

Original Paper

The Effect of Relationship Marketing on Customer Retention through Customer Engagement Considering Customer Citizenship Behavior

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Abstract

In these years due to intense competition, companies have forced to use tools and methods for enhancing their customer retention. There are effective and common strategies for improving this issue. One of these significant and important strategies is relationship marketing. This research accomplished in order to investigate the effect of relationship marketing on customer retention through customer engagement considering customer citizenship behavior within broiler manufacturers in province of guilan (north of Iran). This is descriptive survey research based on data collecting. Statistical population were selected among consumers of broiler industry's products by non-probability sampling method. Data collecting tool were questionnaire and sample size were 150. For testing reliability cronbach's alpha test was used. For analyzing dates used Amos Graphic and SPSS. Results showed that trust and conflict handling as relation marketing elements have positive and significant effect on customer retention through customer engagement, and also results showed that customer citizenship behavior has no significant effect on relationship of customer engagement and customer retention.

Keywords

customer retention, customer engagement, trust, commitment, conflict handling, customer citizenship behavior

1. Introduction

Customer retention brings a plethora of merits for companies in various industries. Influential factors including intense competition and costs of attracting new customers, persuade companies to retain their customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 1999). Some previous researches also have showed customer retention's advantages in terms of financial issues. Researches have revealed that 1 % rise in customer retention rate increases Company's profitability by an average of 5 % (Hawkins & Hoon, 2019). Businesses try to examine and implement several strategies for retaining customers, one of significant and common strategies is Relationship Marketing. Nowadays, Companies are able to sustain themselves in the market for the long term by implementing strategies to create a long-lasting relationship with their customers through relationship marketing (Payne & Frow, 2017). Several studies have considered relationship marketing as a single construct (Hennig-Thurau & Thurau, 2003) or a combination of many constructs. Previous researches have introduced many variables as relationship marketing's constructs. Trust, dedication, interaction, fulfillment of assurances, competence and conflict handling are common indicators of relationship marketing (Ndubisi, 2007). In some papers trust, commitment and conflict handling only are considered as a standard block of relationship marketing (Ryssel et al., 2004; Ndubisi, 2011; Salem, 2020).

Studies showed some variable can impact on relationship between relationship marketing and customer retention. One of factors is customer engagement, Customer engagement as a crucial building block for businesses to develop a long-term relationship with their clients and thus reach a certain level of customer retention and decrease the possibility of customers switching to other brands (Hapsari et al., 2017). Customer engagement helps companies to achieve more customer retention through marketing relationship (Salem, 2020).

Also, voluntary behaviors by customer such as customer citizenship behavior can have effect on bilateral relationship between customer and company. Customer citizenship behavior retain brand's customers for a long time and improve its performance (Jacola & alexander, 2014). And also improve other customers' behaviors, market share, company's profitability, sales, and customer's unwillingness (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015) and Some industries in Iran are advantages and can bring a plethora of merits through making job opportunities and financial benefits. Broiler industry is one of them that has experienced permanent growth during these years. For 30 years ago, broiler industry has experienced 700% rise in production rate from 230000 units per year to 1460000 units per year (statistical center of Iran, 2020). Broiler company's development and job opportunities for labor force will forge an excellent situation for country. So, in this research we try to respond a significant question, does relationship marketing impact on customer retention through customer engagement?

The main objective of research is to assess the effect of relationship marketing as a significant tool for marketing and sales managers in Iranian poultry companies.

1.1 Customer Retention

Customer retention is a significant objective for a plethora of companies, organizations and businesses. Customer retention can make a win-win situation for company and customer through economic and social interactions (Gwninner et al, 1998). Customer retention consists various topics including definition, economic efficiency, customers who should be retained, strategies and assessments. These are important issues that will make questions for managers and executives (buttle, 2009). Customer retention was studied by researchers and most of them concentrate on the same topic that discuss about company's efforts in order to make permanent and long-term relationship with customer. Researchers believe customer retention is crucial for businesses that want to be stable (buttle, 2006). Buttle (2009) defined customer retention as an effort in order to retain long term relationship with customers. More customer retention means less customer churn rate. Another description explains customer retention as a transformation process from new customer to permanent customer (mokhtaredin et al., 2019). Based another approach related to management of customer relationship, customer retention is expressed in order to retain customer data base and convert them to loyal customer (Hawkings et al., 2019). Bodey et al. (2019) represents customer retention as lifelong relationship with both product and service. And also, we can define customer retention as the percentage of active customers at the beginning of the year. From another point of view, customer retention emphasis on long term economic benefits that arise between customer and company. Bahri ammari & bilgihan (2019) defined customer retention as a method that company can retain customers and their portfolio.

1.2 Relationship Marketing

For the first time, berry (1983) served the concept of relationship marketing in service marketing literature. Berry defined relationship marketing as attracting strategy, maintaining strategy and in multi service organizations enhancing customer relationship. Gummesson (1993) defined relationship marketing a strategy that consider management of engagement, relationship and networks as a crucial topic. Morgan and hunt (1994) described relationship marketing as general marketing activities with the aim of establishment, improvement and retain relationships with stakeholders. Another definition also emphasizes on importance of customers and stakeholders. Maggon and Chaudhry (2015) emphasized that relationship marketing as an important and effective strategy involves several activities such as manage, maintain, and control the exchanges with customers.

In relationship Marketing many factors and measures are defined and discussed. The majority of these measures are Trust, dedication, interaction, fulfillment of assurances, competence, as well as conflict handling that are used and known as measuring indicators of relationship marketing (Ndubisi, 2007). Some new researches considered relationship marketing as a group of variables including trust, commitment and conflict handling (Salem, 2020). So, in this study, relationship marketing is investigated as a group of variables consisting of trust, commitment and conflict handling.

1.3 Trust

Trust as one of important constructs of relationship marketing is studied by marketing researchers and practitioners. Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) define trust as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Trust has also been looked at as the belief that a partner's word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfil his/her obligations in a relationship (Schurr & Ozanne, 1985). Al Abdulrazak and Gbadamosi (2017) defined trust as a crucial factor in building relationships with clients. In other definition trust is found and perceived by people through measuring some indicators in one's belief. These measurement tools are known as factors such as competence, integrity, and benevolence (Agyei et al., 2020; Xie & Peng, 2009). Also, Brown et al. (2019), interprets trust as a relationship that this is emerges when both sides of an exchange or relationship confides each other.

Also, previous studies explain trust from customer's point of view, in this approach trust is defined as a reasonable price of a product or service. Iglesias et al. (2020) defined trust as a critical factor that leads to customer loyalty. Similarly, Marakanon and Panjakajornsak (2017) noted that trust and customer retention have a positive relationship with each other. Salem (2020) express Companies should find ways to build trust with their customers to achieve customer retention and thus sustain themselves in the market. Other definitions emphasize on the consequences of trust, Anderson and Narus (1984) define trust as a partner's belief that the other partner will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes, as well as not take unexpected actions that would result in negative results. The presence of trust in outsourcing relationships can reduce the probability of strained relationships, which in other contexts can discourage unscrupulous behaviour (Longenecker, Moore, Petty, Palich, & McKinney, 2006).

1.4 Commitment

Commitment is known as one of the relationship marketing that can identify level of it, previous researches showed that commitment is used for determining loyalty of customers as a measuring tool (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and also it can enhance the probability of repurchasing. Moorman et al. (1992) define commitment as to maintain a valued relationship. This implies a higher level of obligation to make a relationship succeed, and to make it mutually satisfying and beneficial (Gundlach et al., 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Based on Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp (1995), we argue that as interdependence between the outsourcer and the service provider increases, the need for better management of conflicts increases, which in turn leads to greater trust and commitment. In the context of this research, commitment is future oriented and is based on the Confucian dynamism and long-term orientation. In fact, the concept of relationship commitment is similar to the concept of long-term orientation that comprises the desire and utility of a buyer to have an enduring relationship with a seller (Anderson & Weitz, 1989). We reason that a vendor's relationship commitment is preceded by trust in the outsourcer which is shaped in turn by good conflict handling.

Commitment, is defined by the value of the relationship and the effort by two sides to maintain it (Narteh et al., 2013) nevertheless, a psychological approach defines it as the psychological feelings of the mind that tend to make a positive relationship with a business (Ashley et al., 2011). As another definition,

commitment is interpreted as a default action that two persons or two sides of an exchange rely on and try to found a valuable relationship (Van Tonder & Petzer, 2018). Also, Yao et al. (2019), believe commitment emerges when two parties recognize that the relationship is worthy. This state shapes a constructive perception for customers that is similar to the relationship of a company and its customers. So, at the end, there are a continuous correlation between customer and company. Similar studies such as Amoako et al. (2019) and Su et al. (2016), express that commitment plays a significant and crucial role to make a mental basement for establishing permanent and continuous relationship.

1.5 Conflict Handling

In many industries, determining level of customer's satisfaction is necessary in order to obtain a feedback for further assessing (Azar et al., 2020). There are many factors that can help companies to recognize level of satisfaction, Complaints are one of this, and complaints are effective form of feedback that guide businesses to improve their services. Complaints emerge when customer were not satisfied with the services and handling challenges by company (Cheng et al., 2019). Handling issues and complaints by businesses are known as important and vital factor to enhance customer's satisfaction. Previous studies mentioned it as a crucial factor to establish permanent relationship between customer and company (shooshtari et al., 2018; Ofori et al., 2018). So conflict handling as one of relationship marketing constructs is discussed in marketing literatures. Conflict handling is defined as a factor that shows the ability of business to solve the conflict (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). This approach is seen also in present researches. Salem (2020) believe that conflict handling strategies try to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive consequences.

1.6 Relationship Marketing and Customer Engagement

Engagement has been discussed in several researches and literatures. This variable is known as deal between two sides. In marketing, the term engagement is described as customer involvement, which considering customer's activity leads he or she toward a particular firm (Gumparthi & Patra, 2020). Customers tend to engage with a special business, when they are satisfied with their connections. And also, there is an emotional state in their mind (so et al., 2016). One of the main objectives of improving customer engagement is not only to create a positive attitude toward a service or a product but also to help the organization that be able to manage and control the relationship with its customers.

So, customer engagement has a vital and effective role on establishment permanent and continuous relationship between customers and companies. This notable factor helps businesses to improve their ability in order to retain customers and also forge a situation that leads to lower levels of customer's switching (Hapsari et al., 2017). Some previous researches explained that customer engagement is seen when the relationship between customers and companies be strong. Customer engagement is known as the result of a proper and strong relationship between customers and the organization. The connection between relationship marketing constructs and customer engagement is seen in previous studies. Roy et al. (2020) and Zaki et al. (2017) discussed that the level of customer engagement with a product or service is related to level of commitment with company or business. Bergel and Brock (2019) showed that

customer commitment can make customer engagement. Similar results about link between customer commitment and customer engagement are seen in the other researches. Some engagement behavior by customer emerge when attachment signals is perceived, in this situation voluntary behaviors is more common from customers (Thakur, 2018).

1.7 Customer Citizenship Behavior

Marketing literature mostly discussed about role of service provider in making relationship but rarely pay to importance of customer's cooperation. Voluntary behavior by customer is considered as an effective element in order to making strong relationship. Customer citizenship behavior is an important variable that emphasize on customer's role. Like organizational employees, customers may engage in a variety of citizenship behavior directed toward a specific organization. Bowen (1986) argues that "a central difference between service and manufacturing firms is that customers are often physically present when the service is provided, quite unlike manufacturing firms where customers are only rarely present during production." This approach believes that customer and employee help company for providing a successful performance. Actually, human resource of business includes both customer and employee (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Based on these descriptions, it is possible that service customers can exhibit citizenship behaviors like employees. Therefore, traditional organizational citizenship behavior research can be applied to the customer domain. In the management literature, organizational citizenship behavior has been defined formally as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988). Similarly, customer citizenship behavior is defined as "voluntary and discretionary behaviors that are not required for the successful production and/or delivery of the service but that, in the aggregate, help the service organization overall" (Groth, 2005). In literature several dimensions have introduced for customer citizenship behavior. But three significant dimensions are more common and notable for researchers including feedback, help and recommendation (Groth, 2005). Customer provide their opinions about company to help them for improving services. Customers by helping and guiding other customers plays a collaborative role for company. Also, they recommend their friends and families to purchase company's products. (Groth, Mertens, & Murphy, 2004).

Also, Ford (1995) discussed that customers with citizenship behavior try to reflect their opinions about company's failures. Some literatures pay to another dimension of customer citizenship behavior. Keh and Teo (2001) believes that customer who exhibit citizenship behavior try to ignore business's problems and also tolerate them. Keh and Teo (2001) introduces tolerance as one of dimensions of customer citizenship behavior.

2. Method

As we described in the previous part, research's following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: trust has positive effect on customer retention.

Hypothesis 2: commitment has positive effect on customer retention.

Hypothesis 3: conflict handling has positive effect on customer retention.

Hypothesis 4: trust positively effects on customer engagement.

Hypothesis 5: commitment positively effects on customer engagement.

Hypothesis 6: conflict handling positively effects on customer engagement.

Hypothesis 7: trust positively effects on customer retention by customer engagement.

Hypothesis 8: commitment positively effects on customer retention by customer engagement.

Hypothesis 9: conflict handling positively effects on customer retention by customer engagement.

Hypothesis 10: customer engagement positively effects on customer retention regarding customer citizenship behavior.

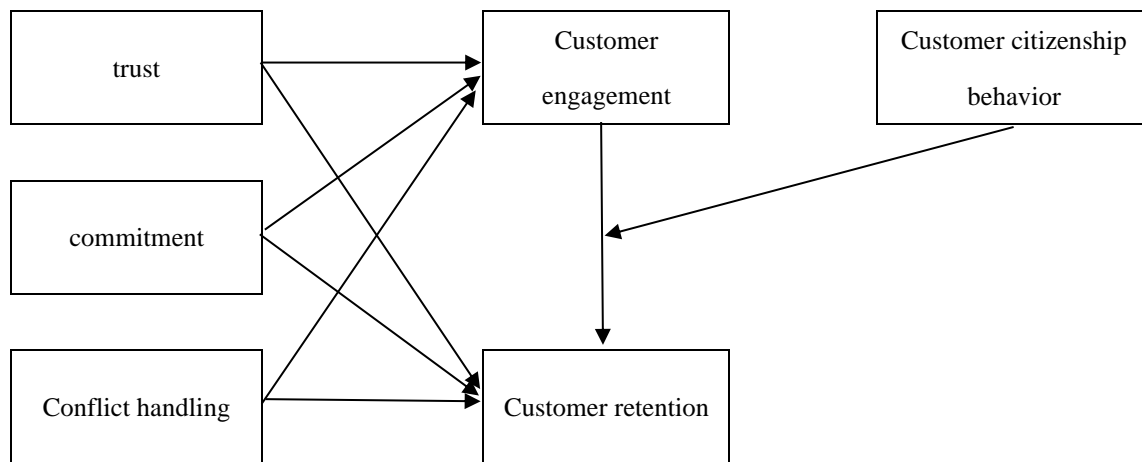


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

For preparing Questionnaire firstly questionnaire was obtained from previous researches and adapted with this study. In order to measuring relationship marketing variables including: trust 5 questions, commitment 4 questions and conflict handling 3 questions were designed regarding narteh et al. (2007). Also, 3 questions related to customer engagement were adapted from Salanova et al. (2005), Salanova et al. (2002), Rich et al. (2010). 3 The objective of this research was to measure variables such as trust, commitment, conflict handling, customer engagement, customer retention, customer citizenship behavior and their relationships. This research is descriptive and data collection tool was questionnaire and content validity were used. For testing reliability cronbach's alpha test used and for each variable were as trust (0.87), commitment (0.85), conflict handling (0.83), customer engagement (0.87), customer retention (0.81), and customer citizenship behavior (0.87). The population were consumers of broiler industry in guilan province and 150 were sample size. Amos Graphic and SPSS were used in order to data analyzing. Questions in order to measuring customer retention were obtained from Lusch and Brown (1996) and Ganesan (1994). Customer citizenship behavior's questions were obtained from yi and gong (2013). Research's population include all broiler buyers in guilan province (north of Iran). By using SPSS

software, the number of samples were estimated around 150 persons. 358 questionnaires were distributed among participants that 150 correct questionnaires were returned.

3. Result

From 150 respondents 79 persons were male (53%) and 71 persons were female (47%). In the following table, demographic result of research is shown as gender, age and education.

Table 1. Demographic Results

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
gender	Male	79	53
	female	71	47
age	18 to 24	7	4
	25 to 35	61	41
	36 to 45	70	47
	46 to 59	9	6
	>60	3	2
education	diploma	12	8
	associate	6	4
	Bachelor	71	47
	master	51	34
	PhD	10	7

And also, the following table shows the results of Shapiro-wilk test:

Table 2. Shapiro-wilk Test

Variable	Parameter		Sig	Result
	average	Standard deviation		
Trust	3.4529	0.70074	0.198	Normal
Commitment	3.1029	0.81246	0.196	Normal
Conflict handling	3.2810	0.71867	0.107	Normal
Customer engagement	3.1005	0.84377	0.127	Normal

Customer retention	3.3170	0.77272	0.062	Normal
Customer citizenship behavior	3.4690	0.86132	0.070	Normal

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis		T statistics	Sig.	Decision
Hypothesis 1	TR → CE	2.563	0.013	Supported
Hypothesis 2	CO → CE	-0.2111	0.834	Not Supported
Hypothesis 3	CH → CE	2.204	0.029	Supported
Hypothesis 4	TR → CR	1.296	0.209	Not Supported
Hypothesis 5	CO → CR	1.150	0.254	Not Supported
Hypothesis 6	CH → CR	-0.303	0.763	Not Supported
Hypothesis 7	TR → CE → CR	2.234	0.025	Supported
Hypothesis 8	CO → CE → CR	-0.715	0.475	Not Supported
Hypothesis 9	CH → CE → CR	2.104	0.049	Supported
Hypothesis 10	CE × CCB → CR	-0.309	0.758	Not Supported

The first finding of research show trust affects on customer engagement, when customer confides company's promises about services and products then the chance of Engagement will increase. This finding is consistent whit a previous research by Salem (2020) and also a research by agyei et al. (2020). The second finding of research determines effect of conflict handling on customer engagement. Conflict handling as an important variable in relationship marketing showed a positive effect on customer engagement. This observation is consistent with a previous research by Salem (2020). Third finding of research shows customer engagement plays a mediating role between relationship marketing and customer engagement. Relationship marketing constructs such as trust and conflict handling affect on customer retention through customer engagement positively. This finding is consistent with previous research by Salem (2020). Actually, customer engagement function is as a mediator. Also, in this research there was no direct relationship between trust, commitment and conflict handling with customer retention. This observation is consistent with results of a research by Salem (2020). In this research the effect of commitment on customer engagement and customer retention didn't determine, and also customer citizenship behavior as a moderator variable had not any effect on the relationship between customer engagement and customer retention.

4. Discussion

As the results show managers of broiler industry section should assess significant factors such as trust and conflict handling in their distribution section in order to establish permanent and long-term relationship with customers. Trust and conflict handling lead to higher level of customer engagement and higher-level customer retention. Workers' promises about product and services make a situation that customer confides company and it increases the level of customer engagement. Pay attention to customer's complaints and try to eliminate conflicts make a positive feeling that can enhances customer engagement. Due to importance of customer engagement, stores in distribution section should notice effective factors that can help to more engagement. Improving customer engagement leads to powerful customer retention. There are some limitations in this research that should be discussed. The research has conducted in a special region with special culture, so it can be examined in different societies and cultures. Another limitation of research is related to product. Research's findings were extracted considering regional culture and consumption lifestyle and cannot be generalized to the other societies and cultures. Also, special situation of economic issues and covid 19 epidemic limitation had a direct effect on consumer's needs and requests.

As results show broiler companies should assess significant variables such as trust, conflict handling and customer engagement in order to enhance the level of customer retention. In distribution section of broiler companies these variables should be assessed precisely.

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