



ARTICLE

Proposal of a social alliance success model from a relationship marketing perspective: A meta-analytical study of the theoretical foundations



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Abstract Partnerships between businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become widely adopted mechanisms for collaboration in addressing complex social issues, the aim being to take advantage of the two types of organizational rationale to generate mutual value. Many such alliances have proved to be unsuccessful, however. To assist managers improve the likelihood of success of their collaborative relationships, the authors propose a success model of business-NGO partnering processes based on Relationship Marketing Theory. They also analyse the theoretical bases of the model's hypotheses through a meta-analytical study of the existing literature.

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Introduction

Partnerships between businesses and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have grown substantially in the last two decades (Bennett et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2014). One reason is their enormous potential in addressing complex social problems, while, in turn, providing multiple benefits for the partners (Berger et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2008; Reed

and Reed, 2009; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a,b; Stadler, 2012; Sakarya et al., 2012; Schiller and Almog-Bar, 2013; Al-Tabbaa et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2014). Indeed, a study by the PrC/Partnerships Resource Centre (2011) finds the world's largest firms to have, on average, 18 ongoing cross-sector collaborations, most of them with NPOs. Their objectives are to contribute to solving social problems, to strengthen their position as market leaders, or, from sharing knowledge and know-how, to develop better products.

However, despite their importance, a large proportion of these partnership processes are unsuccessful (Galaskiewicz and Colman, 2006; Gutiérrez et al., 2012). This is due mainly to the many problems involved in their management

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(Kolk et al., 2010), such as mistrust, misunderstandings, or power imbalances between the partners (Berger et al., 2004; Selsky and Parker, 2005; Seitanidi and Ryan, 2007). In this sense, various researchers have consequently focused their analyses on the factors favouring the success of these processes during the different stages of their development, especially during their formation and initial implementation (Jamali and Keshishian, 2009; Le Ber and Branzei, 2010; Jamali et al., 2011; Seitanidi et al., 2010; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b; McDonald and Young, 2012). However, to date, the number of explanatory theoretical frameworks for success in partnerships, constructed from different perspectives, has been very limited (with exceptions such as Seitanidi and Crane, 2009; Clarke and Fuller, 2010; Seitanidi, 2010; Murphy and Arenas, 2010; Le Ber and Branzei, 2010; Venn, 2012; Sanzo et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2014). This scarcity in the literature is even more evident on those success models developed under one Relationship Marketing approach (Sanzo et al., 2014), theoretical perspective which is considered well-suited to this purpose since it has been widely used in the design of models of success in strategic contexts (Hunt et al., 2002; Arenas and García, 2006; Wittmann et al., 2009).

Since its inception, research in Relationship Marketing has worked on identifying and weighing the key constructs determining success in different partnership processes. However, a narrative review of the links between these constructs has showed a diversity of results (Palmatier et al., 2006), which has markedly limited the generalizability of the obtained conclusions (Camisón et al., 2002). There is thus a need to conduct meta-analyses which, by synthesizing the results of previous studies, can improve the scientific knowledge generated up to that time (Geyskens et al., 2009). There have as yet, however, been very few meta-analytical studies in the field of Relationship Marketing. Among the existing studies, it should be highlighted the work conducted by Palmatier et al. (2006), because of the amplitude of its scope, including a large number of links between different constructs. However, this study focuses on the specific ‘customer-seller’ context, with no reference therefore to the research context of the present work, i.e., ‘business-NGO’ relationships.

In this sense, the specific objectives of the present study were twofold: first, to cover the gap we had identified in research by proposing a model of success for partnership processes between firms and NGOs based on Relationship Marketing Theory, and second, given the divergence of results in the literature, to conduct a meta-analytical study of the theoretical support for the model’s hypotheses, which could then serve as a basis for future research. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section ‘A relational approach to business-NGO partnerships’ analyses alliances between firms and NGOs from a relational perspective, and, following a review of the literature in the domain of Relationship Marketing, presents a success model for such partnership processes. Section ‘Meta-analytical study of the proposed model’ describes the basic notions of meta-analytical techniques, and presents the main results of their use in this study. Finally, section ‘Conclusions and implications for management’ presents the main conclusions of the study, and discusses their implications for

management, the limitations of the study, and indications for future research.

A relational approach to business-NGO partnerships

Concept and evolution of Relationship Marketing

Because of its importance and differentiating features, the Relationship Marketing paradigm has received much attention in recent decades on the part of both academics and professionals.

The term ‘relationship marketing’ first appeared in 1983 in a book chapter published by Berry (Berry, 1995). In this chapter, Berry (1983, p. 25) defined it as ‘attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships’. Since then, numerous authors have proposed many alternative definitions of the term, being most of them collected in different research works. Among the existing studies, it should be highlighted the exhaustive work of Harker (1999), which identified 26 different definitions of the concept published up to that time. The conclusion of his study was that the most widely accepted definition of Relationship Marketing in the literature was that of Grönroos (1994): ‘Relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance and when necessary also to terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met, and that this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises’. Also, in order to update and improve the work of Harker (1999), Agariya and Singh (2011) identified 72 definitions of Relationship Marketing in the literature, covering a 28-year period (1982–2010). According to those authors, although the definitions identified in the literature differ slightly due to different contextual scenarios in which they had been put forward, the core of all of them revolved around the acquisition, the retention, the improvement of profitability, the long-term orientation, and the presence of a win-win situation for all of a firm’s stakeholders.

Thus, as can be gleaned from the various definitions of relationship marketing mentioned previously, numerous researchers have observed that the scope of relationship marketing should not be restricted to the maintenance of relationships between the firm and its customers but should also include the firm’s relationships with various other stakeholders. This extension to other actors is consistent with and strongly linked to the strategic approach of Stakeholder Marketing (Bhattacharya and Korschun, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2010; Smith et al., 2010; Mish and Scammon, 2010), which ‘looks beyond customers as the target of marketing activities and firms as the primary intended beneficiary’ (Bhattacharya and Korschun, 2008, p. 113). In consequence, firms need to design, implement, and evaluate its marketing strategy taking all of its stakeholders into account (Bhattacharya, 2010). Relationship Marketing is no stranger to this idea. In fact, it can be found in the literature on this field several contributions recognizing its various target stakeholder groups (Frow and Payne, 2011; see Table 1), with NGOs being one of them (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

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