participants, generating long-term added value for both the consumer and the organization.

2. Consumer retention and loyalty – objective of relational marketing

Even if in transactional marketing, consumer orientation and knowledge of their buying and consuming behavior are fundamental requirements in the successful development of an organization’s marketing activity, in the last 30 years, more and more marketing specialists have drawn attention to an extremely important aspect, namely that consumer satisfaction is a relative concept because the consumer’s perception of the quality of the products / services used is subjective and not objective and also takes into account the consumer’s efforts to purchase the product or service.

Thus, in terms of transactional marketing, this approach has been replaced by the specific approach to relational marketing which focuses on the long-term relationship with the consumer and the added value it brings after repeated purchases, as well as product recommendations / services of the organization (table 1):

Table 1: The relation with the consumer – transactional marketing vs. relational marketing

Characteristics	Transactions focus	Relationships focus
Focus	Obtaining new customers	Customer retention
Orientation	Service features	Customer value
Timescale	Short	Long
Customer service	Little emphasis	High emphasis
Customer commitment	Limited	High
Customer contact	Limited	High
Quality	An operations concern	The concern of all

Source: Peck, H., Payne, A., Christopher, M., Clark, M.(1991), Relationship Marketing. Strategy and implementation, Butterworth-Heinemann, p. 44

In order to bring this new vision so necessary regarding the relationship with the consumer, relational marketing focuses both on the services offered to the customer (customer service) before the purchase, during the purchase and after purchasing the product, and on the quality of these services. that for a consumer are extremely important both the tangible representations regarding the performance of the products, but also the intangible representations that are closely correlated with the experiences that the consumer lives at the time of purchase and use of the purchased product.

The substantiation of an optimal strategy regarding the services offered to consumers has a decisive role both in terms of attracting new customers and in terms of retaining current customers, knowing that for the organization, retained customers are much more profitable compared to new customers. for the following reasons (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2002):

- Current customers tend to buy more and are much easier satisfy, knowing the information related to the frequency of purchase, products purchased, etc.;
- The current consumers that the company manages to keep trust the supplier and the performance of the delivered products, and therefore they are willing to pay even a higher price for their favorite products;
- The consumers that the organization manages to keep can be an extremely effective and credible marketing communication tool in terms of the recommendations they make;
- The degree to which an organization manages to retain its current consumers can be a barrier to market entry for other competitors.

All the efforts that marketers make towards increasing the customer retention rate are based, first of all, on an increase in the value perceived by the customer. According to Naumann & Kordupleski (1995), the value expected by the consumer is determined as the ratio between the benefits perceived by the consumer in terms of performance of associated products and services and the efforts perceived by the consumer in terms of purchase-related costs (financial, time, psychological, etc.) and the risk perceived at the time of purchase.

The greater the organization's efforts to increase the value perceived by the customer, the higher its attachment to the organization and its products. The management of consumer attachment to an organization / brand can be understood as representing “the

measures that a company takes in order to influence the current and future behavioral intentions of customers towards a company or its activities in a positive way, to stabilize and develop the relationship with them.” (Bruhn, 2001)

Relational marketing emphasizes that the strategies the company chooses in order to attract new customers, respectively to retain customers in order to create attachment to the organization or brand must be different as the consumer goes through several stages until loyalty can be discussed. The literature even discusses a so-called “scale of loyalty” which has the following steps (Peck et al, 1999):

- “Prospect”: the person who can be persuaded to enter into a transactional relationship with the organization;
- “Purchaser”: the person who only once had a transactional relationship with the organization;
- “Customer”: the person who has had repeated transactional relationships with the organization, but may be neutral or even negative about how they feel about the organization;
- “Supporter”: the person who has a positive attitude towards the organization, but supports it passively;
- “Advocate”: the person who actively recommends the organization to others;
- “Partner”: the person who can be considered a partner of the organization.

In the paper “Customer attachment to the enterprise - the main lever of relational marketing”, Professor Nicolae Al. Pop (2005) presents an extremely interesting approach to the stages that a consumer goes through in forming their attachment to an organization / brand. These are the stages highlighted by the author:

First purchase: if the consumer is satisfied after using the product, repurchase occurs; in case of dissatisfaction, the consumer will replace the product or give up purchasing it in the future;

Repurchase: if after consumption there is dissatisfaction or there is a stronger attraction for another product, the consumer gives up or replaces the initially chosen product; if there is talk of increased satisfaction, then there may be the issue of consumer loyalty;

Fidelity: if, after repeated use, the satisfaction will be doubled by a certain satisfaction and by a certain enthusiasm determined by the fact that the consumer's expectations are exceeded repeatedly, then one can discuss the concept of loyalty;

Loyalty: at this stage there is no question of attraction for other competing products, the consumer being really enthusiastic about the product / brand purchased;

Exclusivity: there is full attachment of the consumer to the organization / product / brand.

Depending on the strength of the relationship and the attractiveness of the supplier/provider, Johansen & Monthele (1996) highlight the following types of consumers in the so-called loyalty matrix, namely:

- Ambassadors: they are the customers who have an extremely strong relationship with the supplier and perceive it as extremely attractive in terms of the offer of products/services;
- Loyal customers: they are a little less enthusiastic than ambassadors;

- Customers with a high degree of risk: they are consumers who can be easily attracted by the offers of competitors;
- Searching customers: they are those who are actively looking for a new supplier;
- Lost customers: these are customers that the supplier has already lost.

3. Changes in brand-related consumer loyalty in the current economic and social context

Now more than ever, consumers have a special power in terms of their relationship with the supplier, more precisely in the consumer's relationship with the brand, in terms of the following factors (Smith, 2016):

Possibility to access and compare information obtained from various sources;

Increasing consumer mobility as a result of using various divisions and platforms that help them identify the optimal alternatives to choose from, with reduced time-related and financial costs, etc.;

The power of social networks, which offer the possibility of dialogue between consumers, within various brand communities. In this contexts, opinion formers can exert a great influence as ambassadors-supporters of that brand.

Creating a brand portfolio that is perceived by consumers as attractive and powerful is a major goal of any organization. In this sense, organizations aim to substantiate and analyze two factors, namely: brand equity and brand loyalty, the two notions being considered as interconnected by the vast majority of specialists in the field. Two different points of view on the brand equity - brand loyalty relationship, can be identified, namely:

- Brand loyalty is a component of brand equity (Aaker-1991, Keller-1993);
- Brand loyalty is a result of brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

In the first category, the best known approaches to the notion of consumer brand-equity (CBBE) are those of Keller (1993) who considers brand capital as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on customers' response to the marketing of a brand" and Aaker (1991-article above), that reveals that strong brands are constantly growing in popularity, the quality perceived by consumers being one of the determining variables of its model (Figures 1 and 2).

In recent years, experts insist on the need for a more complex approach to the notion of brand equity (Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, & Christodoulides, 2016) and, although there is no unanimously accepted view on the components that define brand equity, there is a high need to consider both functional (Gronroos, 1984) and symbolic (Kapferer, 1997) variables, attributed to the analyzed brand by consumers (Vazquez, Del Rio & Iglesias, 2002).

Figure 1: Keller's CBBE Model

Source: Keller, K. L. (2001), Building Customer-Based Brand Equity: A Blueprint for Creating Strong Brands, Marketing Management, no. 10

Figure 2: Aaker's Brand Equity approach

Source : Aaker (1991), D. A., Managing brand equity. Capitalizing on the value of brand name. New York, NY: Free Press.

In summary, it can be concluded that CBBE (consumer brand equity) reflects how consumers' perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors are reflected in an increased utility of the product / service, leading to an increase in the profitability of the organization that could not be otherwise achieved without brand recognition and prestige (Pham, 2019).

In the second category of approaches, which consider brand loyalty as a result of brand equity, an extremely interesting approach is that of Nam, Ekinci & Whyatt (2011), whose model emphasize that brand equity should be considered as an independent variable that acts on consumer satisfaction and is considered as a "mediator variable" due to five attributes (physical quality, staff behavior, ideal self-congruence, brand identification and lifestyle-congruence), while brand loyalty must be seen as a dependent variable.

Regardless of the degree of determination between the two concepts, brand equity and brand loyalty, it can be stated with certainty that for any organization, consumers loyal to the brand are a safe source of profit, with a high degree of long-term predictability, as this category of consumers is willing to pay even a higher price for the preferred brand, accept changes related to the brand more easily and are unlikely to be attracted by competing offers (Hogan et al., 2002)

In the current economic and social context, when the challenges faced by suppliers and distributors have multiplied considerably as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the ability of companies to adapt to new legislative requirements as well as consumers', was what made the difference between leaving the market, surviving or succeeding.

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, according to the Gfk Consumer Life 2019 Study, consumer expectations were geared towards four main directions, namely:

- Simplification;
- High performance;
- Premiumization;
- Omnichannel shopping.

In what regards consumer loyalty to the brand and the changes that took place in 2020, compared to 2019, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be seen that in the top 20 brands that enjoy consumer loyalty includes Amazon, for online sales, a brand that has maintained its leading position compared to 2019, Netflix, ranked 6th in the previous year and Amazon, in the video streaming segment, ranked 6th in 2019 (figure 3- 2020 Top 20 Brand Keys Loyalty Leaders). The study published by Brand Keys (<https://brandkeys.com>) on September 15, 2020, reveals that 20% of the brands that entered in the top 100 Brand Loyalty Leaders are new entries, such as Disney, in the segment of streaming video, UPS and FedEx, while the Covid-19 pandemic removed such as Expedia, McDonald's or Hertz from the list of traditional brands.

Figure 3: 2020 Top 20 Brand Keys Loyalty Leaders

Source: Brand Keys Loyalty Leaders 2020, New York, September 15, 2020(<https://brandkeys.com>)

Another study related to the changes in consumer loyalty as a result of the Covid-19 crisis is the one published by Yotpo and entitled “The State of Brand Loyalty 2021: Global consumer Survey”, a study conducted on a sample of 3800 respondents from three geographical areas, namely: US, UK, and Australia. According to the aforementioned study, 26.4% of respondents said they were much more loyal to the brands purchased compared to 2019, while a percentage of only 13.3% admitted they were less loyal in 2020, as compared to 2019 (Figure 4 - Evolution of brand loyalty in 2020 compared to 2019 - US, UK, Australia)

Figure 4 - Evolution of brand loyalty in 2020 compared to 2019 - US, UK, Australia

Source: The State of Brand Loyalty 2021: Global Consumer Survey, Yotpo, <https://www.yotpo.com/blog/the-state-of-brand-loyalty-2021-global-consumer-survey/>

Moreover, regarding the number of brands for which consumers declared loyalty in 2020, as compared to 2019, the same study mentioned above indicates that we are dealing with a larger number of brands to which consumers were loyal in the year of the pandemic (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of brands to which consumers remained loyal – US, UK, Australia

Source: The State of Brand Loyalty 2021: Global Consumer Survey, Yotpo, <https://www.yotpo.com/blog/the-state-of-brand-loyalty-2021-global-consumer-survey/>

Forecasts on the evolution of consumer behavior and changes in their brand-related loyalty for the next 5-10 years were published by Futurum Research in the study “Experience 2030. The future of customer experience is now”, which reveals the main attributes or characteristics that an organization / a brand should offer to consumers in order to retain and build loyalty (Figure 6)

Figure 6: Attributes that will determine consumers' loyalty in 2025-2030 (maximum three)

Source: Experience 2030. The future of customer experience is now, Futurum Research, 2019, <https://futurumresearch.com/research-reports/experience-2030-global-report-customer-experience/>

In the current pandemic context, the issue of loyalty should be pursued by the organization in the sense that it must be loyal to the consumer and not vice versa, using the resources at its disposal to meet consumer expectations, offering them with purchase experiences that encourage an emotional attachment to the brand.

4. Conclusions:

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumer expectations and desires have changed dramatically. If before the outbreak of the pandemic, consumers simply bought the products / brands that met their expectations, with the onset of the current health crisis, with economic and social implications already visible and measurable, consumers sought to purchase those products they really needed, given that which most of the activities took place from home. We have practically experienced a switch between what consumers wanted and what consumers needed.

In this turbulent context for any organization, consolidating a strong relationship with the brand through the use of consumer retention and loyalty policies was the only way for companies to succeed. Strengthening the relationships and partnerships between suppliers and distributors and identifying unique ways of communicating with them have contributed decisively to strengthening the relationship between consumer and brand. On the other hand, consumer loyalty and brand attachment may have diminished from the shortcomings encountered by consumers in terms of distribution channels during the pandemic period.

Given that all activities became more and more interactive during this period, organizations/ brands had to find a way to balance the fun with consumers' attachment and involvement.

Furthermore, a reorientation towards a segmentation that considers "customer value" in relation to the organization, to the detriment of classic segmentation criteria, without omitting everything related to local peculiarities in terms of consumer behavior, can be the answer to the concerns of organizations / brands regarding the increase of profitability in the period immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic, by maintaining and facilitating access for loyal consumers, which are a safe and stable source of profit.

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