

REDEFINING THE RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENTS DURING TIMES OF CRISES – A NECESSARY OR COMPULSORY FEATURE

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the profound changes in markets as a consequence of globalization, increased competition, technology development, communication paths and the complexity of modern customer who made their presence felt, requiring a paradigm shift in the marketing theory. The objectives of the research are to analyze the relationship marketing that emphasizes the importance of cooperation between the various participants - suppliers, employees, distributors - in order to provide an optimal value to the target customers. The expected results are aiming the transition from theory to practice, from rigidity to flexibility of Romanian companies.

Key words: consumer, business environment, change, client, crises.

JEL classification: D12, D22, D4.

1. Introduction

Currently, the business world is undergoing a period of profound changes of the market, the old answers do no longer match new realities. Tom Peters says that, in this world of chaos, successful companies are those that do not prove a great resistance to change and accept its inevitable occurrence.

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The main agents of change for business are customers. They require it to re-design, to adapt continuously, to increase the level of performance offered, they are actually making it highly dynamic. Companies that do not deal in an effective manner with changes that customers require do not have many chances to resist, because customers are those who hold power.

The effects of globalization, stiff competition, technology development, communication routes and distribution and the complexity of modern customer have made their presence felt, marking a significant mutation of marketing theory paradigm. Relational marketing emphasizes the importance of the cooperation between the different participants, suppliers, distributors and employees in order to provide an optimal customer target value.

2. The role and importance of the customer in the business

As customers, modern consumers are part of a universe that is expanding through uninterrupted new offers, they enjoyed previously unimaginable opportunities, every minute are bombarded with thousands of adverts and all sorts of insistent approaches. The current crisis creates an excess of goods, the entrepreneurs must find new consumers for categories always improved of products and services increasingly specialized.

After the shock received by the customer on power loss, firms must awake to reality. They have finally agreed that their existence is in the hands of customers, leading to sales and ultimately profits. Some have understood very late what Peter Drucker had said many years ago: "the only profit center is represented by the client". There is no doubt that in the current circumstances, any business that ignores the interests of the client, may not last. So it becomes evident the need for in-depth knowledge of the new consumer and its behavior.

The consumer is now more educated and more informed, developments in technology being the trigger of communication revolution we are witnessing. (according to some statistics, people in the urban environment are exposed to 3,000-6,000 advertising messages per day, depending on the country). Godin (2004)

- The consumer today is more intelligent and usually knows what is in its interest. Brian Tracy confirms the above, saying: "the customer always

acts in such a way as to satisfy the interests and seeking to obtain the highest quantity and quality, the best at the lowest price" (Tracy, 2003). Thus, they try to increase so to maximize the benefits from an acquisition and to reduce to a minimum the costs or expenses incurred.

- Current Consumer is less demanding in terms of quality and more sophisticated in the purchase process. Jack Welch at General Electric has synthesized perfectly the importance of quality and its benefits: "quality is the best guarantee of the loyalty of our customers, the strongest defense against foreign competition and the only way to sustainable and sustained earnings growth."

- Current Consumer is becoming increasingly squeamish, has increasing claims, taking advantage of the existence of a large number of vendors who try to satisfy all needs.

Current Consumer is increasingly sensitive to prices, globalization, Internet extreme competition and shaping markets, policies and business activity of firms. Many firms have established production areas which ensure lower costs. Consumers take advantage of the current context, quality and low price, firms must "sooner or later, respond to this request (Werner and Weiss, 2004).

Kotler claims that in this era, the firms get lower prices, but "you cannot build a viable business based only on discount prices. And the quality is required so that the client feel that makes a purchase based not only on price but also on value" (Kotler, 2004).

Current Consumer has increasingly less time available, the whole economy relying on customers' desire to have things they want faster, there is a direct relationship between the speed with which a company serves its customers and how they perceive the product or service. The speed in service providing offers companies a competitive advantage in almost any field.

Current Consumer is more egocentric and selfish. Philip Kotler argues that many of the customers have developed such an individuality that will be considered and treated more differently than everyone else (Kotler, 2004). This focus on the ego of consumers provides marketing people a competitive opportunity to offer them products and services tailored to the individual, and with a degree of emotional involvement and expression of status and personality of the individual, based on the understanding that every customer is unique and wants to be treated in a unique and original way.

Consumers are less and less loyal, the long-term success of a business is conditioned by the existence of a growing number of loyal customers, "retaining a customer requires as much skill as winning a customer" (Kotler, 2004). In order to remain in the market, companies must find ways to more effective marketing to build long term relationships with customers.

The consumer is more difficult to be influenced advertising, since he is accustomed with the rules of the game of marketing, the principles and even the techniques of marketing and advertising professionals use to persuade consumers to buy certain products (Iliescu and Petre, 2004) . Today few advertisers shall make it possible to ignore the fact that the only opinion that matters is that of the consumer, Leo Burnett said, in this sense, his younger colleague: "If you cannot turn yourselves in consumers, you may leave advertising industry" (Steel, 2005).

- The consumer is more interested in environmental issues that may affect one's health; the percentage of "ecologist consumers" that actually selects the products according to ecological criteria is increasing (Cave, 2005).

- We live in an economy, an economy in which the consumer was crowned as the King of the market. The ratio between the power companies and the consumer is today reversed or at least balanced firms are now dependent on the clients and not vice versa.

3. The need for client-orientation of the Romanian companies

Although it is known Francis Bacon's dictum: "knowledge is power", few Romanian firms will work to know in depth, their market and customers, it will still pass some time until market research will be something typical for any business, small or large. Romanian managers do not seem very concerned about understanding the ever-changing behavior of consumers, to improve their level of knowledge about consumers. They do not seem to understand that today's customers are not thinking like they used to five or ten years ago.

Companies best suited to market requirements are those that are aware of the expectations and satisfaction of customers, interact with them, they are committed towards customers and comply with them. These companies may have a feature that is missing in many Romanian companies: to think as consumers think of their products. They always try to think as if they were themselves consumers. There is even a witticism in which says that once you

enter a business with a will, you have to act more likely as your client than as yourself. These companies do not ever forget that the decisions consumers take when purchasing, all power is from them, so the only opinion that matters is that of the consumers.

It is also apparent from those companies for which success means to be one step ahead of the consumer, to anticipate their movements. The managers of these firms are thinking permanently what the client wants in the future, over the next few weeks, months, or more than two years. Such an approach would prove to be vital to any Romanian firm in the new context.

As the market makes the rules, businesses are dependent on the clients, who must receive the best treatment that a firm can offer. Romanian companies should start to treat each customer as if it were the only one that they have to treat, that is with respect and seriousness. Commitment to serve customers in a perfect manner will prove the only and best way to ensure long-term success for companies in Romania.

Possession of a customer is a function that must be met by all of the companies, not just the marketing department. This explains the fact that 50% of Japanese firms don't have a marketing department, and 90% of them have no special compartment for marketing research.

Customer-orientation mentality on the part of all the employees of a firm does not appear by itself; it must be planned, implemented, and rewarded. Unfortunately, few Romanian companies are investing in professional training programs to create an organizational culture focused on customer service. Even more so now, in the crisis conditions, when the battle cannot be won only by means of a strategy based only on the best price, firms must focus on retention through high-quality services.

For a firm, being close to the customer is to adopt an attitude of openness and sincere understanding of its needs and desires. Treating each customer with empathy and sensitivity is always positive for businesses. Customer oriented organization gives them the opportunity to express their views and grievances. When customers talk, firms should listen to. Unfortunately, many Romanian businesses do not listen and do not care about their opinions, have gained a bad reputation. In the current environment, to know what customers think, what they want, will become a Romanian visa requirement for any company. To listen to customers and understand them will be the first thing that Romanian firms should do (attraction, but mostly

the default retention, the success of any business depends on it). The way they react when Romanian companies are facing complaints will be decisive for their success or failure. Currently, Romanian firms are known for a tendency to react negatively, rather than receive complaints from customers. The irony is that those disgruntled buyers, but whose complaints have been heard and resolved, often become more loyal than those who have expressed no dissatisfaction. Today any company oriented to the customer must examine periodically the satisfaction of the consumer and to set goals to improve it. It happens often in Romania, where the firm has a comfortable position in the market and a good image among customers; it shows a false sense of security. If these firms do not learn how they can better cater to customers, unless it is permanently adapted to market requirements and are not always striving to exceed the expectations of consumers, they may, in the future lose their privileged position.

Orientation towards the client requires moving the Centre of gravity of the communication process from the product to the consumer. It is amazing that so few Romanian firms (large firms even with professional marketing departments) do not understand the need for this ad in their mutations. The majority of marketing messages made by Romanian companies, say too much about them and focus almost entirely on what the company offers; they the client as a simple consumer of the products they supply, instead of focusing on the benefits potential customers can gain if they choose to accept the offer of that company.

4. The need to redefine the relations with customers

Lack of concern for customers or for the creation and maintenance of deep relationships with consumers was evident and revolting in most companies in Romania, in the period after 1990. While sales and profits went too (competition being relatively low, incomparably less than in developed countries, high levels of involuntary consumption), few firms have raised the question of the development of long-term relations with customers. For many years, Romanian firms were being targeted rather to maximize profits on short-terms, focused on the collection of course immediately and thus, overlooking the value in the perspective of a customer.

Unfortunately for many Romanian owners, the profit was even more important than the health or safety of the people. The numerous cases reported by the media, marketing of products with expired validity terms, manufacture of products under unsanitary conditions, the use of outdated equipment in the fun parks, distribution of food suspected to be infested with viruses, have eroded consumer confidence. So, it is no wonder that today, Romanian businesses seem to suffer from the consumers' perception that their owners are indolent, greedy and indifferent to the interests of the customers, employees, and even firms and their interests in the long term. There is a strong current of suspicion and mistrust of consumers towards environmental practices in Romania.

The most important Romanian companies who want to build lasting relationships with customers focus on honesty and integrity. In business, trust is an essential element, glue any relationships. If there is no trust, a relationship cannot exist, and the long-term success of a company is virtually impossible. In almost every area, companies have the most reliable and highest profits. Marketing studies have shown that, today, consumers tend to support businesses they trust.

In Romania, many companies that are bankrupt, and the growing number of those who are agonizing are eloquent examples of behaviors that have abused the confidence of consumers in exchange of short-term profits. Referring generally to such behavior, Philip Kotler compared the owners of such companies with some vampires, which emptied the blood marks, and left them without life, humble themselves, customers are dust and powder for companies focused on short-term benefits; such companies commit the acts of suicide of firms through self-punishment - and by design brands. Romanian firms have made the mistake of considering that once granted confidence by customers, the latter was granted forever and began to be almost complacent about the mediocrity (several new mentality to "leave that goes and so") or worse, as we mentioned above, have begun to take advantage of the confidence that had been granted at the beginning when such companies were high.

The owners of the Romanian companies who do not comply with the customers, forgetting the old saying "you get respect if you show respect" seek to rapidly enrich on behalf of consumers. Those who still have an arrogant attitude towards customers (and somewhere a naive vision of what it means to

a client today) like: "if I sell they will come" must make rapid changes for this concept is far from helping to build viable relationships with consumers.

A drop in consumer confidence was sharpened against the habit of Romanian to make all sorts of valuable promises to customers, without coverage in reality. Companies were not aware that as soon as it is launched on the market, everything they do, everything they say is analyzed, reviewed, put under magnifying glass by customers. Today promises of firms in our country do no longer enjoy the popularity and they are even viewed with skepticism or doubt. So, they have to be careful what they promise, because repeated disappointments of consumer turn to anger and no one should underestimate the strength of an angry customer.

Customer dissatisfaction produces lasting damage by undermining the existence of firms, any dealings with them. For creating quality relationships with their customers and keeping them for a long time, Romanian firms must learn to respect each promise they make. They are required to prove everything they say, so they should never make promises that are not able to honor them. This is the only way that they can form a clientele. In order not to undermine confidence in the company products, there must be a balance between the "brand promise", the quality and service that is "effective" brand experience

All this set of factors caused the Romanian firms to operate in an environment that is often hostile, it is unlikely that they are entrusted with confidence. Sometimes because of the local and central media approach which has sanctioned behaviors likely to affect the interests of consumers.

Now when things have changed, in terms of competition we can witness an increase of interest paid to consumer behavior and, in particular, to the phenomenon of turning clients more loyal. For turning clients more loyal – forming a stable clientele - the relationship with customers should be cultivated. Someone said that this is somewhat similar to the cultivation of the Earth by digging plants, watering and dedicating yourself to take care of the plants and then harvest the fruits, a work that requires continuous effort and concentration. Any interruption in the process can produce losses, development of relations requires patience, a lot of attention, involvement and dedication time. Romanian firms preferred instead of cultivating client relationships, increase investment in advertising, to manipulate and earn a customer.

5. The relationship between Romanian companies and their customers

The level of satisfaction offered by the Romanian companies to consumers is not very high. This explains why when new, more powerful competitors arise, local firms are losing many customers at the expense of new competitors. The Romanian consumer loyalty towards indigenous products doesn't record highs. The explanation is given by the fact that many employers believed they will achieve business success by maximizing profits only.

Very often Romanian owners have in mind only the criterion of low price when it comes to the choice of suppliers of raw materials and are not hesitating to change suppliers whenever it appears an offer more advantageous from the point of view of quality, even if the price is lower. This makes the product does not have any more the promised quality, depending on the quality of the raw material. To these are added the concept of wage policy, attracting employees' wages reduced or a weak high staff fluctuation.

Romanian firms still in this situation must give up such unhealthy concepts, specialists providing that "a company that aims to make only short-term profit, will not win anything on a long term basis, for the greatest profit is given by repeated sales, and in these companies there will be no repeated sales". Getting feedback from the client, improving products and services, lack of flaws are things that any company would need to undertake in order to achieve a high profit.

To survive, indigenous companies do not have any other chance than to do their best to please customers. "A satisfied customer is the foundation of any successful business.

At the same time, firms that do not consider the quality as its main priority, will fail the high levels of customer satisfaction in the current conjuncture. As today's quality is defined by customer, and the Romanian consumers today become more educated in this respect, the approach that any firm should have towards maximum quality should start by understanding the needs and expectations of consumers of products manufactured by them. The next step would be to give consumers more than they expect, to make an effort to give the product changed and thus to gain an advantage in the minds of customers. Introducing total quality Management systems is recommended,

bringing increasing customer satisfaction by improving quality. Incidentally, today, without the implementation of total quality Management programs, firms must pray that all firms competing to be incompetent (Sagrove, 2000).

The obsessive attention to quality of products should be added and special attention should be paid to services provided to customers. The quality of the services offered is a problem for companies in Romania, its solving will prove vital for the success of any of them. As people speak only of two types of services: the exceptional and the bad, it is obvious the direction to which firms in this area must move: to provide flawless, high class products and services, which attract and gain customers' faith. In Romania one cannot hear and see that too often, companies are proposing to achieve excellence, to become champions in the field of services.

There is a need to develop systems that companies use effectively to attract the emotional involvement of every employee in providing full satisfaction to the customers. If in the West many firms offer employees bonuses depending on the score, the criterion being customer's satisfaction, unfortunately in Romania there are few such companies, which have provided companies with incentives for employees to treat particularly well the client.

If they exist, employees would involve more and would discard behaviors and so the rumors encountered among employees, such as: "what do I care if the customer is satisfied with me? I didn't win anything "The current client is no longer the timid person in the early 90s that accepts any behavior on the part of employees in order to have a product that is needed or wanted. Often the client is dominated by emotions to their purchase decision, and a warm and friendly behavior of the person who provides the product can influence the decision and even faithfulness. The existence of superior strategies for customer service can provide firms an advantage in relation to the competition. Romanian consumers today, demanding and vigilant do no longer tolerate products that you want, and leave the service disabled, inappropriate. They expect the companies raising standards of goods and services that it provides. This may be the key to achieve a significant competitive advantage and long-term success in business. Process improvement should be seen by firms as a contest without the Romanian line.

The tragedy is that many employers are not Romanians in running a normal evaluation, realistic and objective of their companies, their products

and services. In Romania are arrogant, too many patrons who consider that do not need to know the opinion of clients on their performance.

How long time, Romanian firms have treated customers with the superiority of the dominant positions of strength and power, many customers have the Romanians gave to cry, convinced that they would not have any chance to be taken into account, that the firm will do little or nothing to fix the problem reported, or fear they will not be treated with due respect. Even when policemen's idea, as true that Romanian firms are often negative reactions when faced with complaints of dissatisfaction on the part of customers attitude as blunt and the unfortunate. With view to this conviction, as a result of the lack of dialogue with customers, Steven Covey emphasizes the importance of listening in building a relationship with consumers: "to let your ear listen requires patience, open and sincere desire to understand. When customers have a real problem and you listen with the sincere desire to understand, you will be astounded how fast they open to you. They can hardly wait to reveal their feelings. And you have to make them feel that after that are not judged, they will not be laughed at and will benefit from the same deference" (Covey, 2000).

Therefore, Romanian firms should ask customers whether, in their opinion, they could change anything or add anything for a better satisfaction. It may be an open discussion on the acceptance of a client and with constructive criticism.

According to the Romanian company, the customer is not right, but, in the current context, such attitudes like: "we have quite a lot to work even without searching for other complaints" should give up, which can lead to bankruptcy in the longer term. The slogan "when customers talk, Whirpool listens" was effective and brought the company success. If they want to succeed and become the best in their field of activity, Romanian firms must learn to use it constructive feedback from customers and to sacrifice hubris, vanity.

The companies will accept faster feedback received from customers and suggestions will be put into practice, for becoming more successful. And once you attained a higher degree of satisfaction of clients you will register and increase the loyalty of customers. Marketing theory has defined several tools to track and measure customers' satisfaction. Romanian firms should acquire several methods to analyze the satisfaction they offer to customers.

From practical experience of firms developed abroad we list on the most effective: polls, gathering suggestions and complaints, the fictitious clients etc. No company in Romania would have to ignore customers.

6. Conclusions

Until yesterday ignored, the management relationship with customers has become a priority for everyone, more than ever, and the ability to develop personalized relationships with customers is crucial today, is the key to the future of the company. Creating relationships with customers based on their value and satisfaction is the very essence of the thinking and practice of modern marketing.

Romanian firms need a revolution in the way they think about business and marketing process in their effort to decrease the distance that separates them from the European firms.

The last decades have recognized market orientation to the client as a new philosophy of business. Many Romanian companies are for a long time on the road which requires a transition from being product-oriented to being marketing-oriented. However, unfortunately, in Romania, plenty of companies still witness what Theodor Levitt called marketing myopia, demonstrating an exaggerated concentration on the product, to the detriment of consumers' needs, the mistake that the well-known author described as: "too much looking in the mirror instead of looking out of the window".

To succeed, therefore, in the strong competitive environment of contemporary Romanian market, firms must be intensely focused on customers, luring him and then keeping them and helping them to grow by providing higher values. What successful businesses have in common today, in addition to the passion with which they are committed to understanding and meeting the needs of target customers on the market, is the ability of leaders to motivate all employees to contribute to the building of lasting relationships with customers by providing a high degree of value. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, in their search of excellence, *Lessons from the best managed companies in America* (Meteor Press Publishing House, 2011, p 123) identify approaching reviews as one of the eight factors assuring the success of the company.

As long as customers on the domestic market are almost as demanding as those of developed markets, satisfying their needs and cementing a relationship with them are the inevitable existence of human resources capable of change, adaptability, creativity.

Within the scope of current affairs, companies operate in a world of relationships. Normally, to have good relations and long-term customers, Romanian firms must first found relationships or partnerships with employees; build a team with them with a view to customer satisfaction. The creation of such mutually beneficial alliances or partnerships will be the key to success for any company in Romania. Acting in an environment that emphasizes more creativity and innovation will be very hard for companies to gain an advantage of Romanian competition unless they invest to training of employees for training and professional development.

The current economy requires significant structural changes in terms of marketing and how to do business, mainly from the passing from predictability to unpredictability, flexibility, rigidity in accepting the need for certainty of uncertainty. The only thing that remains constant is change.

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