



Antecedents and consequences of commitment in marketing research services: The client's perspective

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ABSTRACT

Commitment is one of the most frequently studied variables in business-to-business relationships and several researchers propose it is the main antecedent of customer loyalty. However, while marketing relationships researchers agree on the importance of the construct, differences remain in its conceptualization and operationalization. This study examines commitment from the customer's perspective, consisting of three components: calculative, affective and normative. Relationships were tested between the three dimensions of commitment and social bonds, trust and satisfaction in the context of professional business services providers and their clients. The results of the model that was tested in Central and Eastern European companies show that affective commitment is the only one of the three components that significantly influences customer loyalty. Trust and social bonds have no significant relation either to normative or to calculative commitment while a relation of overall satisfaction with normative and calculative commitment is negative. The theoretical and managerial implications for the model to assist in the development of appropriate strategies to achieve affective commitment and loyalty in business relationships are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Many researchers have found commitment to be the key component of establishing and maintaining long-term relationships between business partners (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment reveals the importance of the relationship with the partners and their intention to continue the relationship in the future (Wilson, 1995). It has become one of the most frequently studied variables in studies of buyer–seller marketing relationships in business-to-business markets (Gilliland & Bello, 2002; Kim & Frazier, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995). While researchers of business-to-business relationships agree on the importance of this construct, differences exist in its conceptualization and operationalization (Gilliland & Bello, 2002; Kelly, 2004; Kim & Frazier, 1997; Sharma, Young, & Wilkinson, 2006). The majority of researchers have studied commitment as a global construct that measures the intention to continue the relationship. However, in the last 10 years there have been some attempts to transfer findings from organizational psychology and study commitment as consisting of

three components (affective, calculative and normative) that reflect different motivations for continuing the relationship. Kelly (2004) argued that the operationalization of commitment as a three-component structure will contribute to enhancing the sensitivity of our research instruments and consequently to our understanding of the associations identified between the components of commitment, structural and social bonding mechanisms and outcomes. Kelly (2004) also pointed out that the fact that many authors in the past used a global rather than a multi-attribute measure of commitment may have led to certain associations between commitment and other variables in relationships between business partners not being confirmed.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge on customer commitment in the professional service sector in business-to-business markets from the customer's perspective. The aim is to examine commitment not as a global measure but as a multi-attribute measure. Past studies on commitment have primarily focused on affective and calculative commitment and generally not incorporated normative commitment in their analysis (with a few exceptions, e.g., Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004; De Ruyter & Semeijn, 2002; Kumar, Hibbard & Stern, 1994). Even less work has studied all components of commitment in the context of professional business service providers. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies in the development and testing of a model that includes all three components of commitment in a professional business services sector, and especially in the development and testing of additional theoretical

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linkages between the antecedents of commitment and the normative component of commitment. A thorough review of studies on commitment reveals a need to test the linkages of the different components of commitment with trust, social bonds and satisfaction. Although these variables have often been used in marketing relationship research, except for trust, not much is known about their relationships with the different components of commitment. Based on the findings from the literature, a conceptual model was built that includes trust, satisfaction and social bonds positioned as antecedents of affective, calculative and normative commitment, with a proposed positive influence of trust, satisfaction and social bonds on affective and normative commitment, negative influence of trust and satisfaction on calculative commitment and no influence of social bonds on calculative commitment. Loyalty is the consequence of the three components with a proposed positive influence of affective and normative and negative influence of calculative commitment. Based on the findings from organizational psychology and consumer services we also propose a link between affective and normative commitment, with normative commitment being a partial mediating variable between affective commitment and loyalty.

The context of this study is the marketing research industry. This context was chosen because it provides a good representation of a specialized professional service industry (Boughton, Nowak & Washburn, 1996). The importance of commitment for professional business services in the context of marketing research follows from researcher and client interactions where clients are actively involved in the marketing research process. Malhotra and Birks (2006) discuss decision-makers and researcher interactions that can be described by the following: communication (free exchange of ideas), cooperation, confidence (or mutual trust), candor (attitude of openness), closeness and continuity of the relationship. Marketing research services generally provide information on customers, competitors and business environments to decision-makers in client companies. Increasingly, research is being done on an ongoing basis rather than on an ad hoc basis (Malhotra & Birks, 2006). The marketing research industry has traditionally operated in a transaction mode, but it is ever more trying to establish collaborative relationships with customers (Boughton et al., 1996).

This article is structured as follows: based on a literature review a conceptual framework of the antecedents and consequences of commitment is presented and separate hypotheses for specific components of commitment are developed. This is followed by exploratory research into commitment along with the development of measurement. The analysis of the data, including a measurement model and a structural model, is followed by theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual framework and development of the hypotheses

Based on the literature review a conceptual model was built that includes trust, satisfaction, social bonds, three components of

commitment (affective, calculative and normative) and loyalty. First the conceptual definitions of these constructs are presented, followed by the hypotheses that were developed on the basis of the extensive literature review. The proposed relationships are shown in Fig. 1.

Commitment has been defined as ‘an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners’ (Dwyer et al., 1987, p. 19). Moorman Zaltman and Deshpandé (1992, p. 316) defined it as ‘an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship’. It implies a willingness on the part of both partners to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits in the relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Common to the different definitions of commitment is that commitment is characterized by a disincentive to replace relationship partners (Young & Denize, 1995). Most researchers in marketing have conceptualized and operationalized commitment as a global construct. However, researchers observing relationships in organizational psychology have pointed out three distinct motivations underlying the desire for continuity (Allen & Meyer, 1990) and during the last decade there have been some attempts to transfer these findings to marketing relationships (e.g., Bansal et al., 2004; Geyskens et al., 1996; Gilliland & Bello, 2002; Kumar et al., 1994). The three components of commitment that are (to some extent or completely) included in these models are: *affective* (attachment due to liking and identification), *calculative* or *continuance* (attachment due to instrumental reasons) and *moral* or *normative* (attachment due to felt obligations).

All these components of commitment pertain to psychological states, yet they originate from different motivations for maintaining a relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996). Affective commitment means that firms want to stay in the relationship because they like their partner, enjoy the partnership and feel a sense of loyalty and belongingness. On the other hand, calculative commitment is the extent to which partners perceive the need to maintain a relationship due to the significant anticipated switching costs or lack of alternatives. Normative commitment means that partners stay in the relationships because they feel they ought to (Geyskens et al., 1996; Kumar et al., 1994).

Trust is an essential relationship model-building block and has often been defined as a belief that one relationship partner will act in the best interest of the other (Wilson 1995). Based on a meta-analysis of studies about trust, Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar (1998, p. 225) pointed out that most studies in marketing build on interpersonal research and define trust as ‘the extent to which a firm believes that its exchange partner is honest and/or benevolent’ or some variant thereof. This study adopts the definition of Moorman et al. (1992) who studied trust in relationships between suppliers and buyers of marketing research services. According to Moorman et al. (1992, p. 82), trust is ‘a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence/confidence’. An important aspect of their definition is the concept of trust as a belief, feeling or expectation about an exchange partner which can be judged from the partner's expertise, reliability and intentions. Moorman et al.'s (1992) definition, similar to

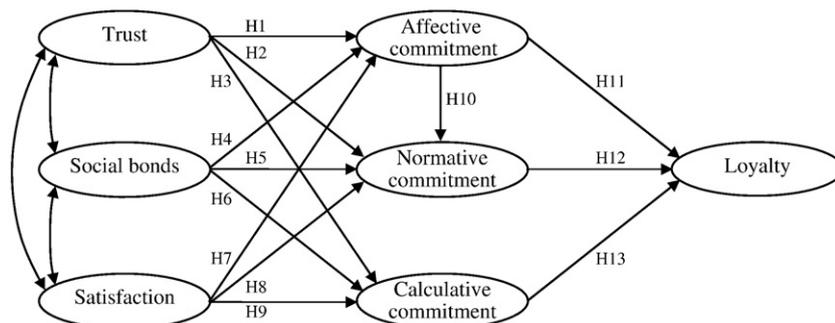


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual model of commitment in professional service relationships in the business-to-business market.

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