



Building customer commitment in business-to-business markets

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to propose and empirically test a customer commitment model in a business-to-business (B2B) market. Specifically, this research investigates the development and role of dependence and trust in relationship management from the customer's perspective and their impact on commitment. Based on the social exchange theory, we argue that relationship maintenance should not only include economic constraint-based relationships, which are derived from dependence, but also dedication-based relationships, which are derived from trust. As such, this research proposes that dependence and trust are mediators by which to understand the complicated relationship between buyers and sellers. A survey study conducted with 522 firms in the timber distribution industry revealed that customer relationship specific investment, social bonding, relationship termination costs and customer expertise have effects on calculative and affective commitments via dependence and trust. It also shows that interaction satisfaction strengthens the positive effect of dependence on calculative commitment and the positive effect of trust on affective commitment. This research contributes to the relationship marketing literature by building a customer commitment model in B2B markets and also offers managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

In mature business-to-business (B2B) markets, relationship maintenance is very important if firms want to increase their market share and profits. Firms have to satisfy customers in each interaction, thereby building stable long-term relationships and preventing customers from switching. However, prior relationship marketing research has focused on evaluating the value of relationship marketing from the seller's perspective, instead of the buyer's perspective (Barnes, 1997; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Barnes (1997) indicated that no relationship exists between a buyer and seller unless the buyer perceives that a relationship exists. Therefore, our research aims to understand, from a buyer's point of view, why buyers want to maintain relationships with sellers and as such, the findings will help marketers to build customer commitment.

Previous studies have focused on developing constraint-based relationships (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1990). For instance, from the economic perspective, suppliers use high switching costs to lock in customers because customers pursue a minimization in costs (Zauberan, 2003). However, prior research neglected to consider the active role of the customer in the relationship development, which results in dedication-based relationships (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Ganesan, 1994). Thus, on the basis of the social exchange theory, we emphasize that dedication-based relationships are derived from trust. Customers are willing to sacrifice short-term benefits in order to maintain long-term relationships and such relationships are actively initiated by the customers (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Customer dependence on and trust in the seller are important constructs in relationship marketing and can enhance transaction relationships (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). This research takes into consideration economic and affective perspectives and proposes that dependence and trust are mediators that underlie the complicated relationships between customers and suppliers.

Commitment refers to the requirement for long-term relationship maintenance (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996) and can be considered an outcome of the relationship maintenance (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; To & Li, 2005). This research includes

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calculative and affective commitments (CC and AC, respectively) as outcome variables in the relationship maintenance model. Although prior studies have examined the effects of dependence and trust on commitment in B2B marketing settings (e.g., [Wetzels, Ruyter, & Birgelen, 1998](#)), the impact of customer variables on commitment have not been widely considered and empirically tested ([Bendapudi & Berry, 1997](#)). Thus, customer variables, customer relationship specific investment (CRSI), social bonding, relationship termination costs (RTCs), and customer expertise, are tested as antecedents to dependence and trust in the model.

Maintaining relationship is a dynamic and continuous process, so interaction factors should play an important role in this process. The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group indicates that in industrial markets the buyer–seller relationship is influenced by the interaction process ([Giannakis, Croom, & Slack, 2004](#)). Since interactions are critical in building relationships, the impact of interaction factors, such as interaction satisfaction on commitment still needs more investigation ([Bendapudi & Berry, 1997](#)). Prior studies have indicated that interaction satisfaction from the interaction process leads to commitment ([Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996](#)) and that routines of interaction enhance security and expectations of continuity of the cooperation ([Anderson & Tuusjärvi, 2000](#)). However, few studies have considered possible moderating effects of interaction factors on the relationship between dependence, trust, and commitment. Thus, this research also aims to fill this gap.

The purpose of this research is to build a customer commitment model and examine the mediating role of dependence and trust in relationship maintenance. We also attempt to explore the possible moderating effects of interaction satisfaction on the development of commitment. This research will contribute to the relationship marketing literature in several aspects. First, although prior research has documented the relationships among dependence, trust, and CC and AC, few studies have investigated the impact of customer variables on the relationship maintenance from a customer's point-of-view. As such, this research demonstrates how customer variables influence the building of commitments. Second, it empirically tested the theoretical customer commitment model on the basis of two pathways: constraint-based and dedication-based relationships. Third, it identified the mediating role of dependence and trust in the effects of customer variables on commitments. Finally, it showed that interaction satisfaction enhances positive effects of dependence and trust on commitments.

2. Theoretical background and research framework

2.1. Constraint-based versus dedication-based relationship maintenance

[Bendapudi and Berry \(1997\)](#) proposed two customer motivations for maintaining relationships with firms: 1. Customers are motivated to maintain relationships after analyzing possible gains and losses because they want to reduce perceived risks of switching firms. This is called constraint-based relationship maintenance. 2. Customers are motivated to maintain relationships because of their desire to continue the relationship. This is called dedication-based relationship maintenance ([Gilliland & Bello, 2002](#)). The former indicates that customers “have to” maintain relationships with the supplier whereas the latter indicates that customers genuinely “want to” maintain relationships with the supplier ([Bendapudi & Berry, 1997](#)). In relationship marketing, dependence is considered to be a constraint motivation ([Anderson & Weitz, 1992](#)) and trust is considered to be a dedication motivation ([Doney & Cannon, 1997](#)).

In the constraint-based relationship, from an economic perspective, in order to acquire essential resources, firms rely on suppliers to offer resources and, thus, become relationship partners.

Dependence arises from the motivation for which firms exchange with other firms that control essential and limited resources ([To & Li, 2005](#)). Dependence is defined separately from interdependence. Interdependence is defined as a dyadic relationship between relationship partners, encompassing each firm's dependence on a partner ([Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995](#)). Dependence is defined as a firm's need to maintain a relationship with a partner in order to achieve its goals ([Kumar et al., 1995](#)). That is, interdependence focuses two-way directions in regard to the partners' dependence upon each other whereas dependence only considers a one-way direction in the relationship (e.g., a buyer's dependence upon a supplier). Our research focuses on the latter construct. This study examines the timber industry in Taiwan, for which suppliers have extensive leverage in price negotiations and resource control as the resources are scarce. Asymmetric interdependence exists between buyers and suppliers in this industry, which creates a buyer's dependence on the supplier ([Heide & John, 1988](#)). Thus, this study focuses on the issues from the customer's perspective and examines on the customer's dependence on the supplier, instead of the interdependence between the customers and suppliers.

On the other hand, this study examines dedication-based relationship maintenance from the social exchange perspective. Recently, the social exchange theory has been widely applied to marketing studies (e.g., [Luo, 2002](#)). The social exchange theory proposes cooperation and mutual reciprocity and is suitable to be used when attempting to understand relationships with customers ([Metcalfe, Frear, & Krishnan, 1992](#)). Social exchange refers to the interpersonal relationships that exist between buyers and sellers ([Metcalfe et al., 1992](#)) and emphasizes the relationship derived from close social interactions, such as additional effort and investment, which result in long-term commitments. Relationship commitment can be considered to be a relationship output ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)), which is the core component of the social exchange theory ([Thibaut & Kelly, 1959](#)). According to [Blau \(1964\)](#), individuals do not engage in social exchange primarily for direct and immediate compensation, but for some anticipated future return for contributions.

In addition, [Barnes \(1997\)](#) indicated that the buyer–seller relationship does not exist unless buyers perceive the relationship to exist. Such a proposition suggests the importance of examining the relationship maintenance from a buyer's perspective. Thus, based on the economic and social exchange perspectives, we examined how customer variables influence commitments via constraint and dedication motivations. The customer variables include two relationship-based variables (CRSI, and social bonding) and two nonrelationship-based variables (RTCs and customer expertise). Only a selection of the variables was chosen. CRSI, social bonding and RTCs are key variables that influence relationship maintenance ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)), whereas customer expertise is an important variable that impacts consumer decision-making ([Alba & Hutchinson, 1987](#)). The consequences of the motivations for relationship maintenance are separated into two commitments: AC and CC.

2.2. Customer variables

2.2.1. CRSI

CRSI refers to a customer's perception of a specific relationship investment made by a supplier. The investment includes time, resources and affect in personal relationships that are made by the supplier in order to maintain relationships and make a customer not easily exit the relationship ([Bendapudi & Berry, 1997](#); [Jones, Mothersbaugh, & Beatty, 2000](#)). It differs from the general investment in that the former states that a customer perceives that the resources and time that the supplier put into the relationship in order

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