

Customer relationship management in the international context – theoretical and practical considerations

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Abstract. *The customer relationship strategy as part of the general business strategy is focused on the interest for the clients, having as a main objective the strengthening of the long-term relationship between the companies and the clients. The essence of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) dwells in preserving long-term partnerships, bringing added value within the business relation and delivering customised propositions to individual clients. By providing personalised products or services the company gets near the need of the client, thus making it a key customer. The bridge between the company and the key client is based on a cross-functional process through which the customer relationship management strategy is implemented. Therefore, the customer orientation becomes an impactful factor in the implementation process. Having a positive relationship with key customers and a better understanding of their needs and activity leads to clarity in the development of the customer relationship management strategy. This principle is worldwide accepted, regardless of industry in which operates the organization. The purpose of this paper is to do a key literature review on customer relationship management by enlightening both the theoretical aspects researched by academicians all over the world and empirical studies applied in international organizations. In addition, the applicative section of this paper consists in a comparison of customer relationship management dimensions' level of implementation in two multinational companies (MNC) from different industries within fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector.*

Keywords: Customer Relationship Management, multinational companies, CRM dimensions, long-term relationship, key customers.

Introduction

International organizations activate in an increasingly dynamic context, therefore their ability to survive and perform is strongly related to their innovation capability. Technology plays an important role in the process of innovation. Customers across the world have access to boundless information in a digital environment where borders are no longer an impediment. Their requirements from the goods and services sellers have increased together with access to information, therefore the customer relationship management is crucial in a digital era. (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021).

In order for the CRM to be successful and contribute to organizational performance, the CRM strategy and vision should be addressed starting from top management and needs to be transmitted further to the employees. In this situation, employees experience within the organization influences the successful deployment of CRM strategy (AlQershi et al., 2020). In order to have a successful presence and take into consideration the specificity of each market, organizations need to develop and implement new ideas, while adapting to external environment (Ghafari et al., 2011). Henceforth, from a commercial perspective, customers give the trend in a fast-developing and global market context and the management of the relationships with the customers are crucial for the company to achieve its objectives. Meanwhile, creativity and innovation at organizational level facilitate competitive advantage gain in order to outperform the rivals.

Literature review

Historical background

CRM theories have emerged from the concept of relationship marketing, which is internationally recognized and has roots back in 1983. Relationship marketing promotes the idea that companies should focus their strategy on developing long-term relationships with their customers, rather than successfully implement transactions and activities with short-term gains (Berry, 1995; Anghel et al., 2005).

This theory was further developed, and it became clearer that marketing research had a worldwide gap in studying the relationship between sellers and buyers during longer periods of time. Instead, marketing research targeted exchange operations between sellers and buyers as singular events or transactions. Besides those singular transactions, other type of seller-buyer operations came into international academic perspective: the ones that involve the development of a relationship between the sellers and the buyers with focalization on a business model built up through five phases: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution (Dwyer et al., 1987).

In addition to this five phases, Morgan and Hunt (1994) introduced a new component: cooperation. They argue that economic cooperation is needed in order to build a relationship between sellers and buyers. Therefore, a successful relationship marketing is based on a commitment-trust theory where all the business players must embrace commitment and trust.

Next step in the evolution of relationship marketing theory entails that costs for maintaining an existing customer are lower than the costs of acquiring a new one (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Direct relation between consumers and certain goods into a defined market needed to be tested in order to support the relationship marketing theory (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Both internal and external marketing need to be taken into consideration in the evolution of marketing relationship. From a certain stage marketing campaigns were not able to meet consumers' expectations or the executives' interests, especially into an international business environment where cultural discrepancies occur. Therefore, relationship marketing has the aim to make the transition from a seller-buyer singular transaction with focus on acquiring new customers to a business strategy that embraces the idea of keeping and developing the existing ones through an efficient management of an already existing relation (Christopher et al., 1991). Relationship marketing involves a customer orientation at organizational level. Companies that are customer-oriented are using processes developed at organizational level, instead of establishing departmental ways of working. Customers' perception upon the company is taken into consideration and employees' jobs involve background experience with the clients (Osarenkhoe & Bennani, 2007). Relationship marketing concept involves leaving behind a business model defined by individual orientation of each department and singular transaction. The new model covers a process-oriented business strategy where customers ask for more than just a product or service. Their needs must be treated during a longer term and through cross-functional processes at company level (Payne & Frow, 2013).

CRM definition

The definitions of customer relationship management have roots in the relationship market theories (Badwan et al., 2017). Customer relationship management has a very wide range of definitions, variety driven also by the fact that CRM is a complex concept that can be applied in any business, at an international level.

For example, CRM can be defined from an IT perspective, or from a strategic and managerial perspective (Buttle & Maklan, 2019, p.3). IT perspective is based on software programs

that even include in their official naming the CRM acronym, leading to a link between CRM and technology. All the software applications and their updates contributed to developing new ways of collecting data and interacting with customers. In an international business context, IT tools can be easily adopted by any player on the globe.

From the strategical and managerial perspective, CRM is seen as the process of managing the route of the customers: customer acquisition, customer development, profit increase and achieving loyalty. The academic literature on CRM has four theoretical areas (Wahlberg et al., 2009): CRM defined as a business process that has to be integrated at organizational level, CRM defined as a business strategy in which customer has a centric role, CRM defined as knowledge about customers and CRM defined as an activity of information management on customers, through technological tools.

Authors like Payne and Frow (2013, p. 26) consider that “CRM is a cross-functional strategic approach concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate relationships with key customers and customer segments.” Kumar and Reinartz (2012, p.5) define CRM as a “strategic process of selecting customers that a firm can most profitably serve and shaping interactions between a company and these customers. The ultimate goal is to optimize the current and future value of customers for the company.” More definitions of CRM are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. CRM definitions

Definition	Source
“customer relationship management is about process efficiency, reducing operational costs, and improving customer interactions and experience.”	Fatouretchi, 2019, p.9
“Customer relationship management is a business approach that integrates people, process, and technology to maximize relationships with all customers, providing seamless collaboration between all customer-facing functions.”	Goldenberg, 2015, p.3
“It is a process or methodology used through which one learns more about customers’ needs and behaviors in order to develop stronger relationship with them.”	Shanthi, 2013, p.1
“Customer Relationship Management is a comprehensive strategy and process of acquiring, retaining and partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the company and the customer.”	Sheth et al., 2001, p.6
“CRM is the practice of analyzing and using marketing databases and leveraging communication technologies to determine corporate practices and methods that maximize the lifetime value of each customer to the firm.”	Kumar and Reinartz, 2012, p.4
“Customer Relationship Management is an enterprise approach to understanding and influencing customer behavior through meaningful communications in order to improve customer acquisition, customer retention, customer loyalty, and customer profitability.”	Swift, 2001, p.12

Source: Author’s own research contribution.

Although relationship marketing and CRM are strongly connected and exhibit some similarities, there are certain differences among them. For example, relationship marketing is a strategic concept, whereas CRM has more tactical implications. Moreover, relationship marketing concentrates on behavior and emotions, while CRM focuses on management and processes that involve customers (Sin et al., 2005).

CRM dimensions

The most widely used dimensions for CRM in academic literature were identified by Sin et al. (2005). According to them there are four behavioral components: key customer focus, CRM organization, knowledge management and technology-based CRM. According to Yim et al. (2005) the four dimensions mentioned above are strongly related to four key areas that need to be tackled in the same time in order to ensure that CRM capabilities are successfully deployed at organizational level: strategy, people, processes and technology.

Other authors identified a similar structure for CRM dimensions. For example, Pozza et al. (2018) use the following four dimensions: organizational alignment, customer management, CRM technology and CRM strategy implementation. Wang and Feng (2012) structure their research on customer orientation, customer-centric organizational system and CRM technology.

There are also different opinions on how CRM should be represented in terms of components. Josiassen et al. (2014) consider that CRM has 5 dimensions, grouped in two pillars. First pillar is CRM System Investments, which is represented by CRM activity investments and relative CRM expenses. Second pillar is CRM Capability, which consists of information generation, information dissemination and responsiveness. Figure 1 reveals the four dimensions from Sin et al. (2005).

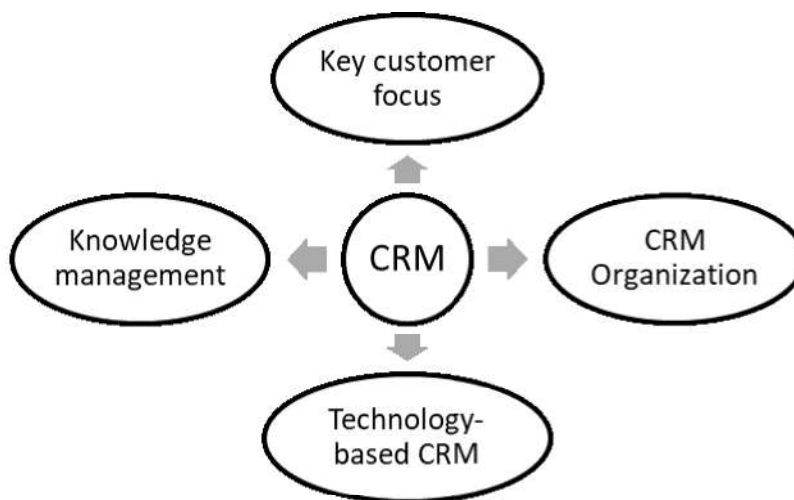


Figure 1. CRM dimensions developed by Sin et al. (2005)

Source: Author's own research contribution.

Key customer focus

In customer-oriented organizations employees are interested in meeting the needs that existing customers and potential ones express. Customer orientation is positively influencing performance (at employee level) and customer satisfaction. A customer-oriented behavior has the purpose to increase satisfaction on long term, thus leading to loyalty for the products or services offered (Mohammad et al., 2013). Through key customer focus international companies are able to offer personalized goods or services to their customers. CRM contributes to information processing and helps organizations to discover certain patterns that help the customization process (Wang and Yang, 2010).

CRM organization

CRM organization involves a successful process of organizing the company around CRM. This requires a common goal for the entire organization: to create and protect powerful relations with

the customers (Sin et al., 2005). This type of strategy requires strong collaborations between departments. Payne and Frow (2013) point out the importance of switching from an organizational culture oriented towards individual functions and departments to one which has a strong cross-functional approach. According to Sin et al (2005) human resources management is vital for organizational adaptation towards a customer relationship approach.

Knowledge management

Customer segmentation and profiling is a process based on knowledge management. Similar, identification of valuable customers can be a tough task. Knowledge management plays an important role into a customer-oriented company (Garrido-Moreno and Padilla-Meléndez, 2011) and can be related to an innovative activity, both in large, but also small companies (Nicolescu & Nicolescu, 2012). The organization has to generate, transfer and act upon the owned knowledge (Sin et al, 2005). The management of this knowledge requires capabilities such as acquisition, transformation, application and protection (Tseng, 2016). As a CRM component, knowledge is referring to the customers and has a final purpose of generating satisfaction for them (Srivastava et al., 2019).

CRM technology

Originally, CRM and IT customer solutions were regarded as the same (Ernst et al, 2010). Even though the two concepts were separated, technology plays an important role in management of databases within organizations. Accuracy in segmentation of actual customers and potential ones is imperative in order to achieve success (Abbott, 2001). CRM technology is based on IT solutions whose role is to enhance the interaction between organizations and customers, as a facilitator of acquiring and processing customer information (Ernst et al, 2010). Employees from sales department can benefit from IT tools and maximize their performance. Integration of information technology into daily activities improves work efficiency through sales automation (Ahearne et al, 2007).

CRM plays an important role in the international context, at company level (for multinational companies for example, and not only) as well as at country level, as the image of a country is also based on the activities of its companies home and abroad (Nicolescu, 2008).

Methodology

The methodology used is descriptive analysis applied to two case studies. The two case studies have been conducted in two multinational companies (MNC) operating in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector.

Both of the companies originate in Western Europe. For one company operates in the cosmetics industry and has subsidiaries in more than 160 countries and it will be called company A (for confidentiality reasons). The other company operates in the food industry, having subsidiaries in more than 180 countries. Both companies have a history of more than 100 years. The data was collected based on documentation (such as analysis of types of research studies organized by each MNC), observation (based on research internships in the companies) and interviews (one interview at the level of each company with a marketing department representative).

After a short descriptive presentation of the CRM at company level based on the CRM dimensions framework conceptualized by Sin et al. (2004), a comparative analysis between the two companies is conducted.

Results and discussions

CRM in a cosmetic multinational company - Company A case study

The CRM dimensions presented in the next part are key customer focus, CRM organization, knowledge management and technology-based CRM (Sin et al., 2005).

The first dimension, the key customer focus dimension is present up to a certain extent in Company A. The organization makes an effort to identify the needs of its key customers, especially by investing in market research activities and brand studies at an international level, conducted by a third-party international research agency. The types of activities that take place in company A and suggest a customer focus orientation are:

a. Brand health tracking studies that are conducted once at four or more years: this type of studies are done by company A in order to measure usage habits of cosmetic products, awareness, likeability and usage of brands within the cosmetic industry and purchase funnel for own brands and also for competitor brands. The brand funnel is consolidated through the following levels: awareness, consideration, purchase, repurchase and loyalty. Also, the brand funnel illustrates what is the percentage of people that are moving from a level to another. The study results in a segmentation of consumers based on their needs and preferences offering insights also of consumer trends and evolution. For example, in 2013 the company conducted a study which revealed an increase in the percentage of men that are starting to care more about their look and are willing to buy dedicated products for their skin. Another example of insightful result is that urban environment with increased pollution is generating skin stress. The international research agency is managing the studies for each country in Europe, based on specific market information provided by the marketing department within each country.

b. Pre-launch studies that are conducted each time before the company launches a new product. Feedback and recommendations from consumers are taken into consideration when developing new products. Before deployment to international level, products are tested and only after achieving a certain score they are launched across the world. Feedback on new products can lead to changes regarding the product, such as smell or texture, but can also lead to changes of packaging. The international research agency is conducting pre-launch studies in countries from Western Europe where cosmetic products market is highly developed.

The second CRM dimension analyzed is the CRM organization. This dimension refers to the way an organization is structured so that it reflects the fact that customers are a priority. Company A does not show evidence of the following aspects of CRM organization:

a. Sales and marketing expertise: employees from company A are missing expertise in CRM.

b. Training programs: training programs dedicated to CRM knowledge are missing within the marketing department. Also, the company does not provide any CRM dedicated training for the employees.

c. Business goals related to customers: CRM organization dimensions involves the following process of customer business goals: acquisition, development, retention and reactivation. Company A has no strategy and goals for the above-mentioned process. The only component from the above process that is present is reactivation. Each country where company A is present develops its own actions to reactivate the existing customers through three or four activities per year with

dedicated messages through email marketing. The content of the newsletters is mainly educational, representing information regarding products that the customers already used.

d. Employee performance is measured based on meeting customer needs: in company A employees' performance rating does not take into consideration the customer needs. Employee performance is measured based on individual targets and group targets. Individual targets in company A are market share level and net sales level. Group target is profitability of the company.

However, company A proved evidence of one aspect of CRM organization: the organizational structure of the marketing department is based on the type of customers. For example, a segmentation of customers that reflects the organizational structure is based on genre. Also, a more granular segmentation is represented by the body part that the products address.

The third CRM dimension is knowledge management. This dimension refers to knowledge creation, knowledge transfer or sharing and knowledge application and responsiveness. The type of activities that are present in company A and suggest a good management of knowledge about customers are:

a. Willingness to help customers in a responsive manner and existence of two-way communication channels: company A is working with a third-party agency for offering solutions in terms of complaints from customers or responses to product related questions or marketing campaigns related questions.

b. Promptitude: Company A offers customers a digitally solution within the presence of a chatbot on its website, thus being able to provide answers in real time based on an already predefined list of topics.

The fourth CRM dimension analyzed is technology-based CRM. This dimension is referring to the capability of the organization to collect data, store them and then analyze in order to generate meaningful insights regarding the organization's customers. In regard to technology-based dimension, Company A presents only one characteristic: hardware for CRM. Company A owns the latest technology assets capable of meeting the technological requirements from latest software programs. Company A is offering its employees new computers at every three years. On the other hand, company A does not meet several requirements for technology-based CRM dimension to be considered present. For example, company A doesn't have CRM dedicated software, therefore no technical personnel to provide the necessary support is available. Another important aspect of technology-based CRM is the existence of a comprehensive database of the customers. Given the fact that no dedicated software is in place, an extensive database is not available.

Company A has CRM on the agenda as a strategic pillar for the business development. Although it is not prepared from a technological point of view, the company is aware that it can do more in terms of investing in CRM technology, as suggested by one marketing team member: "CRM is a topic on the medium-term agenda because loyal consumers represent the base of the business. We do as much as we can with the resources that are available at the moment because we understand that they are an important pillar for our business and we are very much aware of the fact that we have a lot to improve especially from a technical point of view".

CRM dimensions in a food multinational company – company B case study

For company B, the CRM dimensions can be characterized as follows.

Key customer focus dimension is present at Company B level through repetitive market research studies. These studies are conducted by a third-party international research agency in collaboration with Company B's own research department. Activities that suggest that company B has a customer orientation are:

a. Brand health tracker studies: this type of study is conducted in company B once at every two or three years. Brand health tracking studies are conducted in order to assess the score of the company B's brands and also competitor brands on the brand funnel, using the following funnel levels: awareness, consideration, trial, repurchase, loyalty. Brand studies conducted by company B offer information also on usage habits for food products, buying behavior, usage of brands within food category and brand image perceived by customers. An example of insight from a study conducted in 2019 is that the percentage of people willing to move from consideration phase to actual trial is higher for brands with big awareness and brands that are perceived as a safe choice.

b. Pre-launch studies conducted every time before launching a new product. For company B feedback from customers is fundamental for developing new products. Company B makes an effort in order to identify consumer needs and to fulfill them. In this matter company B is performing studies on consumer feedback for new products before they are launched and applies recommendations in final modifications on products. Feedback received can lead to changes in shape, packaging, smell and even taste or recipe. For example, in the last years natural ingredients are among the most important factor into purchase decision making. This type of studies are conducted in collaboration with international third-party research agencies in most developed countries: UK, Germany, France. The portfolio segmentation is specific and reflects customer segmentation and customer needs. Consumer studies are done at an international level in economically developed countries with high purchasing power.

The second dimension analyzed is CRM organization. In company B were not identified any characteristics specific to this dimension. For example, sales and marketing employees do not have CRM expertise, there are no CRM dedicated trainings, business goals are not related to customer acquisition, development, retention and reactivation, employee performance does not take into consideration the level of customer needs that were met and organizational structure is not designed around customers. Although CRM trainings are not available and CRM expertise is not met among employees, company B allocates high attention to personal development of its employees. For example, employees are helped by their managers to identify their weak points and to improve their skills through trainings such as: time management trainings, prioritization trainings, public speaking trainings, using company's software trainings. Also, company B encourage. Performance and rewards are not measured based on customer needs' fulfillment. They are measured through team objective (which are business objectives such as profitability) and individual objectives. Individual objectives are based on two types of measures: individual performance measure and individual development measure. Individual performance measure scale is represented by the achievement of individual business objectives that are numerical and can be easily quantified: market share, sales growth, digital key performance indicators. Individual development of employees consists is more subjective and is based on teammates' feedback on how the weak points were improved during the year.

The third CRM dimension, knowledge management, is present in company B through the following characteristics: willingness to help customers in a responsive manner and existence of two-way communication channels. Company B has its own department responsible for offering

solutions to customer complaints and to provide information to consumers. Customers can contact the company through phone, direct request within website or social media. Direct requests within the website are solutioned during working days and within working program. For emergencies there is also a permanent contact through phone. Company B engages with already existing consumers through special promotions, targeting repurchases from potential loyal customers through discounts for next acquisitions based on amount spent.

Technology-based CRM is the fourth dimension analyzed. Company B meets only one aspect of this dimension: presence of the right hardware to implement CRM programs. Employees work on computers which are replaced once at every three years in order to keep pace with technological advancements. Other aspects of technology-based CRM are missing from company B. Dedicated CRM software is not used, therefore a comprehensive database of the customers is not in place.

For company B CRM is not on the priority list and even though the current business environment is very digitalized CRM strategy is not part of the general business strategy. According to a marketing department from company B, “CRM is not very popular in the company, probably because there are not many resources and from a historical point of view it was not an important aspect of our business strategy. As a marketing person, I believe in its’ benefits and I am aware of the opportunities that CRM can provide, but being into an international company we can only introduce it on the agenda as a top-down business process or strategy.”

Comparative analysis

The two companies analyzed are very similar in terms of presence of customer relationship management dimensions, having only a few minor distinctions. Table 2 provides a comparison between Company A and Company B.

Table 2. Comparative analysis CRM - company A vs. company B

Customer relationship management dimension	Company A	Company B
Key customer focus	Market research for brand perception and consumer needs once at four or more years in countries with high purchase power. Ask consumers for feedback before internationally launching a product.	Market research for brand perception and consumer needs once at two to three years in countries with high purchase power. Ask consumers for feedback before internationally launching a product.
CRM organization	No dedicated customer relationship management trainings. Organizational structure is not based on customers. Performance and reward system is not based on customers. Performance is based on achievement of business targets.	No dedicated customer relationship management trainings. Organizational structure is not based on customers. Performance and reward system is not based on customers. Performance is based on achievement of business targets and personal development.
Knowledge management	High degree of responsiveness and promptitude in offering support to	High degree of responsiveness and promptitude in offering support to

Customer relationship management dimension	Company A	Company B
	consumers via two-way communication channels. Engage loyal consumers through digital means. Third party involved in managing customer questions and complaints.	consumers via two-way communication channels. Very limited activities done to engage with loyal consumers. The activities are more promotional oriented. Dedicated department involved in managing customer questions and complaints
Technology-based CRM	Owns right hardware for customer relationship management programs. Lack of software dedicated to customer relationship management. Small database with information on consumers. Activates digital campaigns with a customer relationship management component through existing tools.	Owns right hardware for customer relationship management programs. Lack of software dedicated to customer relationship management. No database or defined process for customer information acquisition.

Source: Author's own research contribution.

Both multinational companies analyzed manifest a medium to small implementation level of CRM. Key customer focus and CRM organization dimensions are very similar in company A and company B. Both companies invest in research to identify customer needs, trends and preferences. Still, company B is performing regular and more often consumer studies. This is a consequence of the activity domain (food) which requires rigorous regulatory affairs. Both companies lack CRM trainings and do not measure, or reward employees based on meeting customer needs. In regard to knowledge management dimension company A and company B have variation. For example, company A uses a third party for consumer complaints whereas company B has its own department. Also, company A engages more with the customers through digital means. In terms of technological resources both of them are missing a specialized software in managing customer relations.

Conclusion

The paper explains the concept of customer relationship management and the evolution process from relationship marketing to current theory, with emphasize on its basic dimensions. The comparative analyses conducted concludes that CRM dimensions express a medium to small degree of existence in two MNC from FMCG sector. The majority of the existing studies on CRM in international organizations are conducted in services sector, being predominantly in industries like tourism, financial services or telecommunications. Consequently, a high degree of CRM implementation is resulted in such industries due to frequent interactions with customers. Therefore, this analysis is focusing on FMCG sector, which is less studied and in which customers do not engage so much with the brands or products that they acquire. In both companies that were analyzed the key customer focus is most present among dimensions as both of them are conducting studies on customer preferences. Knowledge management and technology-based CRM dimensions

are very limited in both companies as there are only few CRM activities executed with the resources in place. On the other hand, CRM organization dimension is totally missing from both companies. One limitation for this paper is that only two multinational companies were studied. Although the two organizations are representative for their industries, FMCG is very vast in terms of activity domains and further analysis in other industries from FMCG sector is required in order to observe if CRM dimensions have a general low degree of presence in companies activating in this sector.

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