

Customer Service and Relationship Management in the Context of Technology-Enabled Service Delivery Systems.

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Abstract

Increasingly contemporary theorists argue that the emergence of electronic markets and associated systems have enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness by which a marketer can establish, develop and maintain customer relationships. Notwithstanding, evidence suggests that this enthusiasm may need to be tempered by acknowledging that, for a sizeable group of customers, technology-enabled service delivery may lead to less than satisfactory experiences that ultimately impact upon the ability to develop relationships of mutual benefit. This paper explores issues associated with trust, reliability and a felt need for personal contact which impact upon an individual's capacity and willingness to use technology-enabled service delivery. Clearly providers must recognise that a production driven 'one-size-fits-all' approach to electronically enhanced service delivery may have negative implications for an organisation's customer relationship management program. Managerial implications and a proposed research agenda are discussed.

Keywords: Technology, Service delivery, Capacity, Willingness, Customer service, Customer relationship management

1. Introduction

In a climate of escalating competitive intensity, the establishment and maintenance of long-term customer relationships has been increasingly acknowledged for its role in heightening a firm's profitability by enhancing the effectiveness of interacting with key customers (Mohammed, Fisher, Jaworski and Cahill, 2002). This drive to create ongoing loyalty recognises that it is less costly to serve existing customers than to continually find and attract new prospects (Hanson, 2000). Over the course of the past decade, marketers have embraced the power of technology-enabled services, delivered through electronic channels, to facilitate this process of customer relationship management (Mulligan and Gordon, 2002; Winer, 2001; Peters, 1997; Han, 1997; McKenna, 1995; Grant and Schlesinger, 1995). In so doing, this has provided customers with more choice and accessibility, greater convenience and faster response. Correspondingly, service providers using this technology have been provided with the opportunity to gain service delivery cost savings, more direct access to and knowledge of their customers, and an improved ability to maintain contact with these customers, and to customise product offerings. At the same time, however, we argue that what has been observed as an often indiscriminate push

towards universal acceptance and adoption of service delivery automation does not always necessarily distinguish between important customer segments.

We acknowledge that some customers yield greater value over the course of their lifetime of association with a firm than others. However, we propose that a considerable number of potentially valuable customers will perceive barriers to the establishment of relationships when forced to interact with technology-enabled service delivery systems. Thus we propose that, in order to maximise the likelihood of engaging in mutually beneficial relationships with all customers of potentially high lifetime value, marketers should consider the differing needs and motivations of a variety of customer groups from the perspective of their capacity and willingness to enter the electronically enhanced service delivery environment. Findings from an earlier empirical investigation (Walker, Craig-Lees, Hecker and Francis, 2002) into these factors provide the rationale behind an important call for caution to marketers seeking to optimise relationships in electronic markets, and also provide the grounds for what is argued in this paper.

Despite the many potential benefits offered by technology-enabled service delivery (Meuter, Ostrom,

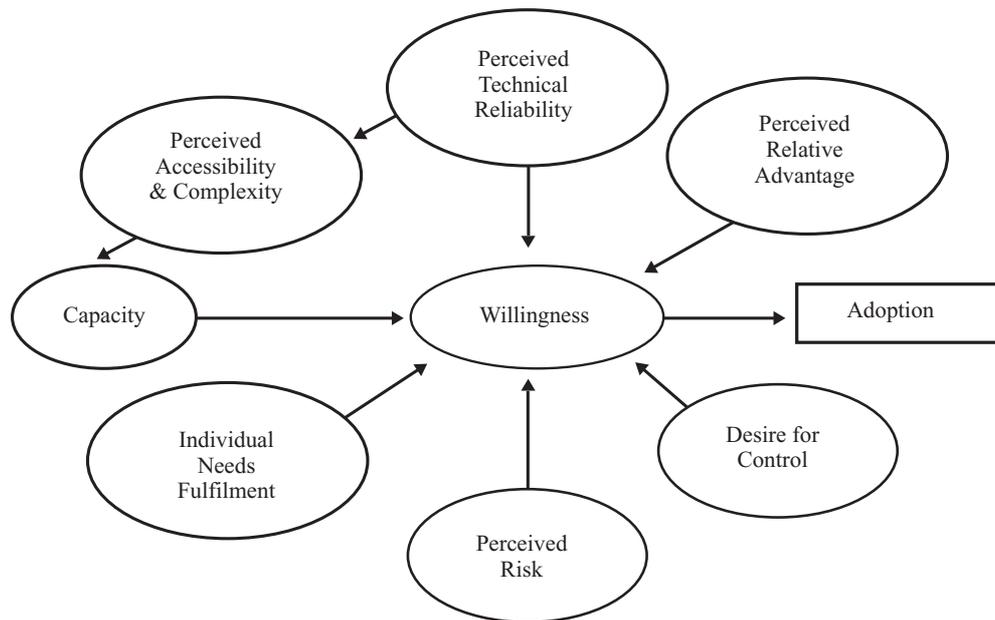


Figure 1: Capacity & Willingness: Relationships & Determinants
(Walker et al. 2002)

Roundtree and Bitner, 2000; Bitner, Brown and Meuter, 2000; Brown, 1997; Dabholkar, 1994 and 1991), the manner by which many of these services are provided appears often to be more production driven than market driven. That is, (i) the delivery process often appears to have been designed principally with the aim of achieving operating efficiencies, productivity gains and reduced costs for the service organisation; and (ii) the delivery process often takes insufficient account of different needs, capabilities and concerns of different users.

Our research shows that a customer's decision to adopt, that is, use regularly, or reject technologically facilitated services is conditioned by their individual capacity and willingness to do so (Walker et al., 2002). Figure 1 illustrates this point, demonstrating relationships between a number of determinants of the capacity and willingness of individuals to adopt technology-enabled services.

Capacity implies a perceived ability to use and manage the technology (Dabholkar and Bagozzi, 2002; Adams, Nelson and Todd, 1992; Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989 and 1992; Tornatzky and Klein, 1982). Willingness is born of several factors including the relative advantage afforded by, and the perceived complexity and accessibility of, what is being offered (Dabholkar and Bagozzi, 2002; Loh and Ong, 1998; Daniel and Storey,

1997; Rugimbana, 1995; Marr and Prendergast, 1991 and 1993; Moore and Benbasat, 1991; Rogers, 1961 and 1976); and the perceived risks and costs associated with trialing the offering (Dabholkar and Bagozzi, 2002; Zeithaml, 1981; Taylor, 1974; Ostlund, 1974; Rogers, 1961). These considerations are grounded in intrinsic personal characteristics and concerns of individual customers that relate to personal needs and wants, including a desire for personal interaction, a sense of perceived risk in the service encounter, a desire for control, and behavioural and cultural norms. These characteristics are also grounded in customer-extrinsic operational attributes including, for example, the relative advantage and benefits offered by the technological means of service delivery, its complexity or ease of access and use (and how this is perceived), and its technical or performance reliability.

This paper focuses on implications of the findings of our research to date for customer service and relationship management, and proposes an agenda for further research.

2. Technology-enabled Services – The Customer Perspective

Not all customers necessarily expect, feel able to use and/or are comfortable with technology-enabled services (Parasuraman, 2000, Mick and Fournier, 1998; Cowles

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