

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT & MANAGEMENT

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CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN TELECOM INDUSTRY – WITH REFERENCE TO BHARTI AIRTEL, ANDHRA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The Indian telecom sector has been met with competitive pressure after deregulation. Many key developments took place in the early 2000. The telecom service providers are expected to struggle with complex issues of new technologies, and value added services through continuous innovations. Though many service industries are affected by the churn phenomenon, the problem is extremely acute in the telecom industry with customers joining and quitting in short periods. According to a survey, with churn of 2 per cent a month an operator is losing 24 per cent of its customers every year, the fact remains that the telecom industries bottom line is getting affected significantly due to the high churn rate. Customers switch over for various reasons. The ultimate goal of CRM in telecom sector is to provide a comprehensive suite of software applications that enable them to increase revenue, productivity and customer satisfaction by managing, synchronizing and coordinating customer interactions across all touch points including web, customer contact centre's, field organization and distribution channels. This research explores the kind of relationship marketing strategies that Indian telecom industries is pursuing in today's rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, and to study their effect on the service quality and satisfaction of customers. And also, it explores that impact of MNP services on telecom service provider in connection with regulations made by Department of Telecommunication.

KEYWORDS

Technology, Customer Relationship Management, Telecom Industry.

INTRODUCTION

Post liberalization has brought about dramatic shifts in the market place triggered by sharp changes in the demography, lifestyle pattern of the consumers, topography of the competition and the so called evolution in the communication technology. Marketers have realized that the time tested concepts of brand loyalty and mass marketing cannot be taken as the devices to gauge the behavior of the new generation consumers. This behavior is characterized by the individualized customer expectations. Apart from insisting on consistent quality and improved price performance ratio, marketers are looking out for more customization, availability of products 'anytime' and 'anywhere' and more information through advertisements rather than merely being a passive participant. Seeing the new emerging face of the customers, companies have realized that it is necessary to understand the changing demographic profile of the population in terms psychographics of the customers i.e., how they feel, think or behave. Further, the competition has become very intense at the market place and consumers have to choose from parity products. With the continuous entry of new competitors to explode the choice of consumers, marketers have realized the value of being customer focused and also are looking out for ways to retain existing customers to gain more revenue from them. Thus has emerged the saga of relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing charts a new different path- advocating a high customer contact and service and customer relation in order to build long term relationships with them. The present chapter is devoted to discuss in depth the emerging marketing scenario of relationship marketing, with firms learning and relearning that consumers are looking for quality and value for money. So all their moves at segmenting, targeting and positioning is to constantly upgrade the consumer and the product by finding new dimensions and also about a paradigm shift on concepts such as one to one marketing. The key to brand loyalty is through ensuring satisfaction and working towards the beginning of a long term relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of the literature review is to ensure that no important variable that has in the past been found repeatedly to have had an impact on the problem is ignored. A clear idea emerges as to what variables would be most important to consider, why they would be considered important, how they should be investigated to solve the problem. Thus, the literature survey helps the development of the theoretical framework and hypothesis for testing.

Sam Stembo¹, in his article titled 'Strategic role of CRM in corporate renaissance' suggested that, "The Task of the organization is to understand its customers because of whom it exists, the organization and its people service providers and suppliers and manage an effective and efficient relationship. This is the only way to add value to every party involved in any transaction and lend to corporate renaissance.

G. Shainesh & Ramneesh Mohan², in their study titled, 'The super intendence of customer kinship', "successful firms take a long term strategic view of customer relationship management. It cannot be solely managed through periodic programs. A holistic approach which leads firms to develop customer centric processes, integrate technology through customer oriented approaches, motivate employees to perform to their full potential through empowerment are pre-requisites for firms to successfully utilize their customer knowledge for customized or even one-to-one marketing".

¹ Sam Stembo, "Strategic Role in CRM in Corporate Renaissance", South Asian Journal of Management, Vol. 9 issue No 2, April – June 2002, pp.16-22

² G.S.Shainesh & Ramneesh Mohan, "The Super Intendence of Customer Kinship, Business and Strategy", August 2000, pp.19-22

G.P.Garg, Seema.S.Zoharhr, Rupali and Joozar Shula³, in their study titled 'Rejuvenating organizations for becoming winners- The millennium perspective', opined that, "The factors that contribute the making a business successful have one thing in common: they are strongly 'Customer focused' and heavily committed to 'Marketing'. In the dynamic external environment the successful companies are those, which overcome the 'corporate myopia', and are able to refocus their core competing in the perspective of customer as a predominant player by absolute dedication to service".

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to examine the "customer relationship management in Telecom Industry - with reference to Bharti Airtel" and to find out the suitability and relevance of these practices in contemporary marketing environment, the present study entitled "Customer Relationship Management in Telecom Industry – with reference to Bharti Airtel" have been taken up with the following objectives:

- To study the CRM Practices in Telecommunications industry in India.
- To study the 4 P's of marketing mix and 7 P's of service mix practices related to CRM adopted by Airtel.
- To examine customer preferences and usage patterns of sample respondents with regard to select telecommunication service provider.
- To study the impact of MNP service stipulated by Dept. of Telecommunications on CRM practices of Bharti Airtel.
- To evaluate the level of customer satisfaction and expectations with regard to various CRM practices adopted by the service provider.

DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

The study entitled, "Customer Relationship Management in Telecom Industry - with reference to Bharti Airtel" is based on both primary and secondary data. For the purpose of primary data a structured questionnaire was designed and administered to the customers of Airtel.

A sample of 240 respondents was selected on stratified random sampling basis from Airtel customers in Warangal District of Telangana region. To give representation to cross – section of the customers, stratified random sampling method was used. Respondents from various strata wise i.e. employees, businessmen, housewives, students, etc., were selected for the study. The various reports, manuals and documents etc., were also consulted to collect secondary data and relevant literature.

The data is processed, analyzed and presented in a systematic way through various statistical techniques like weighted average, weighted ranking, etc. Simple ranking techniques were also used to rank the responses of certain variables. The 5 – point Likert Scale technique was used to test satisfaction level of the respondents. Other tools such as ratios percentages are also used to present the data effectively.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study is restricted to identify the customer relationship most in telecom companies only. The study was confined to Warangal district Airtel customers. The primary data was collected from a sample of 240 cellular users by administering a structured questionnaire.

The secondary data was collected from Airtel manuals, magazines and websites and so on. The study covers information about the customer relationship management practices in the telecom industry with regard to the quality of service, customer satisfaction, grievance redressal mechanism, additional benefits, loyalty programmes, MNP services etc. It also covers the physical facilities available at office premises, customer care service and other value added services provided by the Airtel.

It is aimed at enlightening the company about different steps to be taken up to increase the share of Airtel with regard to other competitors and also to make the company to provide better customer services.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Studying the expectation and behavior of all the respondents is difficult task. Therefore, the present study is confined to Warangal District of Telangana Region only.
- The study confined to only Airtel customers. Though there are many products offered by Airtel, only the mobile phone customers are taken for the study.
- The size of the sample is 240 only.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of previous research studies suggested that CRM focuses on customers and the organization's entire gamut of functions related to value creation and value delivery. It is concerned with developing brand loyalty and customer loyalty to the highest possible level, to maintain long-term customer relationship. Therefore, CRM deployment is positively related to acquiring customers by understanding their needs, retaining customers by fulfilling their needs more than their expectations and attracting new customers through customer specific strategic marketing approaches. Amazingly, Bharati Airtel performs better than any other telecom service providers in case of establishing long term relationships.

While all telecom companies possess the essential infrastructure for CRM (information technology and non – information technology tools), Bharti Airtel is more vastly stronger in terms of non-information technology tools such as the capability to collect the customer feedbacks and complaints. This can be due to its inception has been at the forefront of technology and has pioneered several innovations in the telecom sector and this can be resulted to became third company in the world to cross 100 million mark in a single country.

The above-mentioned findings are propose that both IT and non-IT mediums (i.e. human interaction) can be used as an approach towards relationship development in terms of utilization of the categories in CRM classification, all telecom companies are applying operational, analytical, collaborative, and E-CRM. Although Bharati Airtel is again stronger in more effectively conveying the information for the customer and more effectively receiving information by the customer, this can be attributed to its customer centre's presence. Bharti Airtel is not having effective CRM strategy which involves the integration of all customer touch points. Therefore, the Bharati Airtel is not able to determine the daily performance of each customer centre in each division. Until the end of the month that central office receives the reports of the divisions and then it can identify the strengths and weakness of the channels.

Once organizing the customer base is completed, business can then design an individualized response in the right proportion to the expected level of customer profitability potential. Bharti Airtel effectively utilizes the internet to scrutinize better the core customer and then provide them with highly personalized and specialized services in its all divisions.

Furthermore, CRM can guide the managers how to take measures on allocating more resources on growing areas and aggravating activities on the unprofitable, less profitable customers and weak areas of business to improve them. The CRM play a vital role in telecom industry & banking industry where the competition is extremely high and profit margins are relatively low. It is of great importance for the telecom companies to attract new customers, retain existing ones, and establish long-term relationship with profitable ones.

The CRM empowers the Managers what are the best approaches to entice prospective customers, how to keep the existing ones and avoid defeating them to the competitions. The most profitable customers are the ones who contribute to a very high share of profit in any Business organization. Therefore, the CRM can assist the managers of the telecom companies to scrutinize those core customers and then to provide them with personalized services and products. It can guide the managers and employees how to boost the relationships with those customers by providing them the right products, services, and additional services at the right time via the most appropriate channel and by offering them diverse and pertinent cross-and up-selling options.

³ G.P. Garg, Seema S Zohar, Rupali & Joozar Shula, "Rejuvenating organizations for becoming winners – The Millennium perspective", JIMS 8M, April- June 2000, pp.22-24

CRM is beneficial to both the organization and the customers. The organizations benefit from reduction in customer acquisition costs, generation of more loyal customers, expansion of customer base, reduction in advertisement and promotion expenses, increase in the number of profitable customers, the possibility to introduce new products easily and also the possibility to expand the business.

CRM is beneficial to customers in the form of improved service quality, personalized service, reduction of risk and stress, increased value for money and empowerment.

An effective CRM Strategy involves the integration of all customer touch points. Customers can choose how they wish to sustain a dialog with the company. To retain customers, it is vital to keep dialog going and keep the customer in control. Customers enjoys being in control of their relationship. The technology needs to help the company to optimize the value of customer relationship across. The present study entitled "Customer relationship management - with reference to Bharti Airtel," has been undertaken by me and the following observations were made.

- The age wise distribution of sample respondents reveals that on the whole, a majority of the respondents constituting about 48 per cent is represented by below 25 years age group and is followed by 25-35 years age group (33.33 per cent). The sample is dominated by the respondents in the age group of below 25 years.
- Gender wise composition of sample respondents shows that males dominated the Airtel mobile services with 73.80 per cent, followed by female respondents (26.11 per cent). This shows that there is gender bias in the use of Airtel mobile services.
- The study of occupational pattern of sample customers reveals that on the whole as many as 40 per cent of respondents are professionals, followed by students with 25 per cent. It indicates that most of the professionals are using Airtel mobile services and followed by students.
- From the Income wise analysis of sample respondents it is observed that majority of the Airtel consumers were earning Rs.10, 000 - Rs.20,000 income, representing nearly 47 per cent and followed by less than Rs. 10,000 income group (23.89 per cent).
- The family size of the respondents reveals that a majority of the respondents (40 per cent) have a family size consisting of 5-6 members, followed by 3-4 family size with 35.00 per cent. It indicates that 5-6 members of family size dominated the sample.
- The educational back ground of the respondents shows that 40.00 per cent are postgraduates followed by graduates (22.78 per cent). This indicates a close relationship between education and use of mobile phones. It is the educated consumers who know the use of mobile phones effectively.
- Urban respondents dominated the sample with 60 per cent followed by semi urban respondents of 23.33 per cent and rural account for 16.67 per cent. This indicates that the higher rate of penetration of mobile phones in urban areas as compare to rural areas. Further, this also indicates that mobile phones making inroads into rural and semi urban areas including hamlets.
- An Analysis of type of the service preferred by the sample respondents of Airtel reveals that pre-paid services more popular when compared to postpaid services, and an overwhelming majority of 83 per cent of the respondents preferring pre-paid services. This was due to several advantages associated with pre-paid service.
- An Analysis of motivators/influencer, who convinces the respondents to use the service, reveals that it is observed from the study that friends are the most dominant motivators (72.22 per cent) of customers in convincing the respondents to use Airtel services.
- It is observed that majority of the respondents (52.22 per cent) have been using Airtel cellular connection for more than 4 years due to wide network coverage.
- Further it is observed that, an overwhelming majority (83.33 per cent) of respondents of Airtel have not shifted from Airtel to other service provider. In the recent past about 17 per cent of sample respondents shifted from other network to Airtel. This indicates that the Airtel service provider has been attracting new customers into their Airtel family from other service providers.
- It is observed from the opinions of the respondents who shifted from other network to Airtel that the wide network is the main reason for shifting.
- The Study of reasons for staying with the present service providers reveals that the main reason to stay with Airtel service provider is wide network (Rank 1) followed by more features (rank 2). Lower tariff, service innovations, loyalty programs, customer information system, grievance redressal mechanism, offering gifts and others occupied rank 3, rank4, rank5, rank6, rank7, rank8 & rank 9 each respectively.
- It is observed that majority (64.44 per cent) of the respondents stated that 1 paisa per 1 second scheme attracted them most.
- Majority of the respondents (62.77 per cent) are of the opinion that they welcome the MNP service which is introduced by Department of Telecommunications.
- Majority of the respondents (58.89 per cent) expressed that they prefer to switch over from current telecom service provider to other service provider after MNP service is introduced into telecom industry.
- Further, it is observed that majority of the respondents (39.18 per cent) would like to switch from current telecom service to others because of wide coverage area.
- It is observed that Majority of the respondents (34.44 per cent) satisfied with pre- sale attention of the company personnel.
- Further it is inferred that majority of the respondents are satisfied with the attitude shown during sales by the company personnel.
- Majority of the respondents (50.00 per cent) expressed that the pricing of the recharge cards of Airtel is reasonable, and it is inferred that majority of the respondents are happy with the pricing pattern of their service provider.
- An analysis of the preferred place of purchase of recharge cards by the sample respondents shows that more than half of the respondents purchased recharge cards at their nearby retail shops and the service provider should follow mass distribution strategy.
- It is further observed that the retailers and other store people are charging Rs.1 or Rs.2 extra than the MRP except at company outlet. The service provider should maintain MRP strictly.
- A study of benefits received by the sample customers from their service provider for loyalty reveals that almost majority of the respondents (60 per cent) were not benefited for additional loyalty, and not getting benefit being loyal to their service. This could be due to the reason that a proper database is not being maintained by service provider and hence the failure in benefiting the loyal customers.
- It is observed that majority of the respondents are complaining about the marketing calls and about inadequate services to their service providers.
- The company personnel are solving the problems of customers. In majority of the cases the company personnel are solving the problem with in one day or two days. This is a good sign on the part of company to retain the customers and improve the loyalty.
- The customers who stated that they were not satisfied with the complaint redressal mechanism and are of the opinion that, the service provider is taking 3 to 4 days time in solving their problems though it is very simple and can be solved in one day.
- The study of customer satisfaction with regard to facilities on the basis of visit to the customer service centre related attributes ranked accessibility as the most satisfactory attribute (Rank 1) followed by neatness (Rank 2). Space, Behavior of personnel, punctuality, proper ventilation, indicators-who does what & parking place are occupied third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth each respectively.
- Majority of the respondents expressed that they are expecting immediate responses from the company personnel in the form of taking complaints or providing information. Further the respondents have added that there should be personal attention and care from company personnel in solving the problems of customers/
- It is observed that, majority of respondents (79.44 per cent) are expecting free talk time during slack hours/ holidays from the service provider for loyal customers.
- It is inferred that, the respondents are expecting quicker grievance redressal mechanism to solve their problem and courtesy from company personnel at the time of receiving, solving problems etc.

SUGGESTIONS

- The cellular market space is a highly competitive one, in which the competitors are aggressively promoting their services and gaining the market share. One of the reasons being a large potential market is a felt need for a communication device with the added benefit of portability. Here it is seen that the market leader Airtel has made great strides by concentrating on technology and expanding into the newer segments of the market by offering attractive schemes. This is clearly the reflection of the conventional marketing knowledge which shows that Airtel is able to maximize its first mover's advantage in the market and grab a larger slice of the market and strengthen its market share.
- Airtel is operating in a growing market; hence it should focus more on attracting new customers through innovative products and effective ad-campaign.
- Airtel should try to enlarge its rural customer base as its subscriber profile is highly skewed towards urban customer and every scope is there to improve the client base particularly in rural and semi urban areas.
- It should offer competitive products to the rural customer by taking into consideration the rural customer needs and their profile.
- It would be advantages for the company if it can provide bundle offer i.e. hand set with life time validity at a competitive price.
- Airtel is concentrating too much on prepaid customers; however it would be prudent to focus on postpaid customers as they constitute an assured chance of business.
- Airtel should carry out intensive campaigns so as to promote postpaid services with attractive offers like lower minimum monthly commitment, minimum call charges, bonus offers, and loyalty additions in the form of talk time, gifts etc. and group offers.
- It is seen that the quality and coverage of the Airtel is good, however the customers are experiencing signal drop and call congestion hence Airtel should try to resolve technical issues and provide seamless coverage to its customers.
- It seems that Airtel is using its dominant position to extract more from the customers using prepaid services, this is causing lot of resentment among the customers, and hence Airtel should increase the usage time on its prepaid cards.
- Airtel should reward its loyal customers for their loyalty by offering free talk time, extra talk time on recharges, caller tunes, and other value added services as it can be a good retention tool and an effective CRM practice.
- Airtel services should be made available in the market and nearer to the customer wherever they live. However the margin that is being provided to the retailers to stock and sell the prepaid cards, recharge vouchers is a very low. Hence the retailers are charging Rs. 1 or Rs.2 extra to provide their services. This is creating lot of resentment among the customers of Airtel, hence Airtel should either increase the margins to the retailers or should think of some other distribution pattern.
- The service providers are looking at MNP as competitive tool to gather the customers in the market as the customers are waiting eagerly to move from one service provider to other.
- The MNP would enable the disgruntled customers to switch from one service provider to another; hence every service provider should plan to acquire customers from others while retaining their own customers. To achieve this and the service providers should take measures like customer loyalty schemes and other relevant creative CRM practices.
- Airtel should carry advertising campaigns by effectively using the promotion mix namely advertising promotions campaigns, personal selling and should carry out large scale sales promotion campaign by utilizing various media.
- Airtel is lagging in the advertisements comparative to its competitors, and is not using creative advertisement programmes. Hence it is suggested that the Airtel should adopt most innovative and creative advertisement strategies aiming at its target customers and it should be an intensive campaign to create favorable brand loyalty for the company.

CONCLUSION

The market has become highly competitive and cellular service providers are no exception to this, hence to effectively compete in this hyper competitive environment, companies should continuously endeavor to exceed the expectations of the customers in terms of the quality of service, features that are being offered to the customers, various schemes brand building steps, product offerings etc. It is seen that the cellular market is in a growth mode and the potential is vast if not unlimited, however only those service providers who are able to provide the service according to the needs of the customers and meet their expectations will clearly have an edge over others. Hence the service providers should continuously strive to exceed the expectations of the customers. It has been rightly said one satisfied customer is worth 10 prospective customers and are disgruntled customers can break 20 prospective customers. To gain the customer loyalty it is imperative to practice innovative and creative customer relationship management techniques and retain their competitive edge.

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