

The antecedents of client loyalty in business-to-business (B2B) electronic marketplaces



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 January 2013

Accepted 19 January 2013

Available online 5 March 2013

Keywords:

Business-to-business e-marketplaces

E-service quality

E-loyalty

E-value

E-satisfaction

ABSTRACT

The globalization of economic activity and the emergence of the Internet have led to the appearance of a new model of business-to-business (B2B) known as the electronic B2B market or e-marketplace which facilitates the establishment of marketing relationships between buyers and sellers. In view of the limited research in this area, the present study examines the elements that may influence client (i.e., user) loyalty in this context. The basis of the study is an analysis of empirical data provided by 197 Spanish e-marketplace selling-side users, investigating the influence of image, quality, satisfaction, and value on client loyalty. The results indicated that satisfaction had no direct impact on client loyalty, but that the e-marketplace's image and user-perceived quality and value are antecedents of its clients' loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen increasing interest in establishing what are the marketing relationships between buyers and sellers in the business-to-business (B2B) area. In these relationships, a major role is being played by the new information and communications technologies. In particular, the dramatic growth in firms' use of the Internet for business transactions has led to the emergence of what has come to be known as B2B e-commerce, and a new business model known as business-to-business marketplaces (or simply e-marketplaces) in which many buying and selling firms access a given Web site or platform to transact their business.

For these new channels to be viable, customers must perceive them as effective and efficient (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005). For this reason, issues related to client loyalty and the factors that affect it take on a particular relevance.

Recently, numerous studies have been published which analyze the antecedents of client loyalty in the field of e-commerce between businesses and consumers, B2C (Akinci, Atilgan-Inan, & Aksoy, 2010; Caruana & Ewing, 2010; Ding, Hu, & Sheng, 2011). Despite the importance of this theme, however, there have been relatively few studies conceptualizing and investigating the antecedents of client loyalty in

the relationships between firms (B2B), whether in a traditional (Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004; Oliver, 1999; Sirdeshmukh, Sigh, & Sabol, 2002) or in an electronic B2B environment. Indeed, for the case of e-marketplaces our review of the literature found no article dealing with this question. One of the aims of the present study was therefore to help fill this gap in research.

We believe that client loyalty is crucial to a firm's survival, especially in the context of e-commerce. This loyalty is not achieved simply with technology, but also requires improving the customer's experience. Although Internet brings relationships with customers closer, the basic laws and rewards of building customer relationships have not changed. What has changed is the place where these rules hold and the speed with which firms must improve their products and services if they want to attain and maintain client loyalty (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000).

Since acquiring a customer through the Web is expensive, and competition is just a click away, loyalty in electronic environments, known as e-loyalty, becomes essential both economically and competitively (Semeijn, Van Riel, Van Birgelen, & Streukens, 2005). Firms must therefore strive to be the best to continually satisfy their customers and establish long-term relationships with them (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

In order to help attain such long-term relationships between the e-marketplace and its users, an objective of the present study was to test empirically a model in which image, perceived quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction are defined as antecedents of client loyalty. In particular, we seek to understand how the perceived quality of the service provided by the e-marketplace influences perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty. The other objectives were to examine the

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importance of the e-marketplace's image on the customer's perceived quality, satisfaction, and loyalty, to determine the influence of value on customer satisfaction and loyalty, and to clarify the relationships between customer satisfaction and loyalty to the B2B e-marketplace.

The rest of this communication is organized as follows. In Section 2, we review the literature on these variables, and present the main research hypotheses which we used to explore the principal antecedents of the construction of client loyalty. In Sections 3 and 4, we describe the design of the data collection and acquisition tool and the analysis of the data, respectively. The main results of the study are presented in Section 5, and discussed, together with the conclusions that can be drawn from them, in Section 6. Finally, Section 7 describes the implications of the research, its limitations, and future lines of research.

2. Literature review and conceptual definitions

This research, as mentioned above, was conducted in the context of electronic B2B markets or e-marketplaces. We shall define them as a form of doing business that uses Internet technology to bring together multiple vendor and customer firms at a single Web site or platform, that provides a variety of mechanisms enabling the parties to straightforwardly conduct their business transactions, that is led by a third party who is either neutral and unconnected to the exchange that is to take place, or one of the two parties involved (buyers or sellers), and that offers several value-added services that improve the relationships between buyers and sellers. E-marketplaces can be categorized as vertical or horizontal according to the product involved (Balocco, Perego, & Perotti, 2010; Barrat & Rosdahl, 2002; Ratnasingham, Gefen, & Pavlou, 2005). The former offer goods and services within specific industrial sectors, and the latter offer goods and services across various activity sectors. A second categorization is based on who owns the e-marketplace (Le, 2005), distinguishing between partial and impartial e-marketplaces (Kaplan & Sawhney, 2000; Ordanini & Pol, 2001; Turban, King, Lee, Warkentin, & Chung, 2002). The former are those created and directed by one of the parties involved, whether buyers or sellers, and the latter by an outside third party who is neutral and independent of the participating buyers and sellers.

In this research, it was our intention to determine how the relationships of an e-marketplace with its users can be improved, and thereby achieve the loyalty of its clients. In this sense, the study explored the role played by the constructs of image, perceived quality, value, and satisfaction in creating client loyalty. The conceptual model (Fig. 1) was constructed on the basis of proposals in the literature, mainly in the areas of B2C e-commerce and of non-virtual (i.e., traditional) B2B since, as was mentioned above, we could find no previous study on B2B e-commerce which presented an overall model containing all these variables. Each of the four constructs proposed as antecedents of client loyalty in Fig. 1 has been identified in previous research as a factor influencing such loyalty.² They will be discussed one by one below, together with the construct of loyalty itself.

2.1. Quality in the e-services offered by the e-marketplace

There have now been over two decades of research on quality in e-services, but only recently have these studies begun to consider the e-commerce environment. Indeed, we have to agree with Akinci et al. (2010) and Ding et al. (2011) that research on electronic service quality is at a preliminary stage both theoretically and empirically.

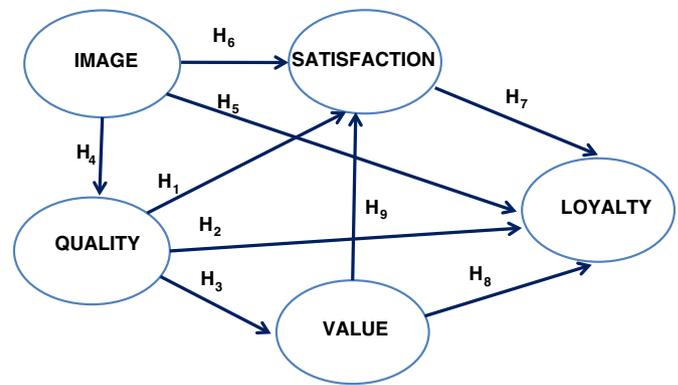


Fig. 1. Antecedents of client loyalty: image, quality, satisfaction, and value.

The first definition of e-service quality seems to be that of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2000, p.11), that it is: “the extent to which a Web site facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing, and delivery.”

Academic interest in the B2C field has been directed at measuring the quality of e-services, and at determining how the delivery of quality services influences consumer purchase intentions (Aladwani, 2006), the intention to use the service (Zhang & Prybutok, 2005), the consumer's attitude towards the site (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), trust in the online retailer (Gefen, 2002), results (Collier & Bienstock, 2006), perceived value (Hsu, 2008), consumer satisfaction (Kim & Stoel, 2004), online business success (Zeithaml, 2000), design and delivery in encounters with the service provider (Cho & Menor, 2010), and on-line site loyalty (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Thus, e-service quality becomes a key factor in differentiating the various services offered and in constructing a competitive advantage (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006; Hsu, 2008; Santos, 2003).

In the context of B2B e-commerce, however, there has been little research on the measurement of the quality of services or of its relationship with other dimensions. The existing studies have sought to identify the factors involved in the success of the Web site (Chakraborty, Srivastava, & Warren, 2005), how a firm's employees perceive the quality of the service (Lai, 2006), the relationship between service quality and satisfaction (Vaidyanathan & Devaraj, 2008), and the differences in the perceptions of service quality between B2C and B2B environments (Stiakakis & Georgiadis, 2009).

A review of the literature on e-service quality showed us that researchers are unanimous that e-service quality is a multidimensional variable (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006; Kim & Stoel, 2004). The critical question that thus arises is which are the most important dimensions for assessing service quality in e-commerce.

Using the principal databases (EBSCOhost, Emerald, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect), we retrieved 96 articles dating from 1997, the year in which the first articles on the topic were published. Despite the lack of unanimity in the different models that these articles presented, we found many similarities among the elements they considered to be relevant for the measurement of e-service quality. Thus, Zeithaml et al. (2000) state that consumers basically use similar dimensions when evaluating e-service quality in accordance with the type of product or service that is being evaluated on the Internet.

Our review showed that most researchers consider the dimensions efficiency, security and privacy, communication, reliability, and information as components of e-service quality. To these we shall add a sixth dimension which we denote value-added services, considered in research on e-marketplaces as constituting differentiating elements that help an organization achieve a competitive advantage (Ordanini & Pol, 2001). These are principally services that complete the common transactions of the e-marketplace. They include financial, logistic, and

² Although the relationships in our model (Fig. 1) have been tested in B2C environment, to the best of our knowledge is the first time this model is used in electronic B2B, so all the hypotheses are new in this context. This is the main contribution of our paper.

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