

Member Relationship Management in Nonprofit Organizations: The Case of an Alumni Organization

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Nonprofit organizations with the ultimate aim of value creation for their stakeholders perhaps need to embrace the customer orientation approach more than for-profit organizations. This study describes and discusses how a customer orientation approach can be adopted in a nonprofit context deriving from “member relationship management” efforts of an alumni association in Turkey, BÜMED. It elaborates on the member acquisition process in detail reporting findings of the research that attempts to identify factors for becoming a member of the association. The results suggest links to organizational identification – in particular, the one with the alma mater – which might be a core issue in value creation for nonprofit organizations. Implications to relationship marketing strategies that have dual-focus are straight forward; accessing and acquiring new members and building strong and long-term relationships with individual members.

Keywords: Customer orientation, relationship marketing, nonprofit organizations.

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The goal of a nonprofit organization is maximization of the value that the organization intends to create for its stakeholders and for society at large. The disproportionate importance attributed to values in general and value creation in particular has been underlined as the main factor distinguishing nonprofits from both for-profit and governmental organizations (Öner, 2004). As the major revenue sources are the monetary contributions of those who share the cause, hence the mission of the nonprofit, survival of the organization in a sense depends on the importance and attractiveness of the cause as well as the success achieved in terms of mission attainment or mission effectiveness (Moore, 2000). The effectiveness of mission and financial sustainability, which are highly intertwined in the case of a nonprofit organization, on the other hand, are closely linked to the issue of value creation, a central concept especially in *market orientation/customer orientation* committed to superior customer value through creating and sustaining an organizational culture and building critical processes.

Given the perspective above, nonprofit organizations with the ultimate aim of value creation for their stakeholders perhaps need to embrace the customer orientation approach more than for-profit organizations. In this article, we attempt to describe and discuss how a customer orientation approach can be adopted in a nonprofit context deriving from “member relationship management” efforts of an alumni association in Turkey, BÜMED. We refer to customer orientation in this article as organization-level ability to identify, analyze, understand, and respond to customer needs and expectations. The paper is structured as follows. The next section first provides an overview of the literature on customer orientation and relationship marketing in general and in a nonprofit setting in particular. We then included a literature review on alumni organizations drawing attention to a key success factor for nonprofits – the organizational identification process of the stakeholders with the organization. Following a brief history of the BÜMED, the association’s customer orientation approach as a part of the EFQM model adoption efforts is presented. In the following section, we shift our focus to the analysis of BÜMED’s member acquisition process in detail reporting findings of a statistical model that attempts to identify factors for becoming a member of the association. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

Customer Orientation and Relationship Marketing in a Nonprofit Setting

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) argues that customer focus which is traditionally defined as obtaining information from customers about their needs and preferences, although being a central element in market orientation lacks capturing some essential considerations. Instead, they coined the term “market intelligence” as a broader concept including exogenous market factors affecting customer needs and preferences and future needs of the customers as well as the current ones. Consequently, they define market orientation as organization-wide generation and dissemination of, and responsiveness to market intelligence (p.6). Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster (1993) emphasizing the view that customer orientation being a part of organizational culture – but much more fundamental – define customer orientation as a set of values and beliefs prioritizing customer interests.

Value is one of the important constituents of relationship marketing and “adding value” to the core product is a means of increasing customer satisfaction which in turn results in improved customer relationships and customer loyalty (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). Relationship marketing differentiates itself from the transaction-oriented marketing approach by emphasizing the process of maintaining and enhancing on-going relationships with customers as well as identifying and establishing new ones (Grönroos, 1999). Key capabilities an organization adopting a relationship approach to marketing should develop can be found in Grönroos (1999) and Day (2000, 2003). Both authors acknowledge managing relationships through continuous efforts dedicated to customer information/knowledge acquisition and dissemination processes as one of the defining features of customer-relating capability.

Srivastava *et al.* (1999, p.169) identify the creation and leveraging of linkages and relationships to channels and users as a means of customer value creation and elaborate further that this task is executed through a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) process that addresses all aspects of identifying customers, creating customer knowledge, building customer relationships, and shaping their perceptions of the organization and its products.

Relationship approach focusing on maintaining and enhancing relationships with existing funders (e.g., Burnett, 1998; Sargeant, 2001) and beneficiaries (Bennett, 2005) has also been advocated in the nonprofit organization literature. McCort (1994) pioneered to apply

relationship marketing concepts to nonprofits interested in donor relations. The framework offered in this study specifies accessibility, accountability, commitment, enhancement, and positive regard as salient elements to assess a relational strategy pursued by a nonprofit. Rentschler *et al.* (2002) attempt to explain the pertinence of relationship marketing for performing art organizations' long-term viability especially focusing on audience retention through building enduring relationships with existing audiences. MacMillan *et al.* (2005) adapt commitment-trust model of Morgan and Hunt (1994) to the nonprofit sector. Arnett *et al.* (2003) suggest that relationship marketing is a viable strategy for contexts involving high levels of social exchange such as nonprofit marketing. Elaborating on the nature of social exchanges, they argue that relationship marketing success depends on different relationship characteristics from those previously defined for for-profit organizations.

The discussion of why applying a relational marketing perspective may be panacea to overcome the lack of customer orientation (Bruce 1995), confusion over who the customers are (Drucker, 1990; Gwin, 1990), and the short-term tactical focus (Conway 1997) impairing many nonprofits can be found in Conway and Whitelock (2004). Kristoffersen and Singh (2004) present the case of a nonprofit organization, Plan Norway, which changed itself from being sales-oriented to market-oriented by successfully implementing a CRM program. The success of the implementation credited to the efforts of Plan for thoroughly understanding what exactly its sponsors expect from their relationship with the organization and meeting these expectations. In their analysis of the transformation that the British Library have gone through in recent years, Warnaby and Finney (2005) describe how a market-oriented approach was adopted by the British Library to communicate its value proposition to its target markets to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage and underline the impact of both legislative and competitive pressures as the main triggers of change. Acquiring/generating information pertaining to the needs of current and future users of its services, organization-wide dissemination of this information, and the resulting process of creating customer value are defined as the main constructs that underlie a market-orientation.

Alumni Associations and Organizational Identification

Each person has a “sense of belonging” (Weick, 1995) and wants to be a member of a community. Social identity theory (e.g. Giddens, 1991) elaborates how individuals through a

process of (self)-orientation and (self)-categorizing position themselves in society, thus choose a community or various communities they feel a belonging to. A community is a network of individuals with shared values, norms and codes of conduct, whether it is a sports club, a political party or an association, and whether it is a for-profit or a nonprofit organization. Each community is unique in its webs of relationships, and it is this distinctiveness that offers a meaning and a sense of belonging for its members as well as a bond with the fellow members. Within the context of organizations, identity describes what people define as central, distinctive and enduring about their organizations (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) define organizational identification as a perceived “oneness” with an organization and the experience of the organization’s successes and failures as one’s own. The same authors in an attempt to operationalize alumni identification with their alma mater, propose an empirical model with organizational and individual antecedents (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). The hypothesized organizational consequences (making financial contributions to the alma mater, advising offspring and others to attend the alma mater, and participating in alumni and general institutional functions) are then tested on self-reported data from alumni of an all-male religious college. The results suggest that organizational identification at least partially mediates the impact of the antecedents on the outcomes.

Another piece of research that relates identity and alumni is by Burt (2001) in which decay in attachment (emotional connectedness) to an organization is analyzed by data on women MBA graduates of University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Business (GSB). GSB alumna data exhibit the decline of attachment linearly across the years after graduation (for the first 20 years to about half its initial level), and decay is inhibited when connections with graduates are embedded in stable relations of family, work, or long-term relationships. Decay is also inhibited by GSB programs that encouraged or enhanced interpersonal relationships for women when they enrolled in the school. One striking finding that might have practical value is that decay is quite insensitive to events after graduation, which in turn might imply that an alumna’s attachment today was largely determined while she was in school.

The long-term relationship between alumni and their alma mater is also studied in Heckman and Guskey (1998) from a relationship marketing perspective. The authors redefine the Discretionary Collaborative Behavior (DCB), which refers to “behavior performed by a

customer in order to help a vendor, company, or institution, which contributes to the effective functioning of the relationship, which is outside formal contractual obligations and is performed without expectation of direct reward” in the alumni-university relationship context. In the proposed research model three independent variables are hypothesized as antecedents of DCB: satisfaction with performance (of the university), relational bonds (in between alumni and university), and individual attributes (of alumni). The results suggest that contributors’ perception that “the university was effective in career preparation” is a distinguishing “satisfaction with performance” factor of financial contribution to the university. Although Heckman and Guskey (1998) present several results that might be of practical value to both university administration and alumni organization management, the finding that both contributors and collaborators engage in higher levels of participation to university sponsored social events seems to be critical in establishing long-term relationships with alumni.

BÜMED- History and Achievements

BÜMED, the Alumni Association of Boğaziçi University, which has been the number one choice for thousands of students taking the central university entrance exam in Turkey, was established in 1985. BÜMED was given the privilege to locate in the university campus, providing it with an opportunity to share the invaluable advantages associated with being a part of the campus life as well as the beautiful landscape (Boğaziçi University is located in central İstanbul, on the European side of the Bosphorus, overlooking the Bebek Bay). The Association sees the privilege of being located in the campus as one of its key advantages and a major factor encouraging alumni to be a member of BÜMED. Indeed, the means of socialization in the campus is apparently important for the alumni; one manifestation of which is seen in the jump observed in the number of members when a restaurant was opened up in the premises in 1987. Specifically, the number of members increased from 969 in 1986 to 2,539 in 1987; 3,715 in 1988 and 4,860 in 1990. This rapid increase in membership meant an increase in the fees collected, which in turn enabled BÜMED to make use of these additional revenues for new investments. A new building next to BÜMED’s administrative offices was constructed, which included additional office space as well as a swimming pool, a café/restaurant and a gym. As a result of improved services provided, the number of members exceeded 7,000 as of the year 1998 (BÜMED, 2004).

The association underwent a strategic transformation starting from the early 2000s, a process that focused on the pursuit of excellence, envisaged to be realized via embedding quality in all processes and operations. In 2001, BÜMED began to apply of the “European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model”. EFQM is a process oriented model that is based on nine criteria, grouped into two parts, five enabler criteria (Leadership, Policy and Strategy, People, Partnerships and Resources, Processes) and four results criteria (Customer Results, People Results, Society Results, Key Performance Results) (Moeller *et al.*, 2000).

The EFQM Model is currently being used by over 800 organizations throughout Europe, including BÜMED. The model provides a framework to enable individual organizations to assess themselves and look for opportunities to improve their services, rather than prescribing “what to do” and “how to do it”. The application of the model enables an organization to identify the areas that need improvement, building on honest and open self-assessment. The specified areas of improvement can then be prioritized and operationalized, and if this process has been used for a significant amount of time, tangible quality improvements are expected to be realized by the organization (Moeller *et al.*, 2000). After four years of rigorous implementation of the EFQM model, BÜMED won the National Quality Award for Nonprofit Organizations in the national quality prize competition organized by Kal-Der (Turkish Society for Quality) in 2005.

The early 2000s also brought about other changes in the organization and operations of BÜMED, including the monthly publication of Boğaziçi Journal and a substantial improvement in the services provided, especially in sports-related ones and in cultural activities. The web-page of the association witnessed an improvement, too, and communication with members was enhanced through launching an e-bulletin, in addition to regular publications. The Human Resources Unit, on the other hand, established a Career Development Centre with the objective of helping current and prospective alumni in the job market.

BÜMED now has 11,250 registered members, implying a membership ratio of 32% given that Boğaziçi University has about 35,000 graduates. This ratio of membership is the highest in Turkey and compares well to the figures observed in some prominent universities in the world. The corresponding rate for the Penn State University, which has attained the highest

ratio in the USA, is, for example, 34%. About 70 employees (52 full-time, 8 part-time and 12 seasonal) and a large number of volunteers currently work for the association. Apart from the services provided to its members, BÜMED organizes re-union dinners, the annual alumni day, seminars and meetings with the business community representing different sectors of the Turkish economy as well as a wide range of other activities, including, for instance, concerts and plays. The Association opened up self-reliant branches in other major cities of Turkey, including İzmir, Ankara and Eskişehir, and has representation offices in many other cities, including those in foreign countries (namely, in Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and USA) (BÜMED, 2004).

Customer Orientation in the Pursuit of Excellence

The importance attributed to organizational information processes – information acquisition, dissemination, and use (e.g., Jayachandran *et al.* 2005) – in creating customer value has directed us to define the customer orientation in this article as organization-level ability to identify, analyze, understand, and respond to customer needs and expectations. We present a brief summary of BÜMED's organizational information processes and discuss how they are structured to enable the association to improve its relationships with existing and prospective members.

Information Acquisition, Dissemination, and Use in BÜMED

Channels of information used by BÜMED to learn about the expectations of its stakeholders⁽¹⁾ include workshops, surveys (BÜMED conducts seven different surveys – such as alumni surveys – to be able to get informed about the satisfaction level of the users of its services), benchmarking studies (BÜMED conducts benchmarking studies on METU -the other leading state-owned university in Turkey), data analysis/data-mining studies, and the meetings of the General Assembly and the Alumni Council. The Alumni Council in particular involves representatives of most stakeholders and is believed to reflect their expectations. The Council acts as a platform to discuss the problems of Boğaziçi University and BÜMED as well as generating ideas for possible remedies to help solve them.

BÜMED has an extensive database, compiling data not only about its members but all Boğaziçi University alumni since its establishment. Demographic information (such as birth

date, gender, birth place, marital status, etc.), contact/communication information, education history, current work sector and position as well as some transactional data for members have been populated in the database. The database also forms a good basis for supporting decision making. The membership campaign launched in 2000, for instance, resulted in an increase in the number of members that are younger than 30 years of age. BÜMED began to think about ways to incorporate this new development into its strategies; one example being giving a discount to younger alumni in the gym. Also, younger members overwhelmingly prefer to use the Internet (rather than reading and/or working with published material), so strategies have been developed to accommodate this trend of change in preferences. The database, for instance, became fully accessible via the Internet as of 2003, and a new web-based program called “job shop” compiling CVs of existing students and alumni was launched in an attempt to help them in the job market.

BÜMED initiated attempts to apply process-oriented management techniques in 2002 and formed a Quality Task Force to establish the necessary infrastructure. As a result of these attempts, four operational processes and five supporting processes have been defined; namely, marketing, member/alumni relations management, member/alumni services management, management of support provided for the University (operational processes), and facilities management, accounting and finance, HRM and quality control, IT (supporting processes). The respective performance indicators (in four dimensions: financial, customers-related, productivity-related, learning-related) and objectives have also been defined, following the Balance Scorecard approach (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; 2001). Search conferences, customer satisfaction surveys and other communications channels (e.g., e-mailing) are used to gather information regarding improvement and/or new product/services development proposals. New product/service development has been accepted as one of the key success factors in BÜMED. One example for the recently developed services to meet the demands coming from the alumni is BÜMED Kids Club, where children of the members can come together to perform various educational activities and sports.

Increasing web-based means of communication (e.g. web-based surveys) and data analysis/data-mining projects are among other means of utilizing information and information technology. A related topic concerns gathering and managing information. Security, closely following technological developments, rapid access to information by employees, alumni and other users constitute the main objectives regarding the management of information systems.

The main sources of information are specified as the Boğaziçi University, alumni, partner organisations and other stakeholders as well as surveys conducted, internal reports prepared and other relevant activities such as meetings and workshops. Currently, BÜMED has got full contact information of about 18,000 alumni, and updating this database has been specified as one of the major performance indicators for BÜMED.

Understanding Members- The Member Acquisition Process

As a part of the association's efforts to better understand its members, a data analysis and data-mining study for BÜMED was carried out by the authors of this article. The study objectives included: (1) profiling members and prospective members (alumni who have not acquired their memberships) in order to improve the relationships with both groups, (2) to increase the membership acquisition rate of alumni.

Preliminary data analysis yielded some interesting results. For instance, one alarming finding was that on the average four years passed until an alumnus became a member. Only 31% of the current member-base acquired their membership within a year following their graduation. Another related finding that as the number of years passed after the graduation increases, the likelihood of becoming a member of the association decreases significantly, provided important clues to BÜMED management to act on. A more aggressive campaign was launched to gain new members just after their graduation. A project was developed to shorten this first contact time, and the target was to reach the alumni immediately after their graduation. Graduates are, for example, given attractive discounts if they become members during their first year of graduation.

A further analysis of membership data showed that the membership acquisition rates among the graduates of different departments of the university might noticeably vary. The minimum and maximum rates are 16% and 51%, respectively. The graduates of the Department of Management constitute 22% of the whole member base with the highest acquisition ratio (51%).

Directed by preliminary data analysis results, we conducted a logistic regression analysis in which we included gender, marital status, graduation year, department, current work-sector, and work-position as independent variables. The dependent variable (Y) indicating

membership was represented by a binary variable which takes a value of “1” if the alumnus is a member and “0” if the alumnus is not a member of the association. The model was tested on analysis and validation data sets comprising 14,083 and 14,077 alumni instances, respectively. The results of logistic regression on the analysis sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Stepwise logistic regression analysis results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Exp(β)
Constant	-52.611*	0.000
x_1 (= Gender)	-0.544*	0.580
x_2 (= Marital Status)	3.208*	24.735
x_3 (= Graduation Year)	-0.011*	0.989
x_4 (= Department)	-0.016*	0.984
x_5 (= Work-sector)	0.055*	1.057
x_6 (= Work-position)	0.055*	1.056

* Significant at 0.001 level.

So that the fitted model is:

$$P(Y = 1) = \frac{\exp(-52.611 - 0.544 x_1 + 3.208 x_2 - 0.011 x_3 - 0.016 x_4 + 0.055 x_5 + 0.055 x_6)}{1 + \exp(-52.611 - 0.544 x_1 + 3.208 x_2 - 0.011 x_3 - 0.016 x_4 + 0.055 x_5 + 0.055 x_6)}$$

It should be noted that the above prediction equation produces the probability of becoming a member for an alumnus when alumnus-specific data are put into the model. The Nagelkerke’s R-square of the fitted model is found to be 0.482 explaining around 48% of variation in acquiring BÜMED membership. The negative sign of the coefficient of gender indicates that female graduates have greater tendency to become members compared to male graduates (females are coded by “1” and males are coded by “2” in the data sets). Moreover, the exp(β) or the odds ratio of 0.580 for gender indicates the predicted change in odds for a unit increase in this variable, i.e., the odds of membership acquisition decreases by a factor of 0.580. In other words, the odds of success (the odds that $Y=1$) are 1.7 times as large for females as for males. The odds ratio for marital status implies that odds of married graduates being members are 24.7 times greater than single graduates. The negative sign for the coefficient of graduation year indicates that the longer the years from graduation, the higher the probability of becoming a member. Furthermore, the odds ratio of 0.989 for the same variable shows that

each additional year after graduation increases the odds of becoming member by about 1%. Although department, work-sector, and work-position are categorical covariates with multiple categories for which a straight forward interpretation of logit coefficients and odd ratios are not possible, we can claim that they are among the predictors of membership acquisition in our logistic regression model.

The split of non-member to member is 66.4% and 33.4% in the analysis sample (66.8% and 33.2% in the validation sample). The analysis sample yields a hit (accuracy) ratio of 82.3 % in estimating the membership acquisition where as the hit ratio of validation data is 81.4%. The hit ratios both for analysis and validation data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Classification tables for analysis and validation data sets

	Analysis Sample			Validation Sample		
	<i>Predicted</i>			<i>Predicted</i>		
	Non-member	Member	Hit ratio	Non-member	Member	Hit ratio
<i>Observed</i>						
Non-member	8735	611	93.5	8750	650	93.1
Member	1878	2859	60.4	1974	2703	57.8
Overall Hit Ratio	82.3			81.4		

A relatively higher hit ratio in predicting non-members and the high number of false negatives (the number of members incorrectly classified as non-members) for both samples suggests that the independent variables in the prediction model are better predictors of not being a member.

Conclusions

The available literature studying alumni relations focuses mainly on the issues related to alumni giving or donations to their alma mater. Our study context is confined to examining the alumni-alumni association relationship with the intention of identification of factors that influence or characterize association membership. Nevertheless, the stream of literature on alumni giving/donation offers significant support for our findings in this research. For example, Belfield and Beney (2000) find gender effects as significant in determining alumni generosity and state that “females have a higher probability of giving, but they are likely to give less.” The same study reports that the likelihood of giving increase with age at a

decreasing rate which is also consistent with our graduation-year predictor variable. Interestingly, determinants of alumni giving include income as a strong predictor, and when it is not included in the model, occupation and gender are found to have much explanatory power. In their attempt to identify undergraduate and post-college variables that may affect alumni giving, Young and Fisher (1996) affirm that among the post-college variables only two variables reflect significant differences based on gender; for men, the level of individual income is an important predictor in whether or not they contributed to their undergraduate institution whereas the number of siblings attending the University is a positive predictor for women. In line with other research (e.g., Okunade *et al.* (1994), Marr *et al.* (2005)), Belfield and Beney (2000) identify the subject of study as influential on alumni donations and report that graduates in Education are least likely to give. BÜMED membership data analysis also yielded that the lowest membership acquisition ratios belong to the graduates of Faculty of Education. Strikingly, Okunade *et al.* (1994) based on their covariance regression model results show that the School of Business graduates give significantly more which is compatible with our result that the graduates of the Department of Management has the highest membership acquisition ratio among the graduates of all departments in the university. As the only contrary finding with our result that married graduates have a higher probability of becoming a member, Belfield and Beney's study presents empirical evidence that those who are married have a lower probability of giving and give less than graduates who are single.

Although the proposed model for predicting membership acquisition is immature and further analysis might be required to refine the model, the results of the analysis that we conducted are suggestive not only concerning the current membership profile but also gave clues regarding mechanisms to attract prospective members. Despite some possible limitations, there seems to be evidence that becoming a member, thus establishing a long-term relationship with the alma mater, is at least partially influenced by gender, marital status, graduation year, department, work-sector, and work-position of an alumnus. Further research is necessary, for instance, to understand the dynamics why some departments' graduates are more likely to become members whereas some other departments' graduates are reluctant for this attachment. Furthermore, Okunade (1996) asserts that socio-economic, geo-demographic, and psychographic factors shape alumni's giving to alma mater. Obviously, incorporation of such variables in our study as the determinants of establishing long-term relationships with

the alma mater through membership to alumni organizations would help to understand the nature of attachment and thus identification with the alma mater in detail.

This study demonstrates how the customer orientation approach is adopted by an alumni association in line with its commitment to provide a superior value to its stakeholders. It also reinforces the importance of customer information/knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and use processes as one of the defining features of customer-relating capability in a nonprofit context. We particularly illustrated how customer knowledge might be put into action in formulating proactive customer acquisition strategies in the case of an alumni association.

Notes:

(1) BÜMED defines its stakeholders as follows: alumni of Boğaziçi University that are members of BÜMED, alumni of Boğaziçi University that are not members of BÜMED, BÜMED employees and volunteers, BÜMED's partners (organisations that BÜMED works with), students of Boğaziçi University, faculty of Boğaziçi University, administrative staff of Boğaziçi University, and legislative and regulatory bodies in BÜMED's institutional environment (BÜMED, 2004).

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