



# Management and Business Research Quarterly

2017(1)1–13



## The Impact of Relationship Marketing Tactics and Dimensions of the Relationship Quality on Customer Loyalty

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*Received* 26 January 2017    *Accepted* 11 February 2017

### ABSTRACT

Retaining customers in the service industry has become the main aim of relationship marketing. Using relationship marketing tactics to establish long-term relationships with customers is essential for mutual benefit. Though these tactics are applied extensively by service-provider companies, customers may always change their companies and use the services of other competing companies. This research examines the effect of relationship marketing tactics (i.e. service quality, brand image, price perception, and value offers) on the relationship quality (i.e. trust, satisfaction and commitment) and also on customer loyalty. Results from linear regression showed that all four marketing tactics in this research were effective on trust. In addition, service quality and brand image tactics were effective on satisfaction and commitment. But the results of the research indicated that price perception and proposed values had no significant effect on satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, the results indicated a positive and significant effect of the relationship quality on customer loyalty of mobile operators. The results also indicated that satisfaction and trust variables could have the most impact on customer loyalty of a company, diminish the company's marketing costs, and have profitability to the company.

*Keywords:* Brand Image, Loyalty, Price Perception, Relationship Marketing, Relationship Quality, Service Quality, Value offers

### Introduction

Due to the intense competition prevailing in the current business environment, retaining customers is very important. In this competitive business environment, vendors are not only careful about delivering quality products or services, but also pay more attention to keep beneficial relationship with their customers for the long term (Tseng, 2007). With regards to the

prevailing competition in the market, business owners must go beyond the traditional combination of strategies to in order to engage with their customers. So, today, companies have more and more emphasis on relationship marketing to create relationships and interaction with their clients. Helping to create a strong competitive advantage, Relationship marketing has become an important part of marketing strategy. Therefore, the redemption will be increased, and the companies and customers will benefit from it (Raza&Rehman, 2012).

Several previous studies have shown that relationship marketing has a positive effect on business performance of companies. A study suggests that companies must manage customers' relationship strategies specifically effective factors on interpersonal relationship in order to create more beneficial buyer-seller relationships and achieve more profit (Halimi, Chavosh, &Choshali 2011). In another study, the researchers stated that relationship marketing helps decision-makers and marketers to make accurate decisions in order to increase customer loyalty (Raza&Rehman, 2012). This proves the importance of relationship marketing in a long-term relationship. So it's more important than ever for businesses to be on this track and manage their relationships with consumers.

### **Theoretical Foundations and Development of Hypotheses**

This study aimed to investigate the following two objectives:

- (1) the effect of marketing tactics on the relationship quality in operator clients of Hamrah-e-Aval;
- (2) the effect of relationship quality on loyalty of Hamrah-e- Aval customers.

Initial analysis of previous studies indicated that most researchers have used relationship quality as mediator for loyalty. For example, Zhang and Feng (2009) have examined relationship marketing tactics including service quality, price perception, brand image, value offers, and switching costs and two aspects of the relationship quality, namely, trust and satisfaction. Other researchers have studies relationship tactics in association with the following variables: direct contact, tactile reward, interpersonal communication, preferential behavior and membership and three dimensions of trust, satisfaction, and commitment for relationship quality (Doaei, Rezaei, &Khajei, 2011).

Both samples present conceptual framework from the intervention of Relationship Marketing Tactics (RMT) in the dimensions of the relationship quality.

### **Relationship Marketing and Its Tactics**

Relationship marketing is a series of activities aiming to establish long-term and profitable relationships between the organization and its customers to create advantage for the parties (Lovelock & Wright, 2002). The main point of relationship marketing is not building relationships, but maintaining and enhancing needed relationships (Rao, 2011). Relationship marketing programs are usually designed to collect information in order to help companies to identify and retain the best customers and to maximize profitability and customer value (Christy, Stephanie, Naveen, & Katherine, 2011). Companies are striving to use more tactics, to turn their

profitable customers to loyal customers (Bagherzad, Chavosh, & Hosseinikhah, 2011). A broad perspective of relationship marketing tactics from Bansal, Taylor, and James (2005) show that relationship marketing tactics can be derived from 12 different factors: service quality, satisfaction, value, trust, commitment, price perception, alternative attractiveness, substitute attitude, subjective norms, switching costs, behavior change, and search for diversity. Peng and Wang (2006) have examined the application of service quality interface tactics, reputation (brand), price perception, and value offers.

Although various tactics are still questionable, in the present study, four relationship marketing tactics (service quality, brand image, price perception and value offers) has been considered to examine their impact on the dimensions of relationship quality and on customer loyalty as well.

### **Service quality**

Services are different from tangible products. Uniqueness of the services is related to their intangible and heterogeneous nature (Raza & Rehman, 2012). The service delivery process takes place in the interaction between the consumer and the service provider (Grönroos, 2000). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1998) define service quality as experience and judgment of consumer services on the excellence of the company in the delivery of services. By considering many researchers' opinion, we can say that consumer perception is influential on the relationship quality between the companies and the customer (Aydin & Özer, 2005; Ismail, Haron, Ibrahim, & Isa, 2006; Ivan, 2015; Parasuraman, Zeitham, & Berry, 1988; Raza & Rehman, 2012).

So we can consider the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: Service quality has a positive relationship with trust.

H<sub>2</sub>: Service quality has a positive relationship with satisfaction.

H<sub>3</sub>: Service quality has a positive relationship with commitment.

### **Brand image**

Building a strong brand is not only important in the manufacturing industry, but it is also a vital issue in the service sector. Keller (1993) defines brand image as a communication and understanding of the brand in the minds of the customer. This is the image of the brand in consumer memory which is presented by his response (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Grönroos (2000) suggested that each brand step creates a specific understanding of the customer's mind, and the final result is called the whole image of the brand. Relationship with customer which is one of the best ways to grow and promote brand value and to meet the needs of customers in the service sector, creates a sustainable and desirable image of marketing activities in the customer's mind. So, by meeting the needs and expectations of customers, a positive image of the brand can have a positive impact on the relationship quality (e.g. trust, satisfaction, and commitment) (Abdullah, Putit, Chui, & Teo, 2014; Grönroos, 2000; Rashid et al, 2013; Vazifehdust, Shahnavaizi, Taghizadeh, Gholizadeh, & Toocheai, 2012; Zhang & Feng, 2009).

So we can consider the following hypotheses:

H1b: Brand image has a positive relationship with trust.

H2b: Brand image has a positive relationship with satisfaction.

H3b: Brand image has a positive relationship with commitment.

### **Price perception**

A consumer pay money or fees to receive service. The price has a significant impact on the consumer's purchasing behavior. Price perception may vary from person to person (Raza & Rehman, 2012). Sometimes higher prices may have a negative impact on the consumer's purchasing decisions (Peng & Wang, 2006). Oliver (1997) believes that the consumer determines the relationship between price and quality of service. The price perception can be measured in two ways: (a) reasonable price and (b) value in exchange (Cheng, Lai, & Yeung, 2008). Most of the time, the customer expects high quality for high price (Chitty, Ward, & Chua, 2007). Studies has shown that price perception affects satisfaction, commitment, and the quality of the relationship (Ehsani & Ehsani, 2014; Kim, Zhao, & Yang, 2008; Zhang & Feng, 2009).

So we can consider the following hypotheses:

H1c: Price perception has a positive relationship with trust.

H2c: Price perception has a positive relationship with satisfaction

H3c: Price perception has a positive relationship with commitment.

### **Value offers**

In general, if a company wants to have a solid and stable relationship with their customers, they need to provide high-value products and services to their customers (Fiol, Alcaniz, Tena, & Garcia, 2009). The company must also establish their competitive advantage with distinctive ways (Roig, Garcia, & Tena, 2009). Receiving and understanding the benefits of products and services based on their own expense, customers will judge consuming it (Zeithaml, 1988). Service companies with better suggestions, which can lead to customer satisfaction, offer more value, and with increasing benefits and reducing on customers' value, not only they keep them, but also they prompt them to repurchase. In a long-term relationship, the value offer received by the customer, depends on his expectations. When customers' expectations are met, they will feel safe and secure which ultimately will increase their confidence, and that will enhance customer loyalty (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996).

In the telecommunications sector, operators earn the trust and satisfaction, and as a result they should provide subscribers' commitment with valuable items such as promotional offers in the servicing process to enhance customer loyalty.

So we can consider the following hypotheses:

H1d: offered value has a positive relationship with trust.

H2d: offered value has a positive relationship with Satisfaction.

H3d: offered value has a positive relationship with obligation.

### **Relationship Quality**

One of the most important research results in the field of marketing is the relationship quality. Some scholars define the relationship quality as a superstructure that is a combination of several factors which reflects the overall nature of the relationship between the company and the customers (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). Relationship quality refers to customer perception regarding the expectations, forecasts, objectives, and demands on the duration of the relationship (Wong & Sohal, 2002). The structure of relationship quality focuses on the nature of the relationship which is a general estimate of the strength of the relationship (Jin, Choi, & Goh, 2011; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). The relationship between the company and the customer is considered good only if the interaction from the previous purchase between them had been desirable. According to Tseng (2007), the quality of the high relationship means that the customer is capable to rely on the service provider, and there is confidence in the company's future performance based on the satisfaction from the past performance. A good relationship is the result of satisfaction and trust of buyers towards the company (Shahrokh, Oveisi, & Timasi, 2013). Although the elements of the relationship quality differ from one study to another one, many researchers consider the key multi-dimensional elements of the structure in the traditional environment (Brun, Rajaobelina, & Ricard, 2014; Palmatier et al, 2006). They summarize those elements as follows: satisfaction with service provider's performance, commitment in relationship, provision of stable service, and trust in the service provider (Henning-Thurau et al., 2002). Therefore, the structure of the relationship quality is a combination of three dimensions of satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Palmatier et al, 2006).

### **Satisfaction**

Recently customer satisfaction has obtained a new viewpoint with in the context of the changing paradigm from transaction marketing to relationship marketing (Grönroos, 1994). The satisfaction of the relationship can be defined as the client's cognitive and emotional assessment based on personal experience at all stages of the related service (Storbacka, Strandvik, & Grönroos, 1994). Satisfaction is exclusively described as customer satisfaction in relation to the relationship which is a general assessment of its power (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, & Kardes, 2009). In one of the previous researches, satisfaction was recognized as the determining factor for loyalty offer (Giese & Cote, 2000). Customer satisfaction is the main success for many organizations, and several investigations refer to it as word-of-mouth communication, loyalty, purchase repetition, and increase of organizational profitability (Fernandez-Gonzalez & Prado, 2007).

### **Trust**

Trust is one of the broadest topics in various fields; including management, economics, philosophy, and psychology. Researchers have presented several definitions of trust, and some scholars have emphasized that the trust is perceived credit (Doney & Cannon, 1997). In addition, some others defined it as common values, mutual goals, and obligations construction and

maintenance (Taghizadeh, Rezaloie, Taleghani, & Gholizadeh, 2012). In fact, long-term relationships between customers and companies require the trust of a relationship (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). It is clear from the above mentioned definitions that trust is a human attribute which depends on personality traits such as motivation and behavior (Chu, 2009). So it can be mentioned that preservation of trust maintains customer with the relationship, and the long-term customer relationship means the company's profitability.

### **Commitment**

Relationship marketing considers a major role for commitment in a relationship with the customer. Commitment represents the customer's psychological dependence on the service provider and their willingness to maintain customer-company relationship (Liang & Chen, 2009).

Consumers who are ready to work, invest in resources, and make efforts or dedications in order to continue the relationship with the company (Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Theron & Terblanche, 2010). Commitment reflects the consumer's voluntary inclination to stay in the relationship and maintain it (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Dawn, 2001). So we can say that commitment withdraws short-term benefits to achieve long-term benefits to keep the customer in touch with the company.

### **Customer Loyalty**

Recent marketing research has paid special attention to develop customer's loyalty with regard to profitability. Loyalty is defined as buyer's behavior and maintenance of relationship and intimacy for frequent purchases of products or services (Oliver, 1997). Customers are the driving force of profit growth, and loyal customer can provide profit (Hayes, 2008). Customer loyalty is also defined as a structure which is measured by customer's probability of returning and the amount of readiness for collaborative activities (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003). For a customer, loyalty is positive attitude and behavior related to repurchase commitment to the brand (Chu, 2009). Research studies has shown that the relationship quality affects customer loyalty (Brun et al., 2014; Gaurav, 2016; Naoui & Zaeim, 2010; Raza & Rehman, 2012; Rizan, Warokka, & Listyawati, 2014; Susanta, Alhabsji, Idrus, & Nimran, 2013). Therefore, the following hypotheses can be stated:

H4: Trust has a positive relationship with customer loyalty.

H5: Satisfaction has a positive relationship with customer loyalty.

H6: Commitment has a positive relationship with customer loyalty.

Considering the hypotheses obtained from theoretical review of the literature, the relationships between researches variables can be shown in the conceptual model.

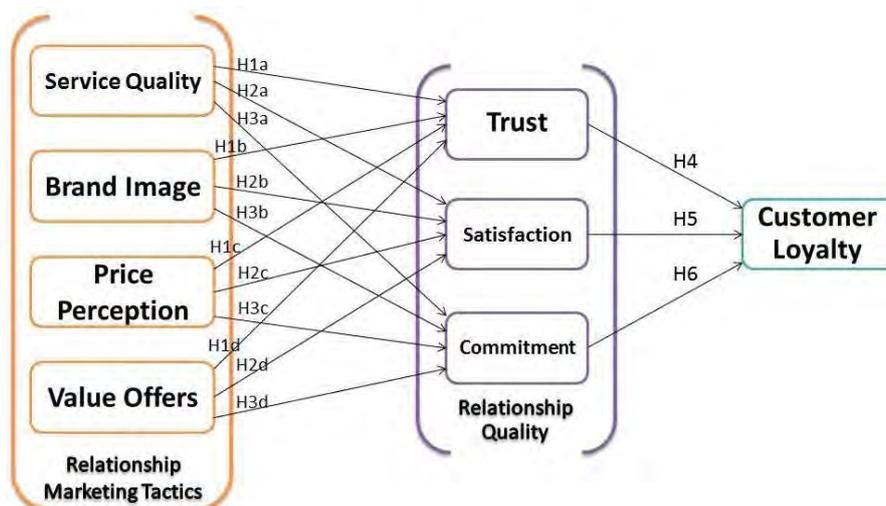


Figure1. Conceptual model of research

**Research Methodology**

This research, in terms of purpose, is experimental, in terms of research methodology, is survey, and in terms of data collection method, is descriptive and non-experimental study. Multivariate linear regression is used to investigate,–research hypotheses and the relationship between variables.

**Data Collection and Sample Size**

A questionnaire was applied in order to collect the research data. In order to formulate 38 items related to the variables of the questionnaire, the measurements from previous researches have been used. Table 1 lists the sources which have been used to formulate the questions.

Table 1

Terms Used to Measure the Variables of the Research

Variables	Number of items	Sources
Service Quality (SQ)	6	Peng & Wang (2006); Grönroos (2000); Parasuraman et al. (1988)
Brand Image (BI)	3	Aydin & Özer (2005); Grönroos (2000); Ravalid & Grönroos (1996)
Price Perception (PP)	5	Cheng et al. (2008); Peng & Wang (2006)
Value Offers (VO)	4	Peng & Wang (2006); Zeithaml (1988)
Customer Trust (CT)	5	Chu (2009); Aydin & Özer (2005); Morgan & Hunt (1994)
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	4	Mouri (2005); Oliver(1997); Fornel (1992)
Customer Commitment (CC)	5	Ndubisi (2007); Johnson & Grayson (2005); Brun et al. (2014)
Customer Loyalty (CL)	6	Aydin & Özer (2005); De Wulf et al. (2001); Morgan & Hunt (1994)

All variables of the research were measured with 5 Likert scale (from 1= completely opposite to 5=fully agree).

Reliability of the questionnaire was obtained by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In Table 2, the reliability values of the entire questionnaire and variables are given.

Table 2  
Reliability of the Questionnaire Variables

Variables	SQ	PP	BI	VO	CT	CS	CC	CL	Total questionnaire
Cronbach's alpha coefficients	0.78	0.75	0.70	0.81	0.85	0.83	0.81	0.88	0.95

The population of the study consisted of Tabriz University students who were benefiting from Hamrah-e-Aval operator service. As the size of the population was unknown, the sample size was determined by the Krejcie & Morgan's (1970) table of 384 people. From 400 distributed questionnaires, 200 of them were returned and 190 questionnaires were used for statistical analysis.

### Descriptive Results

Descriptive analysis of the research sample shows that most respondents to the questionnaire were male with a percentage of about 73%, and most respondents were studying in undergraduate and postgraduate studies (see Table 3).

Table 3  
Demographic Data

		Number of Respondents	%
Gender	Male	140	73.7
	Female	50	26.3
Age	20-30	102	53.7
	31-40	60	31.5
	41-50	26	13.7
Education background	51+	2	1.1
	High school	32	16.8
	Bachelor	74	38.9
	Master	72	37.9
	Doctorate	12	6.3

### Data Analysis

To analyze the research hypotheses, multivariate linear regression was used. Regression was used in two main stages. In the first stage, the variables of trust, satisfaction and commitment were considered as dependent variables, and variables of related marketing tactics were considered as independent variables. In the second stage, customer loyalty was considered as a dependent variable and dimensions of relationship quality were considered as independent variables. The results of the regression analysis of the first stage are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Regression Analysis of the First Stage

dependent variable	independent variable	Hypothesis	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>	Durbin-Watson
CT	SQ	H1a	0.28	0.06	0.27	4.14	0.00	0.51	1.92
	PP	H1c	0.16	0.07	0.15	2.24	0.02		
	BI	H1b	0.64	0.13	0.30	4.84	0.00		
	VO	H1d	0.20	0.07	0.07	2.80	0.00		
CS	SQ	H2a	0.25	0.05	0.33	5.20	0.00	0.54	2.33
	PP	H2c	0.08	0.05	0.10	1.58	0.11		
	BI	H2b	0.63	0.09	0.40	6.64	0.00		
	VO	H2d	0.65	0.05	0.07	1.23	0.21		
CC	SQ	H3a	0.32	0.08	0.30	3.97	0.00	0.34	2.32
	PP	H3c	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.60	0.54		
	BI	H3b	0.55	0.15	0.25	3.49	0.00		
	VO	H3d	0.16	0.08	0.13	1.88	0.06		

The results of hypothesis testing shows that Durbin-Watson statistic at all stages of analysis is a number between 1.5 and 2.5 that demonstrates the proper fit of the model.

Considering that the significance levels (Sig.) for H2c, H2d, H3c, and H3d hypotheses are higher than 0.05, these hypotheses are rejected, that is, price perception and proposed value have no significant effect on satisfaction and commitment. All four marketing tactics in the research, have a significant effect on trust and predict 51% of its changes. Service quality and brand image are effective on customer satisfaction and commitment. Regarding the Beta values, the results of the analysis (Table 4) indicate that the brand image variable had the strongest effect on trust (0.309) and satisfaction (0.403) and likewise, from among the research variables, the service quality, had the most impact on commitment (0.306).

The results of regression analysis in the second stage, as shown in Table 5, indicate a positive and significant impact on dimensions of relationship quality on customer loyalty.

Table 5  
Results of Regression Analysis of the Second Stage

dependent variable	independent variable	Hypothesis	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>	Durbin-Watson
CL	CT	H4	0.43	0.06	0.35	6.20	0.00	0.66	1.65
	CS	H5	0.66	0.09	0.40	7.09	0.00		
	CC	H6	0.23	0.07	0.18	2.93	0.00		

For all three independent variables (trust, satisfaction, commitment) significant level values are less than 0.05 and close to zero, which means that the dimensions of relationship quality have a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty (H4, H5, and H6 hypotheses were confirmed). The value of the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) for this regression analysis is 0.660, which means that 66% of customer loyalty is the result of three variables: trusts,

satisfaction, and commitment, and only 24% is due to other factors or errors. Moreover, the greatest effect on customer loyalty is due to satisfaction variable (0.406).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the impact of relationship marketing tactics (service quality, brand image, price perception, and value offers) on customer loyalty through relationship quality dimensions. The results indicated that four relationship marketing tactics in this study affected the variable of trust. Likewise, quality service and brand image tactics were effective on satisfaction and commitment, but the results of the research showed that the price perceptions and value offers were not significantly affected by satisfaction and commitment. Therefore, the mobile service provider takes it into consideration. That is the quality of provided service and the brand image of the company are very important to customers and even more important than the price offered by the company. Therefore, it can be said that relationship marketing tactics affect customer loyalty through satisfaction, trust, and commitment. The results of this study are also in line with the results of previous studies (e.g. Nakhleh, 2012; Raza&Rehman, 2012; Rizan et al., 2014; Vazifehdust et al., 2012). Some differences in the research results can be due to differences in the culture of countries, surveyed companies, and so on. The results also showed that all three dimensions of relationship quality have positive and significant effects on customer loyalty to the mobile operators. The results of research on the impact of relationship quality on customer loyalty, show that the results of this study are in line with those studies which reported that dimensions of the relationship quality have a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty to the company (e.g. Chakiso, 2015; Gaurav, 2016; Rezvani, Gilanina, & Mousavian, 2011; Susanta et al., 2013). Based on the regression analysis, it can be concluded that satisfaction and trust variables can have the greatest impact on customer loyalty to the company, and it reduces the company's marketing costs and leads to profitability.

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