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Relationships in Fast Moving Consumer Goods Markets: The Consumers' Perspective

Abstract

Purpose: This study explores relationship marketing and the existence of relationships in mass consumer markets from the consumers' perspective, with the focus on the Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG) sector.

Methodology Approach: A total of 10 focus groups were conducted with consumers from a broad range of demographic and socio-economic backgrounds to enable in-depth exploration of the research issue.

Findings: The study highlights the dominant negative attitudes that exist among consumers to relationship marketing as it is operationalised in FMCG markets. It is found that from the consumers' perspective relationships do not and cannot exist in these markets and that the nature of exchange in such markets is not relationship based. Consequently, the research concludes that there is a necessity to move away from relationship rhetoric in FMCG markets, and to explore the true nature of exchange in the quest for effective marketing strategies. The research also suggests that further research on relationship marketing should focus on situations where relationships do and can exist and consequently the boundaries of relationship marketing should be limited to only these situations.

Originality/Value: By offering the consumer perspective on relationships and relationship marketing this study broadens understanding of the phenomenon and makes an important contribution to the relationship marketing debate.

Keywords

Relationships; Relationship Marketing; Mass Consumer Markets; Consumer Perspective; FMCG

Article Type

Research Paper

Introduction

Relationship marketing has been in vogue for more than two decades (Harker and Egan, 2006). Its advocates see it as an emerging paradigm that promises much in the way of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Gummesson, 1999). The most basic definitions point to relationship marketing as attracting and keeping customers in the long term. The aim is to convert buyer behaviour and status from fleeting casual encounter, through marketing interventions, to committed relationships (Varey, 2002). Relationship marketing advocates contend that marketing can no longer only be about developing, selling and delivering products, where the emphasis was directed towards getting customers rather than keeping them. It is progressively more concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships with customers (Buttle, 1996), and holds the promise of keeping customers loyal (Gummesson, 1994; Bulger, 1999). This pursuit is characterised by the quest to both fully understand and anticipate the customers' needs, in a bid to develop long lasting and mutually profitable relationships (Earp *et al.* 1999). A two-way or dialogue marketing communications approach is needed to support the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of an interactions process if relationship marketing is to be successful (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000).

Relationship marketing was initially conceived as an approach to marketing in inter-organisation (Jackson, 1985) and service situations (Berry, 1983) on the basis that, these sectors, given their emphasis on close interpersonal buyer-seller contact, required an alternative paradigm to that which was dominant in mass consumer goods markets. Indeed, at this time, relationship marketing was considered inappropriate in marketing contexts outside of industrial and services industries. However, interest among academics and practitioners in the success of this marketing concept and the explosion of published work through the 1990s examining and extending relational application, resulted in domain extension to mass consumer markets. Relationship marketing, however, whilst gaining recognition and acceptance among academics and practitioners as a concept with much potential, has yet to acquire uncontested meaning and application both across and within different industries and avenues of research (Barnes, 1995; Buttle, 1996; Earp *et al.* 1999; Pressey and Tzokas, 2006; Harker and Egan, 2006). Despite a large literature its meaning and application remains ambiguous, which according to Payne (2000) needs resolution.

In this context, this paper is positioned within the domain of mass consumer goods markets and to focus the study, more specifically in Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) markets. According to Barnes (1997) little thought has been given to which elements of consumer markets would best benefit from a relationship approach, while Harker and Egan (2006) point out that the assumption that relationships exist between suppliers and customers in mass marketing situations has not been challenged in any meaningful way. This is in line with Rao and Perry (2002) and Palmer *et al.* (2005) who speculate that not all customers might want or require a relationship with suppliers.

Thus, to examine the relationship approach and customers' attitudes towards it, in one element of consumer markets, this study focuses on the FMCG sector. FMCG markets are defined as *relatively inexpensive, frequently purchased and rapidly consumed items on which buyers exert only minimal purchasing effort* (Dibb *et al.* 2006: 298) and therein exists a lack of both relationship theory building and testing, overshadowed by the rush to embrace the relationship marketing concept that has found successful application elsewhere. Consequently, it is still unknown if relationships exist in these markets and whether consumers want relationships in FMCG markets. The overall objective of the paper, therefore, is to establish from the consumers' perspective, if relationships exist in FMCG markets. Accordingly, the following section examines the relationship perspective in consumer markets.

Theoretical Framework

Since the early 1990s the discourse of consumer marketing has radically altered and now reflects an emphasis on relationships, loyalty and customer retention, where once the transactional marketing mix management approach dominated. Numerous articles have begun to extend relational exchange as a paradigm beyond its traditional domain of high value industrial goods and service industries, to the relatively low value, high volume goods sold to private consumers (Palmer, 1996). The pervasiveness of this relationship approach has led Petrof (1997) to comment that it appears that relationship marketing has become the accepted orthodoxy in mass consumer markets.

Essentially relationship marketing's emergence in mass consumer markets was driven by a desire for repeat business. Various propositions as to how this might happen are observed in the literature. It is proposed by some (for example, Dwyer *et al.* 1987; Holmlund and Kock, 1996) that the development of relationships will result in a loyal set of customers. Others (for example, Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Kandampully and Duddy, 1999) propose that relationship marketing would result in customer satisfaction which in turn would result in loyalty and drive relationship development, while others (for example, Szmigin and Bourne, 1998; Varey, 2002) point to the assumption made that long-term enduring relationships could be built with a loyal set of customers. In this regard loyalty is considered a driver of relationships. Within this climate, strategies predicated upon continual customer acquisition began to lose credibility, as those concerned with customer retention and the value of loyal customers began to take over. Specifically, relationship marketing emerged in consumer markets with the promise of customer retention in a marketplace that was characterized by intense competition.

The emergence of database and on-line communications technology, which according to many (for example, Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Pine *et al.* 1995; Palmer, 1999) opened the possibility of creating personal relationships with a mass market, fuelled the drive towards relationship development in mass consumer markets. Indeed, in this context, Gronroos (1999) altered his earlier position (1991) to contend that database technology could provide the means to engage with consumers who wanted individual treatment. These technological advances captured the attention of marketers and academics as an approach that promises to deliver a significant competitive advantage and enabled recent developments such as one-to-one marketing and mass customisation. These developments promise the satisfaction of individual customer requirements at a mass-market level. One-to-one marketing (Peppers and Rogers, 1999) or customer-centric marketing (Sheth *et al.* 2000) involves developing relationships with individual customers (Dibb *et al.* 2006) as does mass customisation, which aims to satisfy customers needs at an individual level (Jobber and Fahy, 2006). These developments are heavily dependent on Customer Relationship Management (CRM), which uses technology enhanced customer interaction to shape appropriate marketing offers, designed to nurture ongoing company interaction with individual customers (Dibb *et al.* 2006). The nature of a CRM system is that it is capable of enabling marketers to implement

effective customer retention strategies by monitoring, rewarding and reminding them about goods and services. Consumers can directly voice concerns, complaints and suggestions, while the provider can respond directly and specifically to each person. In Varey's opinion, CRM can be the enabler of relationship marketing (2002).

Others however are not convinced that personal relationships can be built in this way. Many in the literature argue that such marketing efforts are failing to create exclusive relationships with customers with much CRM in practice no more than automated profiling and messaging. Indeed, Earp *et al.* (1999) argue that firm's efforts to build relationships through increased use of databases are in fact contributing to an increase in customer promiscuity, by delivering special offers etc. into the hands of consumers, thereby encouraging them to use the offers of many competing companies. Further to this Pels (1999: 9) asks isn't this "technology-allows-me-to-do approach totally production oriented" and further asks what role do the new technological advances play in developing interaction. The existence of a database does not imply that a company is successfully maintaining relationships with its customers. According to Earp *et al.* (1999) tactical elements, which do not facilitate interaction but merely enable individual contacts to be made fall outside the equation of relationship marketing, the result of which is polygamous, divided loyalty or no loyalty. Moreover, Barnes (2001) is of the opinion that databases impede relationship formation when they are used to promote at customers rather than to support the exchange of ideas and information with them. The result of this is that many market system participants are subjected to no more than an expensive technology of alienative contact (Varey, 2002). In essence, IT hardware and software cannot replace authentic human interaction. In this context Dowling (2002) proposes that a CRM programme designed to build a deep-seated relationship with a customer of a brand is more likely to be a romantic distraction than a cost effective marketing strategy.

Evidently then, extension of the relationship marketing concept into consumer markets, has brought little in the way of agreement among academics. Indeed, it could be argued that there has been insufficient debate on the appropriateness of relationship marketing in consumer markets or how consumer markets would best benefit from a relationship approach. More specifically however, what is particularly striking is the fact

that research on the consumer side of the relationship, from the consumers' perspective has been almost absent. While many have attempted to describe what relationship marketing encompasses, examined methods of practising relationship marketing and extolled the benefits to be gained from relationship marketing, few have critically examined relationship marketing from the consumers' perspective. Indeed, many authors have drawn attention to this (for example, Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Barnes, 1997; Pressey and Tzokas, 2006) but the research conducted remains lacking. As a result the basic questions of whether, why and in what forms consumers seek and value ongoing relationships remain largely unanswered (Webster, 1992). It follows that studies of relationships that only examine the views of one party (company) can at best only provide a partial overall picture. The focus for most academics is on methods of developing technology that enable companies to customise and tailor communications to individual customers to realise the benefits. Thus, studies that examine the views of the other party (customer) are required to complete the picture and to move the debate on relationship marketing constructively forward. Marketers need to view relationships not only through the company's eyes but also through the eyes of their consumers (Varey, 2002; Pressey and Tzokas, 2006). Indeed, Pressey and Tzokas (2006) report that a lack of research on the consumer perspective does not allow the academy to determine the usefulness of relationship marketing from the customers' perspective and consequently it can be argued that a limited understanding of the consumer in consumer markets handicaps the relationship marketing domain.

As indicated, the purpose of this paper is to present information from the consumers' perspective. The overall objective of the paper is to establish from the consumers' perspective, if relationships exist in FMCG markets. From this, further sub objectives arise. Specifically, the consumers' opinions of and attitudes towards relationship marketing as it is operationalised in FMCG markets needs to be determined. Further to this, the research endeavours to establish if relationship marketing works to satisfy the customers' needs and why and in what circumstances this might happen. McDonald (2003) noted that academic marketers have been accused of talking about increasingly narrow issues in an increasingly impenetrable language, prompting Palmer and Bejou (2005) to question if there exists an unbridgeable gap between theory and practice. This paper presents important information in helping to bridge that gap by

exploring the central issue of relationships in FMCG markets and presenting the consumers' perspective on their existence or otherwise.

Methodology

Qualitative research is an array of interpretative techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world (Van Maanen, 1983). Qualitative data are rich and holistic, with strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide thick descriptions that are vivid, nested in a real life context and have a ring of truth that has impact (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that they focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings so that the researcher has a strong handle on what real life is like. These features make qualitative data gathering ideally suited to the current study where the focus is on understanding the consumers' attitudes towards relationship marketing in FCMG markets. As described by Carson *et al* (2001), the importance is on the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon under study in the context of its occurrence in marketing. Essentially, qualitative research methods are valuable for in-depth understanding of phenomena in the marketing domain and provide flexibility and suitability therein.

In keeping with the desire to establish from the consumers' perspective, if relationships exist in FMCG markets, focus group interviews were chosen for the current research. Focus groups are one of the most commonly used methods of gathering qualitative data as they allow respondents to discuss issues using their own words and in their own way. Because of the use of group interaction, focus groups produce data and insights that might be more difficult to access without such interaction, and also provide direct evidence of similarities and differences in the participant's opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups allow the researcher to understand the everyday experiences of consumers, to understand how they interpret reality in their own terms. This is often as a direct result of the interaction within the group and this remains one of the most important features of focus groups (Carson *et al.* 2001).

Selection for focus groups is purposive rather than random or convenience selection. In purposive selection, participants are selected for their suitability and ability to provide insights that are relevant to the particular study even though they are not necessarily representative of the population as a whole (Carson *et al.* 2001). Indeed, Stewart and Shamadasani (1998) are of the view that it is generally inappropriate to generalise far beyond the members of focus groups, thus the sample need only be a good approximation of the population of interest. Respondents for this study therefore, were recruited on the basis of pre-specified criteria in the form of a recruitment questionnaire, (See Appendix 1). Initially the recruitment questionnaire was given to friends, family and work colleagues who in turn circulated the questionnaire to others. This is characteristic of snowballing where one subject gives the name of another subject who in turn provides the name of a third and so on (Vogt, 1999).

As can be seen from Appendix 1, respondents were selected on their relevance to the study and their ability to discuss the research issue in terms of having experience with purchasing in FMCG markets. The researcher followed the advice of Siedman (1991: 45) and continued focus group interviewing until she felt “*enough*” respondents had been surveyed. This saturation and sufficiency point was reached having conducted ten focus groups, at which point no new information was deemed to be forthcoming and the interviewer was at a stage where she could almost predict the respondents’ answers.

Appendix 2 presents the demographic and socio-economic profiles of the focus group participants to the study. Some of the focus groups for this research were demographically homogeneous groups, where similar sex and similar age groups were recruited. This is to promote a positive and open atmosphere conducive to information sharing (Calder, 1977). This allowed for the creation of positive group dynamics in order to facilitate the emergence of a shared perspective, seen as particularly pertinent given the desire to understand consumers’ attitudes towards relationship marketing in FMCG markets. It was, however, also decided to use a number of groups where the participants were heterogeneous to allow for more debate on the topics of interest. This enabled differences of opinion with regard to the subject matter to be debated upon by different types of respondents, allowing the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the consumers’ perspective. As is evident from Appendix 2, females form the majority of respondents. While

it could be argued that there is a gender bias, this reflects the sampling process which was purposive and based on responses to the recruitment questionnaire where the majority of females indicated that they always do the grocery shopping for the household. Many of the male respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they only sometimes or never do the grocery shopping, preferring to pick up one or two necessities, perhaps on the way home from work, but rarely do a large grocery shop for the household.

Focus groups can be held almost anywhere, however, the venue should be one in which participants feel comfortable and at ease (Carson *et al.* 2001). The focus groups for this study were generally run in the home of the researcher, but in a number of cases were run in the homes of some of the participants. The sessions lasted on average 1.5 hours. In all circumstances it was believed that this was sufficient time to allow for discussion on all areas of interest that arose. In a number of situations the session lasted 2 hours, as the groups were particularly open to debate and discussion

When conducting focus groups a balance must be found between having too much structure, which prevents the participants' own ideas surfacing and not enough structure, allowing some participants to dominate and some research issues or topics to be ignored. The focus group researcher is best considered, not as an interviewer but as a catalyst for discussion to stimulate participants to respond (Carson *et al.* 2001). A loosely structured approach to the discussions for this study was followed (see Interview Guide Appendix 3). Prior to the focus group sessions and resulting from the theoretical framework, a number of topics were identified as important for discussion, however the discussion was not limited to these, as respondents also identified other topics as being significant. Accordingly the moderator sought to adjust and direct the flow of conversation to allow for respondents' thoughts on all topics relevant to relationship marketing to be addressed. Respondents were, therefore, encouraged to speak on any matter in relation to the topic that they felt was important. The sessions ended with informants contributing final thoughts and remarks and the researcher provided a brief summary of what had been discussed to ensure that interpretation of the discussion was correct.

All the group discussions were taped and full transcripts produced as soon as possible after the sessions. Each transcript typically ran between 5 and 10 single-spaced typed pages. There are many approaches prescribed for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, approaches, which are often difficult to articulate and make explicit (Jones, 1985). Initial reading of the transcripts focused upon evaluation of the main issues that arose, while subsequent readings focused on making sense of and seeking out points that were relevant and interesting to the debate. Areas where there appeared to be either consensus or divergence of opinion also emerged allowing for comparisons and convergence of ideas and points to surface. Guba (1978) refers to this as convergence and divergence, and Babbie (1998) refers to it as similarities and dissimilarities.

When analysing the data the researcher allowed for ideas, themes and concepts to emerge, rather than using a prior coding system which involves finding the data to fit with the prior codes (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Essentially an open coding process was employed where codes were identified from the data collected. This open coding approach is particularly insightful in achieving deep meaning and understanding of issues, whilst also requiring the making of careful considered judgements about what is really significant in the data (Carson *et al.* 2001). The topics identified in the interview guide along with re-readings of the extant literature informed the coding process. Reviewing of the transcripts, involved attaching labels to “*chunks*” of data to enable objective and systematic counting and recording procedures (Carson *et al.* 2001: 127). Chunking the data involves decontextualising it (Tesch, 1990), therefore, tapes were listened to and transcripts read to ensure that the informants’ views were presented fairly and truthfully.

Findings

Numerous topics emerged from the data generated and the coding and chunking system enabled classification of these topics into four broad thematic areas. Essentially respondents’ attitudes towards the existence and development of relationships in FMCG markets fell into 4 main categories: Negative Reactions and Subsequent Negative Attitudes; The Absence of Personal Content; The Communications

Gap and Difficulties in Generating Interaction. In this context, the following sections present the dominant research findings which inform the research issue and which bring the consumers' perspective to the relationship marketing debate.

Negative Reactions and Subsequent Negative Attitudes

When asked about the nature of interactions or dealings that respondents have with companies, responses focused primarily on postal communications, with discussion also regarding email and telephone communications. Primary responses expressed by focus group participants towards relationship marketing as they perceived it in FMCG markets, indicated much dislike and frustration. Respondents expressed very little interest in hearing from companies in FMCG markets. The inclination to discard any communication was prominent among respondents:

It's easy to find the wastepaper basket, I just throw the stuff in the bin or delete the mail, I'm hardly inclined to look at them at all, more waste, more rubbish, that's my attitude. (Female, 25, C1)

The dominant attitude expressed by respondents was that they receive too many of these types of communications and consequently tend to ignore them all. Furthermore, they indicated that communications which they receive are all very similar and as a result do not work to differentiate one company from the next:

As a marketing strategy I think its overkill because everyone is doing it. They are all the same now. (Female, 35, C2)

Much of the relationship marketing theory argues that relationship marketing will reduce some of the wasteful marketing practices associated with traditional mass marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) and help in differentiating one company from the next (Varey, 2002). It is apparent, however, that respondents to this research believe the opposite. Building on this point, many respondents conveyed that they are receiving too many communications and are suffering from overload as a result. The effect of this is to discount it all:

There's really a problem of getting too much stuff.....I think there's too much coming in the post and by email, it's just clutter really, and if a customer is getting stuff that they don't really want it's bullying, it's not a relationship .(Male, 34, C2)

This emergent finding indicates some difficulties for marketers in operationalising relationship marketing. Relationship marketing and its related applications were proposed as a way of breaking through the clutter that other marketing techniques suffer from. It is argued that relationship marketing would act as the differentiating factor needed to gain an advantage in the marketplace (Varey, 2002). It is apparent from findings to the current study, however, that relationship marketing experiences the same clutter problem that other marketing communications methods have suffered from. Further to this, respondents expressed fear that the amount of personalised communications would increase. In such instances respondents indicated that they may in fact be turned off a brand as a result:

If they annoyed me enough, it could turn me off the product. By annoying me I mean sending me too much, or looking for too much from me such as, anything they want sent back or if the mail situation got out of hand. If they annoyed me enough, it might damage my perception of the brand. (Female, 30, B)

This finding supports Gordon *et al.* (1998) who proposed that some relationship marketing tactics might antagonise buyers, leaving them with a more negative impression than they had prior to the implementation of the tactic. Furthermore, the busy lives that consumers lead, means that they do not have the time or the inclination to give precious moments to the studying of such communications:

This stuff does nothing for me; I'd just bin it or delete it. I might have a quick look at it, but I'd really have no interest in it. I mean a lot of people are at work all day, writing, typing, stressed etc. The last thing I want is to go through this direct mail stuff when I come home in the evening. (Male, 36, C1)

The general feeling among respondents was that such communications were generally unsolicited and as a result of no interest or relevance to them. Many respondents expressed much stronger negative reactions to these contacts and in doing so, painted a vivid picture of respondents' complete annoyance at these communications:

I find them a nuisance, I hate them I absolutely hate them. At the beginning when it started I used to use them, but now I find them irritable, I hate them, I dump them and I find they are just clutter. I hate them. (Female, 36, C1)

Overall, respondents expressed antagonism towards companies that contacted them, and not needing or wanting such communications was a sentiment constantly repeated throughout the research:

I try products; if they suit I continue to buy those products. I don't need the company to contact me, I don't want the company to contact me, if the products suit I continue to buy them if they don't I won't. (Female, 44, C1)

Further negative reactions to *direct mail* communications centre on environmental concerns. Many respondents reported frustration at the waste of paper, given that many direct mailings use large quantities of paper and packaging, a practice that is viewed as wasteful and irresponsible by many respondents:

The stuff they send out in the post is a dreadful waste of paper, look at all the trees that are being killed for this, and ok, so we might be recycling more now than we did before but I still think it's a dreadful waste. (Female, 60, C2)

Initial reactions, therefore, were primarily negative. It is also worthy of note that respondents referred to many communication initiatives as *junk mail* a term that has no place in the repertoire of relationship marketing:

I just see it as clutter and junk mail; we're too busy to be reading through this stuff. You sort through your mail and pick out what you are interested in and the rest you bin. (Male, 28, B)

Exploring these response in more detail, it emerged that not only are respondents attitudes to relationship marketing as it is operationalised in FMCG markets predominately negative, but in addition respondents regard such communications as largely impersonal.

The Absence of Personal Content

One of the overriding themes in relationship marketing is the treatment of customers as individuals (Levitt, 1983; Earp *et al.* 1999), and the subsequent tailoring of personal messages to suit each individual's needs in the quest for relationship development (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000). Personal contact is, therefore, of the utmost importance in convincing customers of the company's good intentions. In fact, to move from a transaction to a relationship, it is imperative that some level of personal contact or individualisation takes place (Varey, 2002). Respondents' attitudes from the current research however, towards companies' attempts at personal contact are by and large extremely sceptical. Overall, customers appear to be far too

cynical and too savvy to consider contact from companies as 'personal'. This attitude presented itself constantly throughout the research and was emphasised successively:

It's not possible for a big company who is selling orange juice for example to make personal contact. It's just not possible. I think most people would think it's not realistic that you can have a personal relationship with a company who has loads of products and millions of customers. So no I don't think people take it seriously. (Male, 31, C1)

Respondents were very conscious of the use of database technology and mail merge and viewed with scorn the notion that contacts from companies were personal or even worthy of consideration as personal:

I know they are not sending anything to me specifically, it's just a name that the computer is spitting out, at the end of the day, they are just one big advertisement. (Female, 40, C1)

All respondents were in agreement that such communications were not and could not be considered personal. The research findings indicate that contacts from companies in low involvement purchase situations are not considered personal and, therefore, have little or no impact on relationship development. To further reinforce this point, there is a belief that there is a lack of any affective component on the company's side:

Well I think they just roll it off a computer and then they don't think about you anymore.....Sure, we're all just numbers and profits anyway..... So no I don't think it's personal, you are just another name or number, one of thousands, the fact that they know your name and address doesn't mean anything, they don't care who you are. (Female, 52, C2)

Contrary to the literature where it is argued that the development of a relationship requires the presence of an affective component (for example, Christopher *et al.* 1991; Barnes, 1994; Tzokas and Saren, 1997) any contacts received by the consumer from the company are viewed as purely commercial initiatives with no emotive element involved. In the drive to develop relationships with customers, companies have been striving towards developing a caring image, have been aiming to convince the customer that the company cares for them and thus have hoped to benefit from the ensuing loyalty. It is shown, however, that respondents in this research are unconvinced of the companies intentions and do not believe that the

company cares for them. Interestingly, respondents generally acknowledged that companies are trying to engender a personal touch with them, but viewed with disdain the notion that customers see it as personal:

You know they don't know you, you know it's a mailing list, I'd like to ring them up and say "hi it's me" and see what they say to me when they don't know me. I think when they send you company information it's like they are saying to you, look we are sending you this because you are such a valued customer of ours and we want to tell you about us. They are trying to psychologically make you think "They really do care about me". I don't need them to make me think I'm a good customer. (Female, 40, C1)

Relationship development requires the nurturing of a climate where both parties to the relationship aim to imbue an understanding, confidence and respect of each other (Tzokas and Saren, 1997). The attitudes expressed above do not lend themselves to such relationship development, since in this case one party to the potential relationship does not believe they are being treated equally nor with respect. Furthermore, a realisation exists that one cannot expect an affective component from a company. Additionally, respondents are conscious that in FMCG markets, personal contact is not only missing and unexpected but in fact is impossible:

Sure how do they know you.....It's impossible to engender a personal touch in FMCG markets. Telling me I am a valued customer means nothing when it comes down to it. It's a waste of paper and if there are thousands of customers they shouldn't bother trying to communicate with customers, because they have nothing specific to the individual's needs to say. (Female, 28, C1)

As is apparent from the excerpts above, the underlying consideration among respondents is that a company is a commercially driven organisation operating to make profit and not to satisfy customers' emotional needs. In such situations respondents do not view companies as relationship partners. In such circumstances it can be argued that these consumers constitute a significant segment who reject long-term one-to-one type relationship initiatives.

The Communications Gap

In highlighting the distance that exists between companies and consumers, respondents to the study indicated that the lack of personal knowledge that companies have about consumers, compounds the problem relating to the absence of personal content. Respondents to the research referenced situations where attempts at personal contact can go terribly wrong due to the gap in two-way communications that exists between companies and consumers in FMCG markets:

This idea about personal contact isn't personal at all. I mean the baby stuff that I get, what if I had miscarried, or the baby dies or was very sick etc. and I still get stuff for my baby and me. I think that's terrible for mothers that have lost their babies, or babies that are terminally ill etc. and then you get this constant reminder in the post. (Female, 34, C1)

Further sensitive situations were also highlighted by respondents as examples to illustrate that the company really doesn't know the consumer:

What about in situations where alcohol drinks companies send out stuff and they send it to teetotalers or worse again to alcoholics or recovering alcoholics. (Female, 38, C2)

In such situations it is argued that the company does not know the customer at an individual level. This is demonstrative of many of the respondents' attitudes towards attempts at personal contact by companies and is evidence of a situation where the demographic characteristics may be known but the person remains anonymous. It is evident from the research findings that knowing the customer is more than simply gathering demographic data that can then be electronically manipulated for further marketing use. The ability to get to know customers in FMCG markets appears to be impeded however, given the mass markets that exist. Both conceptually and empirically, therefore, it can be argued that there are many difficulties facing the applicability of relationship marketing in FMCG markets.

When exploring relationship marketing in detail, it is evident that its' underlying rationale is that customers should not be treated as unknown persons but rather as individuals (Levitt, 1983; Kotler, 1992; Varey, 2002). In an attempt to achieve a segment of one, however, it can be argued from the focus group findings that marketers have reverted to mass marketing, where all consumers are treated the same, albeit using a personalised approach. Such an approach has resulted in very cynical attitudes on the recipients' side, where consumers view attempts at personal contact as largely impersonal:

If you want to send me something in the post or via email fine, but don't pretend you know me and don't try to make it personal. (Male, 32, B)

The belief that such communications are lacking in any affective or emotive element dominates, with little expectation of personal contact in mass consumer markets. Therefore, in the context of these findings it is

apparent that marketers currently face many obstacles in attempting to communicate with consumers in a personal way in attempting to develop relationships.

Difficulties in Generating Interaction with Consumers

A fundamental requirement of relationship development is two-way communication (Edelman and Silverstein, 1993). Contacts from the company directed at the consumer designed to be personal in nature, frequently have the purpose of encouraging that consumer to communicate back to the company. This, it is hoped, will lead to further information gathering for the company (Pressey and Mathews, 1998), the development of closeness between company and consumer and the encouragement of more loyal behaviour on the part of the consumer (Tzokas and Saren, 1997).

In this context, the current research has found that respondents appear particularly reluctant to willingly interact and share information with companies who communicate with them:

Generally these purchases aren't important enough for me to want to interact with the company, I wouldn't be bothered talking to a company about a pack of toothpaste. Life is too busy and too fast to talk and interact with companies and there is no way I would fill in those questionnaire things or give my personal details for fear I would be contacted. (Male, 36, C1)

It is questionable whether this attitude does anything to aid relationship development, given that the relationship marketing literature suggests that the relationship philosophy relies on co-operation and trust (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000). If consumers are unwilling to communicate and interact with companies they purchase products from, it is questionable if relationships can exist, given that interaction is considered a pre-requisite for relationship development. Moreover, respondents were of the opinion that responding to contact from companies required time and effort that they simply were not prepared to give:

Questionnaires require work and most people don't like filling out questionnaires and sending them away. It's likely that it'll end up in the back of your cupboard. (Female, 40, B)

Interestingly, Palmer (1996) predicted that this would be the case, believing that it is not common for reciprocity to prevail in mass consumer markets, where the buyer may prefer little in the way of dialog or other engagement with the marketer. Evidence from the current research indicates that consumers have

little or no desire to correspond with the manufacturers of the products that they purchase. Importantly it emerged from the consumers' perspective that who the makers of these products are is largely irrelevant and of little interest:

I drink Murphys and I don't want to hear from Heineken, I don't care who they are. I like it because it's a nice brand, but I don't care who makes it. (Male, 36, C1)

This finding is significant, given that relationship development is based on a "two-sided venture" (Duck, 1986: 80), where two parties to the relationship must acknowledge its existence before the relationship can be said to exist. If one party to the probable relationship does not know who the other party is, relationship development is hindered before it has even begun. This finding supports Pels (1999) who argues that you cannot have a relationship with someone you do not know:

Sure we don't know anything about these multi-nationals because Bold for example is owned by someone else who is probably owned by someone else, who is probably owned by someone else and sure they don't care about you and why should we care about them. (Male, 28, B)

Such an apathetic attitude is reflective of respondents' views on most mass-producing companies as large entities with hundreds of products but little regard for the individual consumer, resulting in little regard in return for the manufacturer by the consumer. Reciprocity and empathy are largely absent in such circumstances. Such an observation is in line with Evans *et al.* (2001) who found that cynicism among consumers towards companies is on the increase:

You don't know most of the time who the company behind the product is anyhow, and you don't care either, you don't want to know. I just see the big companies as being big corporate machines and I buy their products because it suits me, not because I am loyal to them, I wouldn't be bothered about them. (Male, 33, B)

Consistently, respondents voiced difficulties in relation to the creation of relationships in FMCG markets, confirming the caution voiced by many (for example, Weber, 1999; Greenglass, 2000) when exploring relationship marketing's suitability to mass consumer goods markets. Indications from the current research suggest that relationship marketing's potential in FMCG markets is limited:

I think relationship marketing depends on the seriousness of the product. I don't think it's possible in FMCG because they don't have much personal information on you. How can you feel more special than everyone else? With high-risk purchases and services there's personal contact and personal information given. That is not really the case with FMCG. (Female, 28, C1)

These types of purchases just aren't important enough for me to talk back to a company. If I was buying a car or something really big then I would be inclined, but I wouldn't be bothered talking to a company that I bought mouthwash or something like that from. (Male, 28, B)

These findings suggest difficulties in applying relationship marketing in FMCG markets. These are important findings given that organisations have been aiming to convince customers that they care about them and wish to develop relationships with them at an individual level, to create a loyal group of customers, and to increase efficiency in marketing efforts. The current research indicates that customers are not convinced that companies care for them at an individual level, thus undermining the suitability of such a marketing drive. Furthermore this research has found that many consumers are not at all interested in relationships with marketers, and further to this, see their existence in FMCG markets as impossible. In addition, there is a feeling from the consumers' perspective, that not only do companies not care for individual customers, but also that relationships with consumers are not at all important to companies in FMCG markets:

I think it's ridiculous to even think that companies care for us and want to develop relationships with us. I just don't think that the company is bothered about me, it's my money that bothers them, they are just there to make money. (Female, 40, C1)

Respondents to the current research believe that in their interactions with companies, the company is benefiting more than the consumer benefits. A strong reluctance to do anything for the company was evident:

I don't want to talk back to the company, I suppose it's possible for me to talk back to them, but I don't feel that I have to do them a service. I don't want to reward them back in any way, because I am the customer and I am making a profit for them. (Female, 45, C1)

These attitudes contradict many findings in the literature (for example, Goldberg 1988; Petrison and Wang, 1993; Coviello *et al* 1997) which suggest that the use of databases along with loyalty programmes will result in the development of social bonds where the consumer believes that the company is connecting with them individually, allowing for relationship building to either begin or grow closer. No such attitudes were found among respondents in the current study, who made a clear distinction between what consumers regard as true personal contact and the quasi-personalised impression of contact that a company might endeavour to create. Underlining the predominant attitude articulated by respondents was the belief that

companies show no affective component towards their consumers which was regarded as essential in any relationship. Respondents to this research comprehensively argued that from their perspective relationships with companies are impossible and in the main undesirable in FMCG markets.

Managerial Implications and Applications

A number of dominant issues for managers emerge from the current research. Fundamentally it can be argued from the emergent findings that managers in FMCG markets have been misguided in adopting a relationship approach to marketing. The research has shown such an approach to be relatively ineffective and arguably a wasteful use of resources. The dominant attitude identified from the research is that consumers do not expect companies to be concerned about them at an individual level. Managers, therefore, need to be aware of the fact that, while consumers have a need or want for a product that must be satisfied, they do not need or want the company to care about them personally. In the context of this argument, it is clear that in the majority of situations consumers do not want individual treatment from marketers, have no need or desire to be contacted at a personal level and generally consider interaction of this nature intrusive and annoying.

These findings raise important questions regarding managers' knowledge and understanding of consumers' needs in FMCG markets. Indeed, it can be argued that marketers have either misunderstood or ignored that particular consumers' perspective regarding personalised contact. Thus, management need to be advised that mass attempts at personal contact have resulted in much consumer cynicism, an increasing unwillingness to interact, and much suspicion towards companies and their motives for this increase in individualised contact. Consumers do not see personalised as truly personal and, far from such attempts at personal contact resulting in the building of relationships, these attempts are in most instances alienating the consumer. From the consumers' perspective, communications of this nature lack substance and have increased their disenchantment with companies which they predominantly hold negative attitudes towards. In light of this finding there is a need for marketers to reassess their database management strategies. Collecting the largest quantity of consumer details on a database, and then attempting to communicate with

those consumers on a personal level has become the norm for many marketers in FMCG markets. This research has clearly identified that this strategy has become commoditised, with little or no differentiation resulting, and no value accruing to the consumer.

The research findings indicate that management should, instead of endeavouring to build relationships, focus on the reasons why consumers purchase their brands, and attempt to build loyalty to those brands by building and strengthening the brand values that are attractive to consumers. Given the positive attitudes that emerged towards brands, further research is required to explore the reasons for brand choice and brand loyalty in FMCG markets, and in this regard there exists an opportunity for joint academic/practitioner research. Although not evident from the current research findings, it is possible that there exists a segment of the market who do value direct contact from the manufacturer. Marketers should endeavour to identify these customer segments, and instead of a mass approach of communicating with all consumers, should focus on those consumers who might express their willingness for direct personalised communications. The sample chosen for this research was spread across demographic and socio-economic boundaries; perhaps further research could narrow the sample to specific demographic and socio-economic groups to determine if positive responses to relationship marketing exist among different types of consumers. Herein also exists an opportunity for further collaborative academic/practitioner research. Further research could also endeavour to examine other aspects of consumer markets for relationship development potential. For example, it is possible that consumers might be more inclined to build relationships where there are high involvement purchases, or in areas of consumer markets that are service based, such as retail.

Conclusion

This paper set out to establish from the consumers' perspective if relationships exist in FMCG markets. Essentially, the focus group research revealed that relationship marketing as it is operationalised in FMCG markets is largely impersonal in nature, does not act as a differentiating factor and does not work towards the development of relationships in these markets. In-depth analysis of the focus group interviews reveals that from the consumers' perspective an absence of commitment, trust, interpersonal interactions and

positive attitudes exist in their interactions with companies in FMCG markets. As evidenced in the findings, respondents' attitudes towards manufacturing companies from whom they purchase products is very negative. Responses to the research demonstrate a lack of any affective component on the part of the consumer and also in their perspective on the part of the company. Reactions to companies' attempts at personal contact were treated with much scepticism. Contrary therefore to the literature which proposes that relationships can exist in FMCG markets, this research has found no evidence to support the contention that relationships can develop between companies and consumers in FMCG markets.

While there have been some indications in the literature that relationship development in FMCG markets might be prone to difficulties, the continued fashionability of relationship marketing and the lack of insight into the consumers' perspective has ensured that the pursuit of relationships has remained a core issue for many academics and marketers. This position has been bolstered by the proposition that where an interpersonal process is not possible, relationships can be built on a platform of technology. As a result, the quest for relationships using technology enabled contact has continued. Examining this in detail, this research has shown that attempts at relationship building in FMCG markets have resulted in a situation where little individualisation or added value is delivered to the customer. Importantly, the current research has discovered that operationalising relationship marketing in FMCG markets, has made minimal or no impression on consumers.

Findings from the current research are significant and provide evidence to support the contention that relationships do not and cannot exist between companies and consumers in FMCG markets. It is apparent from the research findings that the existence of technology enabled contact between companies and consumer cannot be considered as evidence of a relationship. Developing this contribution in more detail it is concluded that the trend towards substituting an interpersonal connection with technology and referring to that as a 'relationship' should appropriately discontinue. Perhaps more fundamentally, the findings of the current research suggest the futility of companies attempting to convince consumers at a mass level, that they care about them and that they value their individual custom. It is evident from the research that consumers are more interested in brand propositions that appeal to their interests. In support of this, the

research has shown that consumers do not value marketers' attempts at relationship creation, indicating that the drive to build an affective component in the context of company–customer exchanges should discontinue. The research indicates that there is little to be gained for an FMCG manufacturing company when attempting to develop relationships with their consumers, and given the non-existence of such relationships, it can be argued that their pursuit is a fallacy.

This research concludes that as relationships do not exist between manufacturing companies and consumers in FMCG markets, the relationship term contributes little to the effective development of marketing strategies. In this context it is argued that the mass adoption of strategies designed to build relationships in FMCG markets, is no longer a sustainable strategy. It can be argued that both academics and practitioners have missed the point about relationships and have failed to realise that something other than a relationship exists in many situations. It is concluded therefore, that there is a need to move away from relationship marketing and the pursuit of relationships in FMCG markets and to look for alternative, more appropriate strategies suited to the true nature of exchange in these markets which is not relationship based. In this way the applicability of relationship marketing should be limited to contexts where a relationship can exist. Essentially, in markets where relationships are not a feature, the relationship marketing concept is untenable, and provides little or no direction for marketers.

By bringing the consumer perspective to the discussion on relationship marketing, this research adds to knowledge and assists in closing the gap that exists between theory and practice. The consumer perspective on relationships in FMCG markets should contribute to academic thinking on the relationship marketing concept. As such, the conclusions of this study encourage academic thinking about relationship marketing and its applicability in a context that is rooted in the real life experience of consumers. Against a background of relationship marketing dominance in the literature and in practice, this research urges further studies on the applicability of relationship marketing where relationships can and do exist and further urges studies on the nature of company-consumer exchanges in FMCG markets in an endeavour to develop effective marketing strategies suited to the true nature of exchange.

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Appendix 1: Recruitment Questionnaire

¹Name and Gender: _____

²Age: _____

³Marital Status: Single
 Married/Cohabiting
 Divorced/Separated
 Widowed

Number of Children living at home:

Age and Sex of children living at home:

⁴Do you do the grocery shopping for your household?

Always

Sometimes

Never

¹ A spread of male and female respondents was sought for the research.

² A wide spread of respondents ranging from 20 years of age upwards were sought to participate in the focus groups.

³ Respondents from a variety of household types were sought for the research.

⁴ Respondents who do the grocery shopping on a frequent or infrequent basis were sought for the research

Appendix 2: Demographic and Socio-Economic Profiles of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group 1: Male/Female, 25-30

Female, 25, C1
Male, 30, C1
Female, 26, C1
Female, 28, C1
Female, 29, C1
Female, 28, C1

Focus Group 2: Female, 50-65

Female, 60, C2
Female, 55, C2
Female, 52, C2
Female, 60, C2
Female, 58, C2
Female, 65, C2
Female, 50, C2

Focus Group 3: Male/Female, 25-35

Male, 28, B
Female, 30, C1
Female, 26, B
Male, 31, C1
Male, 33, B
Female, 30, C1
Female, 32, C1

Focus Group 4: Female, 25-65

Female, 65, C2
Female, 40, B
Female, 60, C2
Female, 30, C1
Female, 36, C1
Female, 28, C1
Female, 35, C2

Focus Group 5: Male/Female, 30-40

Female, 30, B
Male, 34, C2
Male, 32, B
Male, 36, C1
Female, 37, C1

Focus Group 6: Female, 50-65

Female, 65, C2
Female, 55, C2
Female, 65, C2
Female, 60, C2
Female, 62, C2
Female, 50, C1

Focus Group 7: Female, 35-45

Female, 40, B
Female, 42, C1
Female, 44, C1
Female, 38, C2
Female, 35, C1
Female, 40, C1

Focus Group 8: Male/Female, 25-35

Female, 30, C1
Female, 34, C1
Female, 28, C1
Male, 34, C2
Male, 32, B
Female, 29, C1

Focus Group 9: Female, 25-35

Female, 32, C1
Female, 30, C1
Female, 34, C1
Female, 28, C1
Female, 35, B

Focus Group 10: Male/Female, 25-45

Female, 32, C1
Female, 26, C1
Male, 27, C1
Female, 45, C1
Female, 40, C1
Female, 36, C1
Female, 30, C1

Appendix 3: Sample Focus Group Interview Guide:

Can you tell me about the kind of dealings or connections that you have with companies if any?

Do companies interact with you and if so how?

What do you think the reasons for these interactions are?

Can we have a discussion on what you think about this?

Do you interact with companies and if so why and how?

Can you tell me about any interactions or dealings that you have had with a company?

What do you think about these dealings or interactions that you might have with companies?

Can you tell me something about the impact these dealings have?

Can we have a discussion on any situations where you have had positive or negative dealings and interactions with companies?

Do you enjoy any interactions or dealings that you have with companies?

Can you tell me about any loyalty programmes etc. that you participate in?

What is the nature of these programmes?