

# Relationship Marketing in 2015: A Delphi Approach

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Over the past twenty years, relationship marketing has represented a renaissance in marketing and even a paradigmatic change according to some. The shift has had uncertain effects, however, and its applications have faced some serious challenges. Questions are being asked about the future of relationship marketing by both academics and businesspersons. To answer these questions, we have devised a Delphi-type predictive survey of twelve European marketing experts, with the aim of producing one view of potential changes that may occur by the year 2015. The present paper categorises this view into four major themes. It also details the managerial implications of one of the themes based on the following key points: “the experience at the heart of relational approaches”; “new data generation”; and “working together with communities”.

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## Introduction

Relationship marketing or RM, the loosest and broadest definition of which is the sum total of marketing approaches focusing on the relationship between a business, its customers and its different stakeholders, came to the forefront of the marketing scene two decades ago. Several years later, RM had to share the spotlight with CRM, Customer Relationship Management, which is “the outcome of the continuing evolution and integration of marketing ideas and newly available data, technologies and organizations forms” (Boulding *et al.*, 2005, p. 156). The advent of RM approaches marks a considerable

change in the way marketing is considered and implemented. This change is still ongoing, however, with many managers questioning the future of these approaches. To apprehend an outline of RM’s future, we have set up a research programme revolving around the Delphi method. In the present article, we begin by detailing our research process before going on to summarize our main findings as regards RM representations in the year 2015. We finish with a discussion of three key points that are highly relevant to future management.

## Unanswered Questions

“In the two last decades, practitioners and academics have focused increasingly on how firms relate to their markets. This has resulted in the emergence of a sub-discipline of marketing referred to as relationship marketing” (Brodie *et al.*, 2003, p. 5). Although it can be claimed that in some (and possibly many) cases relationship marketing has been nothing more than a terminological innovation that Berry introduced (1983) to describe a long-established and well-known practice (Palmer, 2002), it is undeniable that over the past 20 years, “RM was probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management” (Egan, 2003, p. 145). Based on Berry’s idea (1983) and related academic work (Hakansson, 1982), the notion of building relationships was expanded during the 1980’s to encompass different areas, including industrial buyer-seller relationships (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). During the 1990’s, other analysts adopted the idea of building relationships (Boulding *et al.*, 2005) and turned it into a managerial practice, i.e. relationship marketing. Today, however, the results of the rise of relationship

marketing are mixed: no single approach has been adopted and the risks are high that a schism will take place (Coviello *et al.*, 1997; Egan, 2003). Many businesses have adopted relationship marketing without paying attention to the way they generate value for the customer (Ballantyne, 2004a,b), to customers' wishes (Fournier *et al.*, 1998) or to the contingencies of different consumption situations (Grönroos, 2004). The question of the relationships' return on investment (or the return on relationship [ROR]) remains unclear (Gummesson, 2004), as does the measurement of the value created with and for the customer (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2003). More generally, relationship marketing appears to have suffered from IT investments that are often disproportionate to the aims of the relational approach (Hetzl, 2004).

Today, relationship marketing is one of the most widely debated practices in marketing, as witnessed by the number of special issues of academic and business magazines devoted to this topic. At the same time, it is one of the more controversial subjects, one whose future is harder to predict than any other. Articles on this topic have appeared in recent special issues published by the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (Pathways Less Travelled To Value Creation*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2004, which followed the 2nd WWW Conference on Relationship Marketing) and by the magazine *Marketing Theory (Relationship Marketing*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2003, which followed the 10th International Colloquium in Relationship Marketing). Note also the first issue of the new *Journal of Relationship Marketing* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2002). What we are witnessing is the fact that many leading authors in this sub-discipline have started to express doubts, raise questions and throw up challenges for the future. The titles of many articles indicate that there is hope for a better future for relationship marketing, provided that "pathways less travelled" are used (Ballantyne, 2004a); the "dialogue" becomes real (Grönroos, 2004); and "divergence" dies down (Egan, 2003). In view of the very slight optimism about the future of relationship marketing and the much heralded desire of businesses to recoup something from the investments they have made in this area (Rigby *et al.*, 2002), it appears crucial from both an academic and a managerial perspective that we be able to devise a general profile encompassing relationship marketing's medium-term outlook, possibilities and challenges. Hence our development of a research programme designed to "Foresee relationship marketing in the year 2015".

To produce a broad, scientific but non-journalistic outline of relationship marketing in 2015, we have designed a research programme consisting of several phases, each of which included strict, non-intuitive choices. This design is grounded in a Delphi method and follows in the wake of a recent survey on supply management strategies for the future (Ogden *et al.*, 2005). It was deliberately designed as a European project, both to transcend national representations

and also to structure a specifically European vision of relationship marketing. By resorting to the Delphi method in this study, we are providing a framework for communications between participants who despite coming from different professional and cultural circles are all focused on what is a hotly debated marketing topic. It was important to work with a group of partners that was not only heterogeneous but geographically diffuse. The research began in mid-2004 and ended in early 2006.

## A Delphi Approach

The Delphi method was first developed for the field of technological forecasting, in the US, in the early 1960's by Norman Dalkey (Rand Corporation) and Olaf Helmer (Institute for the Future). Today, it is considered a useful method for eliciting and aggregating expert opinion whenever there is a lack of viable or practical statistical techniques (Armstrong, 2001, 2006). It can be defined as a medium-term qualitative forecasting method that is based on building a consensus amongst a group of experts. In marketing, the Delphi method is mainly used to identify product attributes (Ray *et al.*, 2004; Huang and Lin, 2005) or to choose the criteria underlying consumer acceptability of an innovative product (Padel and Midmore, 2005; Verleye and de Marez, 2005). A Delphi type-study enables an exchange of information amongst anonymous experts (no expert knows which other experts are going to be consulted) over a number of rounds (iterations) and allows experts to react to the information gathered during each round and to fine-tune their forecast by means of a feedback mechanism (controlled retroaction). Beyond these three main principles (anonymity – iteration – retroaction), the method's validity is firstly based on a rigorous selection of experts whose combined knowledge and expertise must reflect the full scope of the problem area. Some have suggested asking the persons involved to estimate their own degree of expertise, with others considering that the level of expertise does not necessarily need to be high (Rowe and Wright, 2001). Delphi's validity is also dependent on the size of the group of experts (Vernette, 1997). It appears that the minimum threshold is 5–7 experts, and that a range of 8–10 offers the best precision/cost ratio. Beyond 12 experts, information contributions are marginal. Finally the method's validity relies on a strict implementation of process: three iterations are usually needed to obtain a satisfactory consensus.

In our first study phase, we drew up a list of the most suitable European experts. Our aim was to mix academics, consultants and even practitioners from many different European countries. We eschewed published papers towards this end, because we wanted to avoid any restrictions on our experts' diversity. Instead, we focused on the individual's

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