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## CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF BRITISH TELECOM BROADBAND CUSTOMERS

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### ABSTRACT

Efforts made in extant literature to link the components of customer relationship management (CRM) strategy to its implementation are insufficient. This paper aims to provide insights on the core components of CRM and focuses on the 'trust' component in the British Telecom (BT) sales advisor-customer interaction process. The purpose is to improve the quality of the dialogue between customers and sales advisors. A case study of CRM implementation at British Telecom (BT), U.K. was carried out using open-ended, face-to-face interview methods and a survey questionnaire to collect data from key informants at both the strategic (managerial) and operative (sales advisors) levels. The empirical study focused on the quality of dialogue necessary for the successful implementation of a sustainable CRM strategy. Results show that relational benefits are directly linked to the presence or absence of the 'trust' component in the interaction with customers. Developing relationships should not be used as a tactical weapon but should represent a strategic approach to the buyer-seller exchange. Findings also show that successful CRM strategy requires a genuine relationship that is characterized by dimensions such as *trust*, reliability, shared history and values, mutual respect, caring, empathy, warmth, social support, and effective two way communications. Attempts made in extant literature to define CRM have been varied. A theoretical model on which future empirical analysis should be based on when conceptualizing CRM should consist of direct feedback from customers rather than on observation alone. CRM is a strategic business and process issue not merely a technology solution as is more often conceived in practice. The CRM process is a continuous learning process where information about the individual customer is transformed into a customer relationship. The richness of dialogue during interaction is the stepping stone of CRM. An integrative framework that can help facilitate the successful implementation of a sustainable CRM strategy in the telecommunication industry. The study links the components of CRM strategy with the key dimension of its implementation. The paper contributes by anchoring itself as a focal point from among the diverse existing literature on the subject matter.

### KEYWORDS

Customer relations, Customer service management, Cross-functional integration, Management strategy, Quality of dialogue and Trust, Relationship marketing.

### INTRODUCTION



Over the period, numerous management concepts have emerged and soon became buzzwords in the academic circles since they inherit exciting possibilities of changing the fundamentals of an organisation and how it operates. Despite their meteoric rise, they run a risk of fading into obscurity because they fail to fulfil what they promise. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is one concept that has caught the imagination and interest of academicians and marketers across the globe. One of the industries to adopt and embrace CRM is the telecommunication industry. British Telecom (BT) has invested heavily into its CRM tools and applications. The interaction between a BT customer and a BT Sales Advisor is the focal point of CRM within BT. Although many researches and studies have been done on the successes and failures of CRM, there is still a gap in the understanding of the dynamics of a conversation between a customer and a sales advisor. The quality of dialogue is the focus of this research paper with emphasis on the 'trust' factor that is generated between the interacting parties. The authors have striven to critically analyse the 'richness' of dialogue to uncover how it affects the relationship BT has with its customers.

An analogy can be established between an excellent Customer Relationship Management (CRM) of a company and a successful marriage. Both require a recipe to achieve success. There has to be mutual affection and respect, both parties should evolve with time, recognize and meet each other needs and wants and most importantly, each should feel valued and cared for. Like some relationships, the practice of CRM may also head towards disaster but at times this does tend to strengthen the bond over time. British Telecom (BT) has been market leader in the UK broadband industry but despite the efforts made to keep its customer relationships strong, BT is feeling the bite of competition. Many of its broadband customers are still continuing to sign up with competitor providers.

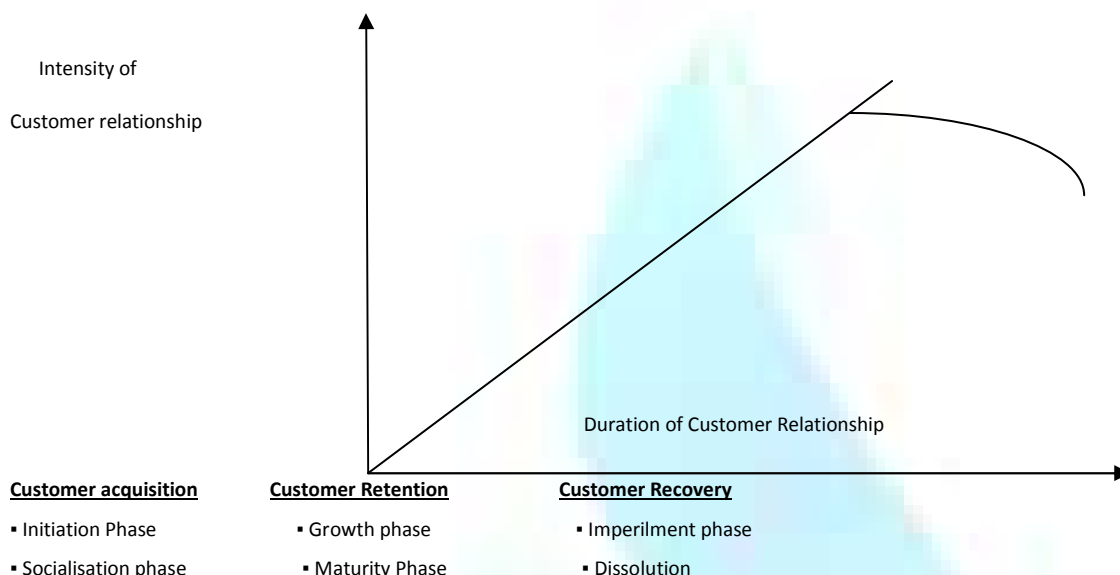
There are various aspects of CRM but the authors focus on exploring the touch point where a customer interacts with a sales advisor and the dynamics of such interaction. Whether the interaction strengthens the bond between the customer and the company or whether the interaction disengages the customer from the company is of vital importance. It is at this interface point, the moment of bonding or disengagement, that a customer is gained, retained or lost. Having said that it is to be noted that customer relationship can not be developed overnight as it is an on-going process. Peppers and Rogers (2004) state that in order to build customer value through managed relationships, the company must engage in a four-step process called IDIC, an acronym for identifying customers, differentiating them, interacting with them and customizing for them. These steps represent the mechanics of a genuine relationship between a BT sales advisor and a customer, which by definition; will involve mutual and customer-specific action. The element of trust between a sales advisor and a customer is an important ingredient of a successful sale and of customer satisfaction. This research paper attempts to explore these aspects of interaction of CRM process, customer behaviour and relationship marketing.

Customer relationships have been increasingly studied in academic marketing literature (Berry 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Early relationship marketing aimed at obtaining information about the customers' preferences and analysing information that was stored in databases. This evolved into "one-to-one marketing" which implies that, through interaction and processing, companies are able to create more customized offers. CRM was developed to help companies secure and manage these one-to-one interactions and thereby contribute towards a profitable and long-term relationship with customers.

To get insight into customer relationship management, it is imperative to first understand its three components; customers, relationships and the management of relationships. Some people may find it difficult to associate the commercial interaction between a company and its customers with the term 'relationship'. Barnes (2001) argues that if we were to truly understand the word *relationship* in our modern approach to business building, and in the context of long-term customer loyalty, then it is critical that organisations understand what relationships are all about. Czepiel (1990) presents one of the best perspectives and states that a market place based relationship is "the mutual recognition of some special status between exchange partners". Such a perspective reflects that a relationship can exist between customers and enterprises, customers and brands, and that the customer has to *feel* the existence of the 'special status'. Barnes (2001) highlights a very important point that long term satisfaction and loyalty has absolutely nothing to do with products or prices. It has a great deal more to do with how the customer is treated, what he or she goes through, and ultimately how he or she feels about dealing with the organisation. This is where 'understanding the customer' meets 'relationships'. Fournier (1998) describes the emotional connection between customer and the brands they use regularly in

vivid detail. She argues that to qualify as such, a relationship must be two-way instead of one-way. Therefore, a true relationship with a brand, which doesn't-can't-respond to a customer or one that it is not aware of, is not strictly a relationship, per se. This is really a preference or proclivity, no matter what we call it. The lesson that organisations can learn is that unless they understand how customers develop such relationships and what customers get from the relationship, those firms will not begin to understand how to build on them. Instead, they can be tempted into falsely believing that an organisation can simply decide to have a relationship with a customer, *whether or not the customer wants one*. The fallacy is that customer relationships can be built or even *imposed* on the customer through the creation of customer databases. This holds true especially for broadband service providers who think they have a relationship with a customer because they have succeeded in locking the customer into a 12- or 18-month contract. Such association between an organisation and their customers is not considered as a relationship in the customer's mind. This research paper will explore how and when a customer 'feels' the relationship is being formed. Bruhn (2003) stated that customer relationships are dynamic in nature, resulting in various phases in the relationship that can be presented and analysed uniquely through the life cycle concept. A Relationship Life Cycle has three core phases; acquisition, retention and recover. Please see figure 1 below:

FIGURE 1: CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP LIFE CYCLE PHASES (ADAPTED FROM BRUHN, 2003)



As it is evident from the above diagram, the intensity of a relationship is directly proportional to the duration of the customer relationship and if the changing needs and wants of a customer are not met as time progresses then customer may enter the imperilment and dissolution phase. Here customer begins to mull over the idea of not using BT's products and may consider switching over to BT's competitors such as Virgin, Sky or Tiscalli. Please see table 1 for the overview of phase-driven relationship marketing instruments).



TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF PHASE-DRIVEN RELATIONSHIP MARKETING INSTRUMENTS

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF PHASE-DRIVEN RELATIONSHIP MARKETING INSTRUMENTS			
Phases		Tasks	Instruments
CUSTOMER ACQUISITION	Initiation Phase (BT marketing & interaction with sales advisors)	Persuasion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Direct assurance</li><li>• Indirect assurance</li><li>• Direct substantiation of recommendations</li><li>• Indirect substantiation of recommendations</li></ul>
		Stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Direct short-term stimulation</li><li>• Indirect short-term stimulation</li><li>• Direct long-term stimulation</li><li>• Indirect long-term stimulation</li></ul>
	Socialization Phase (Customer uses BT Broadband)	Acclimatization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acclimatisation directly through the output</li><li>• Acclimatisation indirectly through the output</li></ul>
	Growth Phase (Max. utilization of customer potential, cross selling of more products)	Customization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Customer integration</li><li>• Value-added services</li></ul>
Cross selling		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quality-focused cross selling</li><li>• Price-focused cross selling</li><li>• Quality-focused purchasing frequency increase</li><li>• Pricing-focused purchasing frequency increase</li></ul>	
CUSTOMER RETENTION	Maturity Phase (Loyal customer, full potential realized)	Building switching barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Economic switching barriers</li><li>• Technical switching barriers</li><li>• Contractual switching barriers</li></ul>
		Efficiency improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Standardization</li><li>• Sales volume increase</li><li>• Taking full advantage of willingness to pay</li></ul>
CUSTOMER RECOVERY	Imperilment Phase (Customer mulls over not using the BT Broadband anymore)	Error rectification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Product policy</li><li>• Promotion policy</li><li>• Pricing policy</li><li>• Place policy</li></ul>
		Restitution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Product policy</li><li>• Promotion policy</li><li>• Pricing policy</li><li>• Place policy</li></ul>
	Termination/Abstinence Phase (Customer cancels BT Broadband contract and switch to other providers)	Persuasion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Added value in products</li><li>• Added value in promotion</li><li>• Added value in pricing</li><li>• Added value in the place</li></ul>
		Stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recovery offers</li><li>• Product related</li><li>• Price related</li><li>• Place related</li><li>• Information through promotion</li></ul>

Source: Adapted from Bruhn (2003) for BT broadband customers.

Peppers and Rogers (2004) argue that the dynamics of the customer-enterprise relationship has changed dramatically over time. "Instead of selling one product at a time to as many customers as possible in a particular sales period, the one-to-one marketer uses customer databases and interactive communication tools to sell one customer as many products and services as possible, over the entire lifetime of that customer's patronage. This is a strategy that requires a business to manage customers individually rather than just managing its products, sales channels, and programs" (Peppers & Rogers, 1997, p. xxiii). They further argue that the most successful company will not be the one with the most customers, but the one that has the most knowledge about its individual customer's needs. The aim is to keep customers longer and increase the level of business with them so that the lifetime value will be high. In order to compete in a truly customer-driven manner, the one-to-one company must integrate its business functions around satisfying the individual needs of each individual customer – not just marketing, customer service, and sales and channel management as well as production, logistics, and financial measurement and metrics. With the help of information technology the company can create a sophisticated database for one-to-one customer management needs. A company must be able to see whether or not a customer is valuable and, if so, whether or not they can remain loyal to the company. The company sells products or services and, in the interactive age, sales are secured by finding the benefits and services for each customer that is valued by the customer (Peppers & Rogers, 1997). They elaborate to state that in order to build customer value through managed relationships, the company must engage in a four-step process called IDIC, an acronym for identifying customers, differentiating them, interacting with them and customizing products and services for them.

Later, Pepper and Rogers (2004) stated that setting up and managing individual customer relationship can be broken into four inter-related implementation tasks. Implementation is based on the unique, customer-specific and iterative character of such relationships. This IDIC model is discussed in detail:

1. **Identify Customers:** The first task in setting up a relationship is to identify as an individual, the party at the other end of the relationship. An organisation must be able to *recognize* a customer when he or she comes back, in person, by telephone, online, or however else the contact is made. Moreover, organisations need to 'know' each customer in as much detail as possible-including their purchasing habits, preferences, and other characteristics that make each customer unique. For example, when a BT sales advisor interacts with a customer, they can call up when did the person called last, the duration of loyalty to, what kind of products they use, whether any interest in newer technologies have been expressed. Such database information can help the sales advisor to steer the course of conversation towards greater customer loyalty and further sales.
2. **Differentiate customers:** Knowing how customers are different allows a company to focus its resources on those customers who will bring in the most value for the enterprise and to devise and implement customer-specific strategies to satisfy individually different customer needs. Previous researchers have suggested that a better understanding of the value of the customer should lead to changes in the way these customers are managed (Mulhern 1999; Niraj, Gupta, and Narasimhan 2001; Reinartz, Thomas, and Kumar 2005).
3. **Interact with Customers:** Enterprises must improve the effectiveness of their interaction with customers. Each successive interaction with a customer should take place in the context of all previous interactions with that customer. A conversation should pick up where the last one left off. For example, if a

BT customer calls to report a technical fault, a sales advisor must mention that in the next ongoing conversation for feedback purposes and to gain customer satisfaction. Customers tend to feel valued and cared for by such an approach.

4. **Customize treatment:** To engage a customer in an ongoing Learning Relationship, an enterprise needs to adapt its behaviour to satisfy the customer's needs as are expressed. The traditional business organizes and measures itself on a "lateral" basis. The business goes from quarter to quarter, year to year, measuring sales revenue and profit laterally across different business units and over the entire enterprise. However, when a company engages an individual customer in a relationship, the relationship develops longitudinally, through time, with a focus on this single customer. It is characteristically different today than it was previously, and it evolves as time goes on. This is the essence of the Learning Relationship concept and customers derive satisfaction from such personalized service.

Where a genuine customer relationship exists, there is more than a functional connection; it is emotionally charged. Barnes (2001) states that it is characterized by dimensions such as *trust*, reliability, shared history and values, mutual respect, caring, empathy, warmth, social support, and effective two way communications. In fact where a genuine relationship exists, customers often knowingly and willingly pay *higher* prices for the satisfaction that comes from the relationship. A relationship of trust is one in which both parties feel 'comfortable' by continuing to interact and deal with each other. The element of trust is an indispensable component of a healthy, growing relationship between a company and its customer.

Green (2004) argues that role of trust in the economic equation is rarely noticed. In fact trust is not so easily understood and the process required to generate a customer's trust is not necessarily simple. He suggests a trust equation which is as follows:

$$\text{Trust} = (C+R+I)/S$$

Where;

C = *credibility*. Credibility has to do with words such as; 'I can trust what he says about....' Other related terms include *believability* and *truthfulness*.

R = *reliability*. Reliability has to do with actions such as; 'I can trust that he'll do about.....' Other related terms include *predictability* and *familiarity*.

I = *intimacy*. Intimacy has to do with a perceived safety factor shown by feelings concerned with; 'I can trust talking with him about....' *Security* and *integrity* are related with intimacy.

S = *self-orientation*. Self-orientation has to do with focus as is evidenced when a customer believes; 'I can trust that he is focused on me...' A low level of self-orientation on the part of the organisation enhances the customer's trust, while a high level of self-orientation shown by the company on itself will destroy trust. Self-orientation appears in many guises- selfishness, self-consciousness and self-pre-occupation. The first two components, credibility and reliability, operate mainly in rational realm whereas second two, intimacy and self-orientation, are largely non-rational<sup>1</sup>.

Green (2004) further argued that the power of the fourth component – self orientation – is greater than the other three components, as is evidenced by its solo position as the denominator. A customer who perceives low credibility may sense empty words from the sales staff. If the customer senses a low level of reliability, he or she may believe the offer is 'flaky' and if a low level of intimacy is sensed then the organisation may appear too technical. All these destroy the elements of trust.

The trust equation of Green (2004) allows us to see more clearly the trust-destroying nature of many activities that organisations engage in when they install CRM technologies without adopting an appropriately customer-oriented business philosophy. The company may have the best of intentions but the results can be counterproductive without trust. For example, the BT CRM system may give a sales advisor confidence that a particular product is right for a given customer, but if the sales advisor proceeds to 'sell' the product before the customer feels adequately listened to, then he or she will not buy, even if purchasing the service is the 'rational' thing to do. Jumping to conclusions before the customer feels listened to combines the two major trust violations. In the same context, Peppers and Rogers (2004) argue that a framework for understanding customer needs can be best understood as a continuum. At the very beginning of the continuum, customer needs are not understood and a company ignores the differences inherent in customers. At the other end of the continuum is a true customer-focused orientation, in which the needs of each customer are known. It is in the large area in between these extremes that the learning about customer needs occurs as an ongoing process. To develop trust, an organisation must address all four components of trust in the customer's mind. Issues of credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation must exist. Although CRM is part of marketing's new dominant logic (Day, 2004), it is more likely to fail than to deliver any business results (Zablah, Bellenger, and Johnston 2004). Worse still, failed implementation may actually damage customer relationships (Rigby, Reichheld, and Scheffer, 2002). CRM has become a buzzword in the telecommunication industry but it suffers from being poorly understood, improperly applied and incorrectly measured.

## METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this paper, the empirical data needed to build the case study (Yin, 1981, 2002) was acquired by way of multiple data collection techniques. Methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) facilitated the use of multiple data collection methods consisting of open-ended, face-to-face interviews and completed questionnaires by key informants. The key informants (Kumar et al., 1993) for the study were 48 employees at both strategic (managerial) and operative levels (sales advisors) who had sufficient knowledge of the phenomenon being investigated and who were in appropriate positions in BT to provide first hand information. The three data collection methods specified above will focus on components of customer relationship as discussed in the literature earlier on and the current CRM practices at BT. In addition, this empirical study will also focus on the key dimensions of relationship strategy implementation within BT. The strategy implementation framework consists of technological and managerial aspects necessary for successful implementation of a sustainable CRM strategy.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study analyses the interaction of customer and sales advisor from the prism of CRM. The research, therefore, covers the emotional component as well as the physical component under study. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), research is a process of trying to gain a better understanding of human interactions. The primary aim of this research is to analyze the importance and the quality of sales advisor-customer interaction and its dynamics. In order to fulfill this objective, the research will attempt to test the following hypotheses that have been derived from the review of literature.

**Hypothesis 1:** Trust component and its drivers positively affect the customer relationship.

**Hypothesis 2:** Quality of dialogue and/or conversation can make or break the relationship with customers.

**Hypothesis 3:** A dialogue and/or conversation with both functional and emotional connection can generate higher customer satisfaction.

There are a number of advantages to applying both qualitative and quantitative methods in this CRM-based research. The one-to-one interviews were conducted at the Stoke-on-Trent office (in the U.K.) where the goal was to obtain in-depth information about how the sales advisors perceive the value of conversation and interaction with customers; how they develop and foster trust during the interaction and how they personalize the products and make customers feel valuable to BT.

To collect the completed questionnaires, the sales advisors were contacted at BT's office in Stoke-on-Trent. The sales advisors and the managers recorded their feedback by filling in preset questionnaires. The key aspects covered in the questionnaire included the different dimensions of CRM based on the literature review and was designed to test the above mentioned hypotheses. Several open-ended questions were asked during the interviews. Qualitative interviews of four managers have helped to enrich the data collected as it provided a management perspective for the research. The study yielded a number of conclusions about the importance of 'trust', 'one-to-one marketing', 'relationship marketing' and quality of conversation with customer at the first point-of-contact. To add rigour to the argument, interviews with customer services managers and sales advisors that deal with high level complaints at BT's main U.K. office were also carried out.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Green's use of terms 'rational' and 'non-rational' closely parallel the more widely used accepted terms 'cognitive' which refers to 'thinking', and 'affective', which refers to 'feeling'. These terms may also be seen as reflecting the current controversy about rational versus emotional processes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The grounded approach for data analysis was used when interpretations of the findings was carried out. A total of 50 questionnaires were distributed to BT sales advisors and managers. Respondents included sales advisors, sales managers, customer services advisors and complaints managers. A total of 48 questionnaires were returned and used for research. This represents a response rate of 96 percent. The responses to all the questions were recorded manually. On the basis of their answers, pie charts and bar graphs were utilized to depict the research data. The quantitative method used has allowed the researchers to compile the data from the respondents in the numerical format, thus achieving a high level of reliability and accuracy. The data was analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to perform a descriptive statistical analysis. The data was analyzed by prioritizing the questions according to the different dimensions of CRM as highlighted in the literature review and the set hypotheses. The results for each set of questions were consolidated in separate excel-sheets.

## EVALUATING THE HYPOTHESIS

*Hypothesis 1 - Trust component and its drivers positively affect the customer relationship.*

The findings that pertain to this hypothesis were extracted from the results of the questionnaire survey. As evident from the findings derived from the questionnaire, a good customer relationship is directly proportional to the trust component and its drivers; credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation (Green (2004) the trust equation). The findings of the results collated from the questionnaire suggest that if a customer finds a conversation to be reliable, credible and intimate, trust is developed in between a sales advisor and a customer and it strengthens the customer relationship with BT. The findings also reflected that once trust has been established, the customer does not mind even paying a little extra to get the services as he/she wants as the customer has total trust in the sales advisor concerning what was explained and set out by the sales advisor. By signing a contract, the customer is now looking forward to the same positive experience with BT that he/she had with the sales advisor. This hypothesis has tested positive. There is a clear indication that the trust component and its drivers positively affect the customer relationship.

*Hypothesis 2 – The quality of dialogue and/or conversation can make or break the relationship with a customer.*

It was strongly agreed by most of the sales advisors, managers and complaint handling team members that the quality and the richness of dialogue between the sales advisor and the customer is crucial if BT aims to strengthen the relationship. It was also evident from the findings that with so much to choose from the marketplace, customers do not take long to switch over to another provider (as suggested by Bruhn (2003)) during the customer maturity phase of the relationship life cycle). Even one bad conversation can potentially damage the relationship. On the other hand, if the sales advisor creates a warm rapport with the customer and wins his/her trust, the relationship is strengthened and customer loyalty is enhanced. A high quality dialogue and/or conversation also results in long term satisfaction and loyalty which has absolutely nothing to do with products or prices. How the customer is treated, what he or she goes through, and ultimately how he or she feels about dealing with BT is crucial to the relationship. This is where 'understanding the customer' meets 'relationships'. Thus, this hypothesis has tested positive, indicating that the quality of dialogue and/or conversation can make or break the relationship with customers.

*Hypothesis 3 - A dialogue and/or conversation with both functional and emotional connection generates higher customer satisfaction*

Results from the findings demonstrated that it was strongly agreed by all sales advisors and managers that a dialogue and/or conversation has to have both functional and emotional connection if it is to generate satisfaction. Czepiel (1990) supported this finding and stated that a customer has to feel the 'special status' with an element of empathy and care in a dialogue. Any dialogue which is without intimacy, credibility and reliability will not generate trust and the customer will not be satisfied if he or she feels that the sales advisor has not listened to his or her needs and requirements. Unless there is warm rapport with the customer, sales advisor's offerings may sound disingenuous even if he or she is just conducting a routine functional conversation. Some customers felt that the sales advisor was merely reading from a script. Without any real connection, the customers did not find the dialogue to be trustworthy. On the other hand, it was evident from the findings that if a sales advisor is able to relate to the customer and their needs on an emotional level, the customer will have a pleasant experience. When this occurs, the customer is often willing to accept and take up the product offer as recommended by the sales advisor. Hence, the hypothesis has tested positive and it indicates that dialogues and/or conversations with both functional and emotional connection do generate higher customer satisfaction.

## CONCLUSION

The literature review highlighted that there have been many academic researches and studies on CRM and that most researches have focused mostly on organizational (internal to the company) factors to explain the success/failure and general performance of a CRM system and strategy. Much less research has been conducted to focus on the way customers react to a company's CRM strategy, especially on sales advisor- customer interaction and the quality of that dialogue. The customers' perspectives have been studied in relationship marketing literatures are the benefits that a customer may expect and receive from a relationship with a company. However, these extensive literatures have not always linked these relational benefits directly to the presence or absence of the 'trust' component in the interaction. This research paper has attempted to fill that gap in the academic literature of CRM and highlight the importance of 'quality dialogue' and 'trust' generated in the conversation was proposed by Green (2004).

It is evident in the findings that one-to-one relationship marketing is currently the need of the hour, especially when BT's market share of broadband services is being fast eroded by competitors. Over ninety percent of advisors and managers agreed that relationship marketing is the way forward. Price cutting is not the only solution to lure customers back. If customers are treated well and BT meets their expectations, then customers are willing to pay extra when they trust the service provider. This is a very important finding as it shows that if CRM practices can be improved, customers not only will stay loyal but will also pay more for additional services. Loyalty has less to do with price reduction or products than with how the customer is treated when he or she calls or contacts BT. Eighty four percent of advisors and managers agreed to the finding. The most successful company will not be the one with the most customers, but the one that has the most knowledge about its individual customer's needs and provides it. The aim of BT's CRM policy is to keep customers longer and increase the level of business with its customers so that the lifetime value will be high. Also, where a genuine customer relationship exists, it is apparent that there is more than a functional connection; it is highly emotional one. A genuine relationship is characterized by dimensions such as trust, reliability, shared history, shared values, mutual respect, caring, empathy, warmth, social support, and effective two way communications. Ninety four percent of advisors and managers agreed that while organizations like BT stress the need for customer satisfaction, and have overall strategic intent to acquire and retain their customers through high-quality interfaces (the "moments of truth"), the quality of interaction should be given a high priority. Sometimes under the pressure of meeting sales targets and achieving greater revenue, sales advisors tended to focus merely on the 'selling' part of a conversation. Seventy five percent of advisors agreed to this finding as identified pressure of meeting targets as the main reason for such behavior. However, this study has shown that if they focus on the richness of dialogue and treat customers with empathy, warmth, care and listen to their needs, a better opportunity exists not only to just sell but also strengthen the relationship with the customer and deepen the customer's loyalty (as is supported by the Peppers and Rogers (2006) study).

Since the needs and wants of a customer is dynamic in nature and keeps changing with the time, a company should be able to meet the customer's expectations and this can be achieved by learning more about the customer with each interaction. CRM is not just about information technology but it is a comprehensive business strategy. Another myth that has been exploded from this research is that in one-to-one marketing, market segmentation is no longer that meaningful. In fact, customer relationship strategy begins with segmentation and ends with the individual customer. BT can take advantage of its sophisticated database to create segmentation by customer types and then customize the products and services to cater to individual needs. In the context of a customer relationship strategy, BT can ask itself some probing questions. For example; can customers be meaningfully segmented in terms of the drivers of their attraction and loyalty to a firm? Are some customers more interested in having a close relationship with BT and, hence, are more likely to respond favourably to one-to-one marketing efforts? What level of relationship is appropriate for what customer type? How do customers want to be communicated with? Depending on the answers to these types of questions, it may be possible to identify the different relationship requirements of BT customers so that better and a more effective customer relationship management can be achieved.



From the interviews and discussions with participating sales advisors and managers, it was noted that to simply capture and store customer data was inadequate. The impetus here is to make relevant customer data readily accessible to BT sales advisors through on-line retrieval systems. This can be referred to as the “democratization of data”. The authors gathered from a growing chorus of sales advisors that they were drowning in customer data whilst being simultaneously starved of relevant customer information required to conduct effective day-to-day interaction with customers. One part of the problem is that front-line employees, namely the sales advisors, often do not understand their role as a “relationship managers”. They have been trained to be polite to customers, to listen to them, and to be empathetic. Nobody has said “you are a relationship manager and this is what it entails”. Furthermore, they are mainly incentivized to reduce average handling time (AHT) and to turn every customer interaction into a cross-sell or an up-sell. Under such circumstances, it not surprising that they view much of the customer data provided through CRM as irrelevant to their jobs and just clutter. BT needs to inculcate the importance of CRM and encourage their sales advisors to incorporate and use relevant customer data when they interact with the individual customer to improve the quality of the dialogue and/or conversation to foster and sustain customer relationships towards making every single transaction have the potential of making a life time relationship (as suggested by Bruhn (2003)).

The study brought out three focal points which have long term implications for the success of BT’s CRM strategy.

- The trust component and its drivers positively affect customer relationships.
- The quality of dialogue and/or conversation can make or break the customer relationship.
- A dialogue and/or conversation with both functional and emotional components generate higher customer satisfaction.

These three simple statements have profound implications, Should they be integrated into BT’s CRM strategies, it can help BT gain a huge competitive advantage. A close, positive, two-sided relationships in which both partners respect and commit to one another has the potential to lead to a long term relationship and a competitive advantage.

The question is: “Is BT really the listening company it says it is?”

Furthermore, this work opens up several opportunities for further research. This research paper has explored the importance of the ‘trust’ component as well as the functional and emotional element in dialogue with customers. The results show that their effect on customer relationships is positive and of benefit. Perhaps other variables like customer attitude, prejudice and bias are important antecedents in the quality of interaction. Further research could investigate these variables. Also, the mediating role of personal characteristics and situational factors on customers’ perceptions and expectations of their relationship with a service company such as BT are still largely unexplored research issues. Finally, further research could aim at developing decision support type models (using data available in customer databases and data from questionnaires) that would demonstrate the impact of CRM strategies.

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