



NORTH-HOLLAND

The Concept Of Satisfaction in Industrial Markets: A Contextual Perspective and a Case Study from the Software Industry

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The starting point for this study was the obvious “mis-match” between the dominating, consumer marketing-oriented way of approaching customer satisfaction on the one hand and

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our current understanding of industrial buyer–seller relationships and networks on the other. The purpose of this paper is to present a relational and contextual perspective on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in industrial markets. To illustrate the usefulness of the perspective, this paper presents a case study on the emergence of dissatisfaction in a buyer–

Understanding satisfaction in industrial markets.

seller relationship within its network context in the software industry. On the basis of the three-level framework highlighted in this paper, i.e., the inner context of a buyer–seller relationship, the connected network of a buyer–seller relationship, and the outer context of the connected network, it is argued that it is possible to develop a richer understanding of the emergence of satisfaction in industrial markets. ©2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved

INTRODUCTION

Consumer satisfaction is one of the core areas of interest in marketing in the academic world and practice [1–4]. Some evidence has been presented regarding a link between customer satisfaction, customer relationship continuity, and the performance of the firm [5–7]. Different approaches to the measurement of customer satisfaction developed in consumer research [1] have had a strong effect on quality models developed in services marketing research and in various TQM approaches, as well as on the discussion of customer satisfaction in industrial marketing [8–12].

The recent emergence of relationalism or “relationship marketing” as a core philosophy of marketing has gradually shifted the emphasis from transactions to long-term relationships in both academic research and managerial practice [13–15]. A large amount of research has been

conducted concerning interorganizational business relationships and networks. The earliest research concentrated mostly on understanding the nature of dyadic relationships based on the seminal observation that both customer and supplier are active [16]. In the next phase, the focus changed to understanding the dynamic development of dyadic relationships [17, 18].

One of the main conclusions of the Europe-based International/Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group studies is that a dyadic relationship has to be studied in the context of a larger set of interfirm relationships which form the business context of the focal dyad. This network perspective has recently attracted considerable interest among business marketing researchers [19–21].

However, the relational orientation also calls for a more complete understanding of satisfaction. The relationship perspective emphasizes the mutual nature of satisfaction (c.f. the concept of buyer–seller customer satisfaction in Emerson and Grimm [22]). Thus, the satisfaction of both business parties can be seen as a cohesive factor or force in the development of buyer–seller relationships. Within long-term business relationships, a repeated purchase situation is usually, at the same time, a pre-purchase situation. For instance, the customer will not repeat his purchase if his expectations have not been fulfilled [23]. Furthermore, high customer satisfaction often also creates bonding and commitment between interacting parties, which inevitably increases customer retention [24, 25].

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to present a relational and contextual perspective on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in industrial markets. Taken in general terms, context is understood as something we need to know about in order to properly understand structure, action, and process. It functions as the background, environment, setting, circumstances,

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