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# Antecedents of Commitment and Trust in Customer–Supplier Relationships in High Technology Markets

Ko de Ruyter  
Luci Moorman  
Jos Lemmink

*The level of complexity and inherent perceived risk involved in customer relationships in high-technology markets leads to an intricate interplay of factors determining commitment and trust that in turn affect customer intentions to remain in the relationship. In this article, we develop a model in which aspects*

*of the product, relationship management activities, and market variables are discerned and taken into account simultaneously as antecedents of trust, commitment, and intention to stay. The results from a qualitative and a quantitative study provide evidence for the influence of types of antecedents of trust, commitment, and intention to stay in supplier–customer relationships in high-technology markets relationships. It is shown that particularly affective commitment plays an important role in these relationships* © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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Address correspondence to Dr. K. de Ruyter, Maastricht University, Department of Marketing and Marketing Research, P.O. Box 616, NL-6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands.

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## INTRODUCTION

Firms operating in high-technology markets must face the demanding challenges of environmental complexity. The complex nature and volatility of high-technology markets create uncertainty and contribute to perceived risk both on the supply and the demand side [1]. Suppliers of high-tech products must cope with the technological skepticism frequently exhibited by buyers who delay or postpone their purchase of the product [2] as well as obsolescence and the threat of competing technologies [3, 4]. Alternatively, buyers in this market often face switching costs resulting from the fact that they have made commitments to a certain technology or a particular vendor [5–7]. As the number of players in high-technology markets is frequently limited, switching barriers as well as interdependence are relatively high [2]. Many buyers are developing single source suppliers [6], and many suppliers are striving for closer ties with their customers [8]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated frequently that in addition to the high-tech product, both sales person expertise and after-sales support and service and communication effectiveness are essential ingredients for supplier success in high-technology markets [9–12]. Extensive contract negotiations and regular maintenance requirements lead to an atmosphere of multiple interactions between individual buyers and sellers in which communication and cooperation play an important role [13]. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “multiheaded customer and seller” [14].

The level of complexity and inherent perceived risk involved in relationships with customers forces suppliers of high-technology products to allocate investments among various available assets. In addition to product and after-sales service quality, relationship investments have to be made with regards to such matters as account support, conflict regulation mechanisms and increasing switching costs for customers [15]. Apart from monetary returns on

investment, a number of nonmonetary returns have been identified in the relationship marketing literature [6]. Particularly, commitment and trust frequently have been identified as essential “relationship building blocks” [16–23]. Both variables have been successfully used as indicators of relational continuity.

However, whereas ample and well-supported models have been developed for identifying relationship success or failure in business relations, empirical knowledge of relationships between firms operating in the environment of the high-technology market has remained relatively scarce [7]. It is not clear how market-, relationship-, and product-related variables influence buyer–seller relationships in terms of commitment, trust, and the intention to continue the relationship in the future. In this article, therefore, we develop and empirically test a model that integrates variables from the environment of high-technology markets with the relationship variables of commitment, trust, and relational continuity.

This article is structured as follows. First, we review the relationship marketing literature with regard to the variables incorporated in our model and discuss their interrelationships. Subsequently, we will report on the results of a study that was conducted to empirically test our model. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications and directions for future research.

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BLOCKS: COMMITMENT AND TRUST

The literature on relationship marketing reports extensively on trust and commitment (see e.g. [6, 18–25]). Trust has been conceptualized as the confidence that relationship partners have in the reliability and integrity of each other [21, 24]. Commitment refers to the motivation to stay with a supplier [23] or, as Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande [19] state, to an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship. Kumar, Hibbard, and Stern [22] distinguish two different types of commitment, that is, affective and calculative commitment. Affective commitment expresses the extent to which customers like to maintain their relationship with their supplier. Affective commitment is based on a general positive feeling towards the exchange partner [26]. Calculative commitment, a negatively oriented type of motivation, refers to a firm’s motivation to continue the relationship because it cannot easily replace its current partner and because it cannot obtain the same resources and outcomes outside

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KO DE RUYTER is associate professor of marketing and marketing research and director of MAXX, the Maastricht Academic Center for Research in Services.

LUCI MOORMAN is a research associate with Maastricht University, The Netherlands.

JOS LEMMINK is professor of marketing and marketing research at Maastricht University, The Netherlands.

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