TOWARD A MEANS-END THEORY OF SERVICE RELATIONSHIPS: LINKING RELATIONSHIP-DRIVING BENEFITS WITH SERVICE ATTRIBUTES AND MOTIVATIONAL VALUES

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SUMMARY

For most service organizations today economic success largely depends upon the firm's ability to establish long-term relationships with consumers; therefore, understanding the reasons why consumers maintain relationships with service firms represents an issue of essential importance. Several studies have addressed a wide variety of service relationship determinants such as relationship marketing devices (Verhoef 2003), customer relational benefits (Reynolds and Beatty 1999), and consumer personality (Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf, and Schumacher 2003). However, no common theoretical underpinning exists for these research streams and, as a result, no consistent typology of service relationship drivers has been developed. This lack of integration between research streams has led to myriads of what are considered "key drivers" of service relationships, making it difficult for service managers to focus on the "right" set of constructs or measures.

In this research we develop an integrating hierarchical framework of service relationship determinants by drawing on means-end theory. Means-end theory posits that a consumer's knowledge about products and services is hierarchically organized, connecting knowledge about the attributes of an object with their functional and psychosocial consequences, and associating consequences with personal values (Gutman 1982). Based on a means-end perspective of service relationships, we argue that a consumer's motivation to buy repeatedly from a service provider is driven by the three interlinked concepts of *service relationship attributes*, *relationship-driving benefits,* and *motivational values* with benefits as the pivotal element. Building on this framework, we conducted two empirical studies to answer four research questions: (1) Which service relationship attributes, relationship-driving benefits, and motivational values are responsible for consumers' service relationships? (2) What is the relative importance of the different service relationship attributes, relationship-driving benefits, and motivational values to customers? (3) What service relationship attributes can a service firm use to provide relationship-driving benefits

to customers? (4) Which motivational values are achieved through relationship-driving benefits?

In study one, we conducted 100 laddering interviews (Reynolds and Gutman 1988) to provide an answer to research question one. Content analysis resulted in a set of 50 hierarchical service relationship determinants of which 28 were classified as service relationship attributes, 12 as relationship-driving benefits, and ten as motivational values. We find several service attributes that refer to the three service quality dimensions suggested by Rust and Oliver (1994), namely the *service product* (e.g., service customization), the *service delivery* (e.g., employees' expertise), and the *service environment* (e.g., atmosphere and design of the servicescape). Other service relationship attributes identified in the data deal with the *service location*, with *relationship characteristics* (e.g., personal connection with the service provider), and with *company characteristics* (e.g., reputation). On the relationship-driving benefits levels, we find that our *confidence, money saving, communication, privileges,* and *affiliation benefits* are similar to the relational benefits that have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998), and our two benefits of *comfort* and *convenience* link relationship-driving benefits with other areas of relationship marketing (e.g., Spake et al. 2003; Berry, Seiders, and Grewal 2002). Five benefit categories are novel, namely *welcomeness*, *altruism*, *community*, *autonomy*, and *knowledge benefits*. Motivational values were classified using the Schwartz (1992) typology of ten distinct motivational values, which can be assigned to three more abstract motivational domains, namely *individual motivational values* (i.e., achievement, hedonism, self-direction, stimulation, and power), *collective motivational values* (i.e., benevolence, conformity, and tradition), and *mixed motivational values* (i.e., security and universalism).

In study two, we developed a standardized questionnaire for a CATI survey and drew a probability random sample of 618 customers to answer research questions two to four. We find that on the *service relationship attributes* level, attributes of the service product were

most important for determining the respondents' relationship to a service provider, followed in descending order by service delivery attributes, service location, relationship characteristics, service environment, and company characteristics. On the *relationship-driving benefits* level, we first ran a principal component analysis on the 12 benefits which resulted in three factors: (1) *Psychological benefits* (confidence, welcomeness, autonomy, and knowledge benefits) have the highest relative importance, followed by (2) *functional benefits* (convenience and money saving benefits), and (3) *social benefits* (comfort, communication, affiliation, privileges, community, and altruism benefits) being least important. Regarding the relative importance of the various *motivational values*, individual values are most salient, followed by mixed values and collective values. When analyzing the *inter-level relations* between attributes-benefits and benefits-values, we find that customers whose relationship to a service provider is based on *functional benefits* consider service product characteristics as most effective for receiving such benefits, followed by the service location. With regard to *psychological benefits*, service delivery plays a crucial role on the service attribute level, and for *social benefits*, relationship characteristics primarily drive the consumer's service relationship. On the value level, the link with individual motivational values has the highest probability for all three relationship-driving benefits.

Our research provides marketing managers of service firms with detailed insights on the devices that can be used to influence service relationships. Specifically, the results can help managers to develop more effective relationship marketing strategies which focus on the provision of particular relationship-driving benefits and then allocate resources across service marketing devices by prioritizing those service relationship attributes which are most likely to deliver the desired benefits. References are available upon request.

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