

## Relationship marketing orientation: scale development and cross-cultural validation

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the conceptual and measurement issues related to the study of relationship marketing orientation (RMO). It first reviews the concept of RMO and its important components. It then reports on the construction and psychometric assessment of a measure of RMO. Six multiitem scales are developed showing strong evidence of reliability and validity in samples from firms in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Further analysis provides evidence supporting scale invariance across the two samples. The final section includes a discussion of the implications of the findings and directions for future research.

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### 1. Introduction

Relationship marketing, characterized by reciprocal, interdependent, committed, and long-term relationships between sellers and buyers, has dominated much of the managerial and academic discussions of the 1990s (Tuominen et al., 2000). During the past few years, several international seminars and special issues of journals have effectively created a worldwide forum for discussion on relationship marketing.

A relationship marketing orientation (RMO) has generally been assumed to create a competitive edge for an organization, and to have a positive impact on organizational performance. However, there is still much debate over exactly what constitutes a RMO or strategy. In fact, many scholars have claimed that the precise meaning of relationship marketing is not always clear in the literature (Blois, 1996; Lehtinen, 1996; Peterson, 1995). Nevin (1995) notes that the term has become a buzzword, with the concept being used to reflect a number of differing themes or

perspectives such as database marketing, electronic marketing, multilevel marketing, customer retention and partnering, and a business philosophy. Thus, a clarification and conceptualization of this construct is needed to ensure that our knowledge of relationship marketing grows in a 'cumulative' way.

Moreover, while there has been an increase in the attention paid to relationship marketing by practitioners and academics, to date no systematic attempt has been made to develop a valid measure of it, or to assess its influence on business performance. Many of the past studies on relationship marketing have been criticized as overly simplistic due to their use of a single component perspective (Callaghan et al., 1995). As a result, business practitioners seeking to implement a relationship marketing concept have had no specific guidance regarding precisely what a RMO is and what actual effect it has on business performance.

Given these problems, this paper reports on the development and validation of a set of multiitem scales for the measurement of the RMO using established procedures from the measurement development literature. We first provide a brief conceptual background for the development of the relationship marketing concept. We then set forth the

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hypothesized components of the RMO and follow this with a description of the procedures used to construct the subscales and assess their psychometric properties. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the research findings and directions for future research.

## 2. Background and previous research

### 2.1. Evolution of relationship marketing

Subtle changes in the concept and practice of business have been fundamentally reshaping the marketing discipline. According to Gruen (1997) and Grönroos (1989), the philosophy of business has shifted from a production orientation to a selling orientation, then to a marketing orientation, and finally to a RMO. RMO suggests that the traditional short-term transaction-oriented exchange research has to be replaced with research into long-term buyer–seller relationships.

The services marketing literature was one of the first areas in which relationship marketing research had its start. The service marketing tradition pays particular attention to the relationship between the individual consumer and service company personnel (Möller and Halinen, 2000), and questions the applicability of traditional marketing to a service context. Services researchers argue that consumer satisfaction with a service is primarily the outcome of an interaction relationship between service personnel and the consumer (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993; Grönroos, 1990) and therefore service organizations should develop long-term relationships with their customers (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1991; Gummesson, 1987) in order to acquire and maintain a competitive edge.

In the personal selling literature, the term “relationship selling” was used in most cases to describe relationship marketing (Chonko and Tanner, 1990; Crosby et al., 1990). It has been argued that both the salesperson and the customer find long-term relationships beneficial (Bejou, 1994).

The marketing channels literature, examining the shift from understanding marketing exchange as a transactional phenomenon to viewing it as an on-going relationship, frequently posed the following questions: What forms of governance are efficient for specific types of channel relationships? In what way is the dyadic relationship contingent on the larger channel context? How are the key constructs like cooperation, trust, communication, and conflicts manifested and related to each other?

Another contribution to the development of research on relationship marketing is the focus on the interaction and network approaches in the business marketing literature. The interaction approach conceptualizes buyer–seller interactions as dyadic interactions at both the firm and individual levels with the interaction influenced by atmosphere, a multidimensional construct involving power/dependence,

trust, mutual goals, commitment, satisfaction, and adaptation (Ford, 1984; Wilson, 1995; Grönroos, 1990; Håkansson, 1982). The network approach differs from the interaction approach by extending dyadic relationships to network relationships with customers, distributors, suppliers, and other organizations that may have an interest in the firm’s business (Easton, 1995, Anderson et al., 1994).

Another significant contribution to relationship marketing comes from the research on *guanxi* in the marketing literature on China. The word *guanxi* has the same meaning as “relationship” in English. *Guanxi* literally means the social relationship between two persons under a particular bonding, which refers to Confucius’ five cardinal bonds (*wu lun*), including the bonds between sovereign and minister, father and son, husband and wife, old and young, and friend and friend (Hchu and Yang, 1972).

### 2.2. The relationship marketing concept and RMO

Although past studies have made significant progress toward understanding relationship marketing, two fundamental questions remain unanswered: What precisely is the relationship marketing concept? How can it be implemented? The concept of relationship marketing was formally introduced by Berry (1983), who defined it as “attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships.” Later, Grönroos (1991) proposed to include further “establishing relationships with customers and other parties at a profit by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises.” Recently, Harker (1999) further proposed to add “proactively creating, developing and maintaining” to the definition. The above three definitions, though differing somewhat, focus on individual buyer–seller relationships that are longitudinal and mutually beneficial in nature. In short, from a firm’s perspective the relationship marketing concept can be viewed as a philosophy of doing business successfully, or as a distinct organizational culture/value that puts the buyer–seller relationship at the center of the firm’s strategic or operational thinking.

Strangely, despite its increasingly acknowledged importance, little research has focused on the implementation of the relationship marketing concept, referred to as the RMO, nor has there been much research on creating a valid measurement scale and testing the concept empirically. Relationship marketing as an emerging paradigm will remain undeveloped until its key components have been identified and operationalized. Thus, it is the goal of this paper to propose a conceptualization of the basic components of RMO and to develop a reliable and valid measurement scale for these components.

## 3. The components of the RMO

Based on past related literature (e.g., Callaghan et al., 1995; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995; Yau et al.,

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