

Potential effects of psychological reactance and relationship proneness on
relationships marketing programmes.

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Summary

This conceptual article presents the current criticisms to relationship marketing and important concepts developed in marketing and psychology to understand consumer reactance toward services packaged as formal contracts. A first part presents the numerous questions that researches are raising about the willingness of people to commit to services and presents four key variables to understand the customer's willingness to enter and develop business relationships. Indeed, psychological reactance and relationship proneness are introduced as interesting concepts to revisit the relationship marketing paradigm and to better understand trust and commitment. A second section develops an integrative conceptual framework of the different concepts introduced in this research. We then conclude with avenues for future research and potential managerial implications.

Key words

Relationship marketing; relationship orientation; relationship proneness; psychological reactance; trust; commitment.

1.Introduction

Nowadays, more and more firms are implementing relationship marketing strategies, looking to have fewer but more intense relationships with their channel partners or customers. This trend is driven by both efficiency and effectiveness concerns (Geysken *et al.*, 1998) but if relationship marketing is powerful in theory, it is troubled in practice (Fournier *et al.*, 1998). "To prevent its premature death", it is now welcome to build new strategies on the idea that not all customers are willing to enter a deep and long-term relationship (*e.g.*, Bloemer *et al.*, 2003). Marketers may have forgotten that relationships take two. "It is possible that we haven't looked close enough to see that the consumer is not necessarily a willing participant

in our relationship mission” (Fournier *et al.*, 1998, p. 44). « The number of one-to-one relationships that companies ask consumers to maintain is untenable. As a result, many marketing initiatives seem trivial and useless instead of unique and valuable” (Fournier *et al.*, 1998, p.46). The control that companies try to have on relationship through, for example, consumer data collection and cross selling is also simultaneously experienced by the customer as a loss of control (Fournier *et al.*, 1998). As a consequence, freedom of choice may be interpreted as a bind of commitments. Customers being more and more aware of the fact that companies are trying to reduce their choice set in order to keep them may become reactant to any new formal commitment. Besides, in order to get customer’s commitment, firms try to generate dependence through investments and changing costs. Instead of that a more social line of thought would suggest the generation of social norms and trust. Then, it could be more appropriate to organize long lasting exchanges through the establishment of affective bonds between customers and their providers. As a consequence, the development of relationships based on trust and commitment should be more adequate than the development of relationships based on contractual safeguards (Gutierrez *et al.* 2004).

At the same time, it would be unrealistic to consider that the relational approach applies to all circumstances and to all individuals. As noted by Bahia *et al.* (2005), some customers may prefer approaches that are based on the minimization of costs and interactions such as those offered by internet discount brokers. We may then suggest that all customers are not willing to engage in long term relationships (Barnes, 1997) and that firms should respect it in order to develop relevant and valuable exchanges. The relationship marketing literature does not specify clearly what is the role that individual variables such as relationship proneness and psychological reactance play in the process of developing trust and commitment.

The general goal of this research is to identify individual characteristics allowing to better explain the levels of trust and commitment that customers give to their service providers. Especially, we try to investigate the relationship between trust and commitment, considering individual variables such as relationship proneness and psychological reactance.

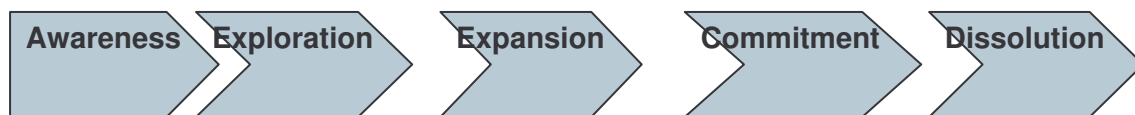
2. Literature review

Even though it is now well accepted that relationship marketing is not a new paradigm but a necessary complementary approach to “traditional marketing” (*e.g.*, Kumar *et al.*, 2003), the research literature remains very discrete on defining cases in which one or the other approach is more relevant (*e.g.*, Reinartz and Kumar, 2000).

Very little empirical work aims at explaining how some individual characteristics could be related to trust and commitment (Mathieu et Zajac, 1990). As Ganesan (1994) distinguishes between the duration of the relationship and the intention to pursue it, we propose to distinguish the intention of entering a new relationship from the intention to maintain it. To do so, there are in the relationship marketing and psychological literatures two interesting variables which could be helpful at explaining why customers do not want to enter a relationship (psychological reactance) and why they desire or not to maintain a relationship (relationship proneness).

Psychological reactance refers to the intention to enter or not a formal relationship. Another approach to relationship is to take into consideration the relationship life cycle. For example, Dwyer *et al.* (1987) consider that there are at least 5 stages in the relationship process:

Figure 1



From Dwyer et al, 1987

Relationship proneness which refers to the intention to continue or not a relationship (formally or not) may be then useful to explain the transition from exploration to commitment.

The simultaneous use of relationship proneness and psychological reactance may seem paradoxical. We believe it is not if we consider the two constructs in a temporal perspective as defined above. We also believe that some customers may be reactant (they do not want to enter a formal relationship) and at the same time relational prone (they remain very loyal to their providers in a informal relationship) –Darpy & Prim-Allaz, 2006-.

Relationship marketing is built on two main constructs, trust and commitment. Indeed, it recommends the generation of trust and the establishment of mutual commitment as a relevant way to build successful and long-lasting relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). There must be a clear desire of continuity and efficient relationships should not be only based on contractual and legal mechanisms (Nevin, 1995). As mentioned by Gutierrez *et al.* (2004), trust and commitment have mainly been applied to industrial markets but they can also be useful to better understand relationships in consumer-service provider relationships.

Psychological reactance

As mentioned in the introduction, relationship marketing is widely based on commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This commitment can be either contractual or not. In the first case, the formalization of the commitment may be seen by customers as a formal and infeasible tie which can be interpreted as a threat to their freedom of choice as for some promotional influence or manipulative advertisement (Clee and Wicklund, 1980). The contractualization may be seen by some customers as a threat to their freedom for future choices. As a consequence, some customers develop strategies to reply to this feeling of freedom reduction through a commitment refusal. Actually, customers may have different cognitive, affective and behavioural responses for different levels of perceived decision freedom.

Psychological reactance is “the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination” (Brehm and Brehm, 1981, p. 37). The theory indicates that when a perceived freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination, the individual will be motivated to re-establish that freedom. When an individual perceives a specific freedom, any force on the individual that makes it more difficult for him or her to exercise that freedom constitutes a threat (Brehm, 1966; Brehm and Brehm, 1981). Psychological reactance is associated with defensiveness, dominance and aggressiveness (Dowd and Wallbrown, 1993). Reactant people have a tendency to act without considering potential consequences (Buboltz *et al.*, 2003). For reactance to occur, the individual must perceive the freedom in question as being important (Clee and Wicklund, 1980; Lessne and Venkatesan, 1989).

In persuasion models, psychological reactance is presented as a mediator between communication and attitude/behaviour (Dillard and Shen, 2005). Direct restoration of freedom involves doing the forbidden act. In addition, freedom may be restored indirectly by increasing liking for threatened choice, derogating the source of threat, denying the existence of threat or by exercising a different freedom to gain feeling of control and choice (Dillard and Shen, 2005).

Persuasive attempts of all sorts, including public health campaigns, often fail to produce the desired effect. In some cases, they even produce results directly at odds with their intents. The theory of psychological reactance provides one theoretical perspective through which these miscarriages might be understood. The theory contends that any persuasive message may arouse a motivation to reject the advocacy. That motivation is called reactance (Dillard and Shen, 2005). From this inception to the present, the theory may be called upon to explain resistance to long-term commitment. For reactant people, any lack of alternatives, high switching costs or long term contracts represent a threat to their freedom.

Relationship proneness

Relational behaviours such as cooperative intention generally produce strong buyer-seller bonds (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relationships are more likely to be profitable when the clients are predisposed to receive and appreciate relational treatment (Bahia *et al.* 2005). Relational oriented customers are likely to value a customized service, mutual collaboration, confidentiality and long-term perspectives (Bahia *et al.*, 2005). Relationship proneness is defined as a personality trait that reflects a consumer's relatively stable and conscious tendency to engage in relationships with sellers of a particular product category (De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Odekerken-Schröder *et al.*, 2001; Bloemer *et al.* 2003). As relationship proneness has mostly been investigated in product-oriented contexts, other very closed concepts have been introduced in services marketing studies such as client's relational predisposition (Bahia *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, definitions remain very similar and we will retain this of Bloemer *et al.* (2003).

From a service encounter perspective, consumer relationship proneness can be expected to play an important role in the different service contexts, mainly when these services are built

on people-based service encounters. As suggested by Bloemer *et al.* (2003) with hairdressers, front-line employees are an important source of social support and assistance to clients with personal problems.

Given the need of both parties to maintain a relationship, there is a support to the idea that client's relationship proneness will impact the willingness to trust the partner and to commit in long term relationships. Bloemer *et al.* (2003) study the relationship between relationship proneness and commitment and demonstrates the existence of a positive correlation in the hairdresser context¹.

To our knowledge, there is no study considering simultaneously relationship proneness and psychological reactance.

Trust

Trust is a major determinant of commitment (*e.g.*, Achrol 1991; Moorman *et al.*, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and is conceptualized as follows: trust exists “when one party has confidence in an exchange partner reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Geysken *et al.* (1998) find that trust contributes to satisfaction and long-term orientation over and beyond the effects of economic outcomes of the relationship.

Trust is often defined as being two-dimensional, even though major references still use unidimensional measures (*e.g.*, Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Indeed, more developed definitions insist on the fact that trust means that one believes that its exchange partner is honest and/or benevolent (Geysken *et al.*, 1998). Some fellows add a third dimension: competence (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Christopher *et al.*, 1998). Trust in the partner honesty is the belief that one's partner is reliable, stands by its words and is sincere (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Dwyer and Oh, 1987). Trust in partner's benevolence is the belief that its partner is genuinely interested in one's interests or welfare. A benevolent partner balances immediate self-interest with long range group gain (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Trust in the partner competence or credibility is based

¹ Bloemer *et al.* (2003) measure of commitment is unidimensional and closed to loyalty.

on the extent to which one believes that its partner has the required expertise to perform the job effectively and reliably (Ganesan, 1994).

Trust is now well accepted as playing a central role in relationship building and maintenance (e.g., Dwyer *et al.* 1987; Morgan et Hunt, 1994; Geysken *et al.*, 1998). Trust is supposed to lead to cooperative behaviors and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Geysken *et al.* 1998). Geysken *et al.* (1998) find that trust is a key mediator variable, influencing satisfaction and long term orientation over and beyond the economic outcomes of the relationship.

Commitment

Cook and Emerson (1978, p. 728 in Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p.23) characterize commitment as “a variable [they] believe to be central in distinguishing social from economic exchanges”. Commitment can be defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman *et al.*, 1992, p. 316). This means that “the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Moreover, Morgan and Hunt (1994) consider that relationship commitment can only exist when the relationship is considered important. Moreover, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) have pointed out that in the services relationship marketing area, relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment.

Commitment is also a key in explaining loyalty behaviours in order to make the difference between simply repeat buying –which may be the translation of a spurious loyalty- and true loyalty –which is closely linked with a positive attitude toward the service provider- (Day, 1969).

Commitment in Business-to-Consumer contexts often creates dependence asymmetry. While there is a dependence asymmetry in the relationship or a suspected one in a potential relationship, customers may be suspicious. In these cases, literature has found that dependence may lead to calculative commitment and that the relationship will probably be dissolved as soon as the obligation derived from the dependence will end up (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996; Geysken *et al.*, 1996).

3. Model and hypothesis:

The literature review invites us to propose a new conceptual model in order to better understand customers' positive and/or negative reactions to relationship marketing programmes.

As said previously, the theory of psychological reactance suggests that reactant people are always trying to keep or to re-establish their freedom (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). This conducts us to the first hypothesis:

H1: The higher the psychological reactance, the lower the commitment.

As a consequence, reactant people should less enter into formal or contractual relationship than non reactant people.

As demonstrated by Morgan and Hunt (1994), relational behaviours such as cooperative intention generally lead to strong bonds between relationship partners. Nevertheless, all individuals may not have the same willingness to commit as explained by Bloemer *et al.* (2003) through their concept of relationship proneness.

As a consequence, we can formulate a second hypothesis:

H2: The higher the relationship proneness, the higher the commitment

Marketing and psychological literatures seem to never consider relationship proneness and psychological reactance at the same time. The present authors have conducted a qualitative analyses based on 20 in-depth interviews in the health sector (Darpy & Prim-Allaz, 2006). Results seem to show the independence between the two constructs. Indeed, we have identified different categories of respondents among which:

- High reactant and low relationship prone respondents;
- Low reactant and high relationship prone respondents;
- High reactant and high relationship prone respondents.

If the two first categories are not surprising, the third one seem to be very interesting and show a relative independence between the two constructs².

The literature review has presented trust as a major determinant of relationship commitment (e.g., Achrol 1991; Moorman *et al.*, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). It is now widely recognized as influencing relationship building and maintenance (e.g., Dwyer *et al.* 1987; Morgan et Hunt, 1994; Geysken *et al.*, 1998). As a consequence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

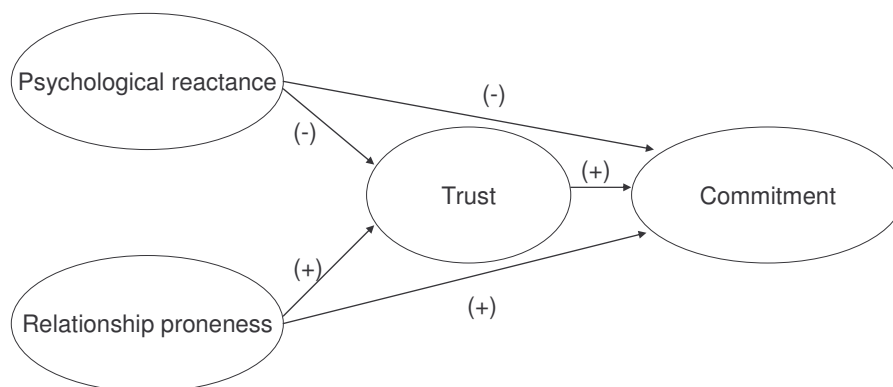
H3: The higher the trust, the higher the commitment

H4a: Trust mediates the relationship between relationship proneness and commitment

H4b: Trust mediates the relationship between psychological reactance and commitment

All relationships are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2



² We should logically consider a fourth category « low psychological reactant and low relationship prone customers». In fact this category is not really interesting as it is made of customer with a very low level of implication.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual research is a first step of a wider research program. Its objectives were to present current criticisms to relationship marketing and to show how important concepts developed either in the marketing or the psychological fields may be of help to better understand relationship marketing failures. Psychological reactance helps us to understand the non willingness of certain customers to enter long term and contractual relationships; relationship proneness helps us to better understand the willingness of customers to maintain or not a relationship. This research is obviously a first step, the next one being an empirical validation of the model.

Nevertheless, we can already point out theoretical and managerial implications.

On a theoretical point of view, this research proposes a new approach to understand relationship commitment through two variables: relationship proneness and psychological reactance. As long as we know, these two variables never appear simultaneously in this context. Moreover, they appear as being really complementary from each other as they concern different stages of the relationship development and better help fellows to explain customer behaviors. This approach represents a new way to answer the question posed by Fournier et al. (1998) on the fact that we haven't looked close enough to see that the consumer is not necessarily a willing participant in relationships developed by its providers.

It will be now necessary to work on the adaptation of the psychological reactance measurement scale. Existing scales have mostly been developed in medical contexts and may not be fully relevant in the business context. Relationship proneness measurement also needs to be improved. A few researchers (e.g., Bloemer *et al.*, 2003; Bahia *et al.*, 2005) have worked on that issue but the scales could probably still be improved. For instance, the scale proposed by Bloemer *et al.* (2003) is very closed to the measurement of the loyalty concept.

On a managerial point of view, this research should help managers to better understand their customers' behaviors and expectations in term of relationship. Developing relevant measurement tools for these two variables should allow managers to segment their customers

according to their willingness to enter and to develop the relationship. Indeed, psychological reactant customers should refuse formal and long-term commitment. Relationship prone customers should be willing to commit and to develop the relationship on a long term basis. As mentioned earlier, one category of customers may be very interesting for managers for developing new types of relationships: the highly psychological reactant and highly relationship prone.

For the low psychological reactant and highly relationship prone customers, traditional relationship marketing tools should be efficient. These customers easily accept to engage in long term contracts as they believe it is necessary for the service provider as well as beneficial to customers (Cf Appendix 1, example 2). They also probably give great value to loyalty programs.

For the highly psychological reactant and low relationship prone customers, transactional programs offer the best solutions. For example, mobile phone providers are offering specific services to transactional customers, stressing the fact that neither a long-term commitment nor exit costs are requested (Cf Appendix 1, example 1). These customers are probably more price sensitive as they don't value the relationship. Communication should probably stress that dimension of the marketing mix.

For the third category (highly psychological reactant and highly relationship prone), neither traditional relationship marketing nor transactional tools should be efficient. This category of people seems to be quite loyal to their service providers, quite trusting but refuse to sign any type of formal commitment. The challenge is, then, to build a long term relationship with them without giving them the feeling that their freedom is restricted. This may show, for example, that policies such as exit costs are not relevant for this category of customers (Cf. Appendix1, example 2). At the same time, it is necessary to show to these customers that they are important to the firm and that the firm is committing to the relationship. They appreciate to be recognized by the employees, they want to be sure they will get the best offer (in term of quality) and they look for tailored-made solutions. New marketing tools should be developed for this segment.

This segmentation should provide a great opportunities to companies to spend efficiently their resources (financial, human, ...) and to improve their image. For example, Boulaire (2003) shows that sending a birthday card to its customers may be risky for a firm if the customer does not desire it. She finds that there are three categories of customers:

- The transactional customers who never appreciate birthday card sent by companies;
- The relational customers who always appreciate birthday card sent by companies
- The conditional relational customers who appreciate birthday card when sent by some companies and who don't appreciate it when sent by others. The difference comes from the evaluation they make of the firm's strategy.

It is then essential to be able to classified customers according to their proneness to create and develop a relationship.

As mentioned earlier, the next step is to conduct an empirical research in different fields as for example the health sector and mobile phones. We believe that these two fields are interesting for different reasons:

- First they are really different fields, even though the patient-practitioner and the customer-service provider relationships may have a lot in common. In both cases the asymmetry of information is sources of frustration and ethical questions. Indeed, both long term subscription and prevention illness programs require commitment and disclosure of information of the customer or patient towards the practitioner or the service provider.
- They are different in term of level of implication. In the health context, the patient health is at stake which automatically increases the level of patient's implication.
- The competition is different in the two fields. The health sector is still strictly controlled in many countries, while the mobile phone sector is more competitive.

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Appendix 1

Example 1

Lu et approuvé:

Si je Veux

découvrez internet à la carte
sans engagement ni frais de résiliation

Agences France Télécom

open orange

open: "s'ouvrir"
Offres soumises à conditions.
Valables en France métropolitaine sous réserve d'éligibilité et de compatibilité de la ligne téléphonique à l'offre choisie. La résiliation prend effet en fin de mois. Détails et conditions de l'offre sur Orange.fr
Publique Internet, France Télécom, SA au capital de 10 412 239 189 € - RCS Paris 850 120 896.

Example 2

Compare Orange Broadband Internet packages - Orange - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Fichier Edition Affichage Favoris Outils ?

Précédente Revenir Arrêter Rechercher Favoris

Adresse <http://www.orange.co.uk/time/compareall.htm> OK Liens

Google Envoyer 165 bloquée(s) Orthographe Paramètres

orange home

Orange shop news sport entertainment lifestyle email & communicate help & support your account

compare broadband packages

confused by broadband jargon? print this page

	just broadband		broadband + mobile	
	Broadband Starter	Broadband Unlimited	free Broadband Starter	Broadband Unlimited
broadband price	£14.99 a month	£19.99 a month	free with mobile contract	£5 a month on top of your mobile payment
Orange mobile plan required	no	no	yes – plan must be £30 a month or more	yes – plan must be £30 a month or more
broadband contract length	12 months	12 months	12 months	12 months
broadband speed	up to 2Meg	up to 8Meg*	up to 2Meg	up to 8Meg*
broadband modem	USB	Livebox	USB	Livebox