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Openness and Capability of Organizations in Capturing and Making Use of Customer's Advisory*

ABSTRACT

Organizations analyze the market, anticipate the needs, design, shape, and provide solutions through their understanding. Generally, their main issue is waiting for responses like complaints as a feedback to activate an innovative system. However, there are possibly more valuable comments to listen to, if the communication would be started by customer towards the organization regarding the evaluation of product and service, and even idea generation. This flow is named as “customer's advisory” by the authors and it is used as a general term for capturing the responses and advises of customers. For this purpose it requires technological focus along with responsiveness and empathy in organizational culture, creating an open communication environment; and it fosters the organizations' capability for product and service evaluation. The advisory of customers can be critically supportive for developing an innovative mindset within the organization. In this study, openness of the organization to listen to customers and capability of the organization to evaluate its services are detected. The study is run in Turkey focusing a sample of middle-line managers.

KEYWORDS

Customer's Advisory, Openness and Capability, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Technology, Relationship Management

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INTRODUCTION

Global challenges enforce the organizations to remain competitive. Modern organizations move more from the market driven systems to customer driven systems (Day, 1999). Any organization launching a tangible product to the market offers at the same time a service attached to it to the buyers. It can be said hence that organizations of the 21st century are living with the services they provide, and that makes a customer-centric culture the core for competitiveness. Relationships with any customer can only be enhanced by collecting information from the different target groups as to understand their focus for interaction, generate feedback and assure lifetime value as a result of this ongoing communication. This in turn can also help organizations to understand market behavior, anticipate the needs, wants and expectations in advance and use these as guidance for their upcoming short term strategies and long term goals. That is, the customers take an active role in the marketing process, and provide fresh information to the organization. They are at the same time active participants in idea generation and new product development. At this point it can be said that the organization has assured customer involvement. Especially when an organization serves a variety of customer groups, it becomes a priority to learn about and serve for different niche market needs. Customer involvement in new product and service development has also been discussed from a relationship marketing point of view to understand better how to get the best value out of factors affecting customer satisfaction (Lagrosen, 2005). Higher value product offerings to the market and higher level of customer value achievement will not only assure customer satisfaction and long term loyalty. It will also enhance brand and corporate image and help for competitive advantage in domestic as well as world markets.

Attaching this kind of a new role to the customer can be called “customer’s advisory”. Here the customer helps the organization to adapt itself to ongoing changes taking place in the competitive environment. At second place, this kind of continuous interaction will help the customers also to understand the difficulties the firm is facing and ease the process of communication and mutual understanding.

Customer orientation and making use of customer’s advisory cannot be separated from technological devices of today and link highly to proper use of different technological advancements for communication, starting with web sites of firms informing at simplest way about the organization and its products and allowing the customer to write their questions to Internet based free cost phone lines and blogs, email use made possible via cellular phones,

all accelerating the bidirectional information flow on a continuous way. The discussion will be mainly about the mutual needs around the products and services offered to the market.

The important thing here is to build correct linkages between organizations, their customers and products. Figure 1 presents the basic challenges of the competitive environment: organizational development, customer development, and service development. Because any change taking place in the micro and macro environment of any business organization reflects a need to revise these business programs on a continuous basis.

The customer's advisory is at the intersection point of these three levels. Being open to listen to and being responsive to suggestions, needs and insights from the market, triggers better customer and service development, and in turn a market-oriented organizational development. Facilitating tool is the technology.

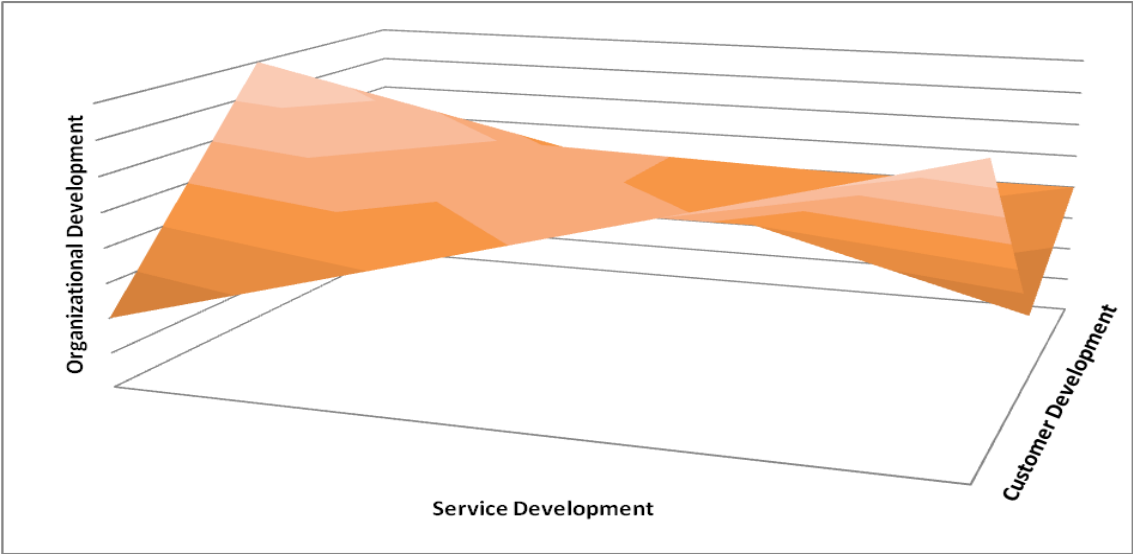


Figure 1: Three dimensions of modern organization

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to note at this point that why customer's advisory is getting critical for any organization to assure life time customer value and long-term relations, and how the organizations can approach their customers through organizational learning and technology orientation, via openness and capability.

Customer's Advisory for Customer Lifetime Value

Organizations that are ready to learn about differences in target markets need to focus on customer lifetime value (CLV) measurement (Pfeifer et al., 2005). In this sense, knowledge about the customer migration, optimal resource allocation and customer relationship handling can be of good help (Jain and Singh, 2002). Different scholars focus on this issue: Malthouse and Blattberg (2004) developed a model, others added new parameters and factors like retention, growth margin and time horizon (Gupta and Lehmann, 2005), value, brand and relationship equity composing the customer equity (Lemon et al., 2001), and the brand manifold concept (Berthon et al., 2007). The value can be generated when quality, cost and convenience are coherent with each other, for brand equity awareness and attitude formation. More to that, corporate ethics is a must for the relationships to be triggered via loyalty and affinity programs, community-building activities, and follow up of changing customer needs. Besides, any product incorporates a service dimension today. Hence, service dominant logic of marketing (SDLM) emphasizes that value definitions of buyers would help to build long term relations and provides the opportunity to turn them into lifetime customers (Lusch and Vargo, 2004). To achieve this, customer's advisory becomes crucial.

Customer's advisory is a result of customer development approach (see Figure 1) and intersects with service and organizational dimensions. It is one of the most influential dominating factors of development in modern organizations. Customer's interpretation of alternatives always reflects dynamism and is always affected by gravity of the social networks. When an organization activates the customer's advisory, it fosters a great potential to develop new or elaborated, customized, and direct service for its markets; assuring higher efficiency gains both from the financial and from the managerial side of the business operations.

Organizations and Organizational Learning

Modern organizations today reflect an integrated structure with close commitment of three basic dimensions: organizational development, service development and customer development. The first dimension of the figure challenged and be considered in this paper, named as the organizational development. Without assuring a proper functioning of the organizational commitment, neither the service development not the customer development can be in progress. This first aspect links the model to organizational behavior; and its importance stresses that organizations of the 21st century do not reflect longer solitude, monolithic structures. They rather present a well knit structure with other institutions and people around, trapped by the need for continuous, ongoing learning. Scholars such as Senge (1990) highlighted the capabilities of learning and changing, others such as Hammer and Champy (1993) stressed the importance of adaptation and expansion. The possibilities for collapse or revolving were themes discussed by Gibson (1996). Many other scholars (Gummesson, 2005; Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000; Cooper, 2000; Walker and Ruekert, 1987) covered managerial strategies and organizational dynamics. This can generate a business interaction environment in the organization, where openness to listen can be encouraged among the internal and external customers and therefore, organizational commitment is increased. In parallel with this, the budget for technological investments can also be affected positively. These investments are mandatory for retrieving information on time and using it in correct way. Otherwise, it is difficult to say that customer's advisory can be activated properly. Technology can range from a simple investment to highly sophisticated one. But nevertheless, they all support and be supported by customer's advisory.

The question at this point is how to design a system where customer's advisory is not just a feedback for product evaluations, but at the same time, a future focus for new product development. Beyond openness to listen to the customer and being committed to move the customer into the process of evaluation and building new products, the organizations need to develop also a system and team capable to evaluate the information in continuous flow to them. Especially for the development of new products and services, customer responses are important to understand and anticipate needs correctly (Matthing et al., 2004). This necessitates giving way to creative mindset, innovative thinking and evaluation capability within an existing system. Deriving meaningful customer insights and developing entirely new business models build the core for innovative corporate-thinking in an organization. This

perspective requires new concerns and ways of thinking in the organization, and transitioning from old models to new ones as Desouza et al. (2008) put it. Creation of an innovative mindset starts at the strategic decision-making level. The resource advantage theory perspective of Hunt (1997) stresses the importance of organizational learning and innovativeness within an imperfectly mobile and heterogeneous information environment. Gummesson (2005) reveals the fact that in the 21st century the move is from “One-to-One” to “Many-to-Many” marketing in the network society. With the variety of technology tools, marketing communication is made easy and turned into a dialogue with customers for listening to responses and comments, capturing ideas and understanding the requirements for new features. Hence, the organizations can easily utilize the customer’s advisory for better relationship building with their customer-base, learning from their experiences and retaining innovative ideas at a lower cost. When an organization is committed to build the necessary infrastructure to listen to its customers and reflects openness to new ideas, new consumer markets can be easily reached, new products with longer life cycles can be created, and a loyal customer-base can be built.

Organizations and Use of Technology

Innovation is the key to enable new ways of thinking, producing and presenting value to customers. The convergence of marketing and technology, though they were evolving separately in different cultures and mindset, is more apparent than ever. Many customer-driven organizations are finding new ways to align marketing and information technologies to develop better targeted marketing campaigns and detailed customer analytics. Organizations are faced to build their competitive strategies around data-driven insights. Reengineering customer responses, involving them into the product design, letting the customers communicate with the organization directly and listening to them in detail, using incoming information for strategy development are important in a competitive environment. Social networking websites commute many subsets of segments and provide the chance to integrate product and service offerings directly into these specific customer clubs. As customer community brings in the opportunity to inherit more distilled information from before, innovation becomes inertia of the organization driven by the customer-oriented business architecture to "out-think" rivals.

However, these are not so easy to implement without an open mindset of top management, and without an appropriate information system infrastructure that is based on the marketing

technology tools and configured for the enhancement of organizational decision making. Knowledge management challenges the organizations to question the information content and values, reshape existing products and transform their value proposition radically to meet new customer needs Tiwana (2001, p. 43). Integration of knowledge management practices into relationship management processes brings out the possibilities of success in closer customer interaction, customized product design and configured service.

From time to time, marketing gets aligned with improvements of technology and makes effective use of newest tools brought to market in understanding dynamic consumer behavior. There are three interrelated levels when major developments in technology are considered: Database infrastructure and user-friendliness for data storage, the Internet infrastructure and the web interfaces for data collection, and the wireless networking infrastructure ranging from Bluetooth¹ and WiMax² to 3G³ and CDMA⁴, and mobile devices for data interactivity with increasing number of smart phones and portable computers. Personalized and user friendly technological improvements open the gates to interact within the organizations and with their supply chains and customers directly. The better the communication medium is equipped and its effectiveness increased, the more responsive the customers become taking part in service evaluations and suggestions. The Internet and any wireless network achieved to break the walls between the organizations and their customers, giving way to a new form of dialogue. As Ridderstrale and Nordström (2000, p.102) mentioned, the Internet assures transparency and access to huge amount of information, so both internal and external customers of organizations feel responsive to challenge these service providers.

Antecedents of Customer's Advisory: Openness and Capability by use of Technology

Two constructs of openness and capability are the keys to capture, to understand and to make use of customer's advisory. Briefly explained, openness to listen to customer responses is a matter of responsiveness, empathy and technology focus. Capability on the other hand relates

¹ For details see under www.bluetooth.org and www.wikipedia.com; Bluetooth is a wireless protocol utilizing short-range communications technology for data transmission over short distances.

² For details see under www.wimaxforum.org; WiMAX is a standards-based technology enabling the delivery of last mile wireless broadband access as an alternative to wired broadband like cable and digital subscriber lines.

³ For details see under www.itu.int and www.3gpp.com; 3G is the third generation of mobile phone standards and technology, based on the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) family of standards under the IMT-2000.

⁴ For details see under www.cdma.org; Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) is a spread spectrum technology, allowing many users to occupy the same time and frequency allocations in a given space, providing better capacity for voice and data communications, allowing more subscribers to connect. 3G technologies are built on this platform.

to bidirectional information sharing on a continuous basis, that is, not only being interested to send tremendous amounts of messages about their offerings but also receiving many messages from their customers.

Regarding the openness, *responsiveness* and *empathy* in an organizational climate are critical to anticipate problems, address requests, adapt the products / services to ideas and recommendations of customers, as well as to understand the changes taking place in the market environment. *Responsiveness*, the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service (Parasuraman et al., 1991), is formed of four basic subscales: promising attitude in behaving customer comments, willingness to respond eagerly, seriousness in the responses back to customer, and quickness in getting back to customer. *Empathy*, individualized attention the organization provides to customer (Parasuraman et al., 1991), is a combination of three subscales: explanation of options to the customer against its will, lesser use of technical jargon in communication, and understanding concerns of customers in dialogue.

Technology focus is an additional requirement for organizations to get these behavioral transactions with customers logged and to make proper uses of them for strategic benefits of organization. *Technology focus* includes the implementation of websites (Garrity et al, 2005; Marsden, 2008), electronic forums (Nambisan and Nambisan, 2008), blogs (Dwyer, 2007; Rickman and Cosenza, 2007), e-chatting (Clauser, 2001) features and e-mailing technologies (Bachmann et al, 1999; Kurtzberg et al. 2005) within the organization to enable communication with customers.

The capability of product / service knowledge utilization and evaluation within an organization are found to be related to several factors in diverse studies (see Menon and Varadarajan, 1992; Maltz and Kohli, 1996; Kang et.al., 2007) such as having computerized information systems, increased personal contacts, innovation orientation, market intelligence dissemination effectiveness, interpersonal trust, and communication between marketing and engineering units. Also Fisher et al. (1997) in their study found that the capability of service evaluation in organizations relate highly to *bidirectional information-sharing* among engineering and marketing departments in the organization, and the *frequency in information use* to evaluate services; and these two constructs were also tested by Massey and Kyriazis (2007) with an integrative model. Effectiveness in information sharing can though be generated when critical marketing technology tools are used by the organizations for evaluation of customer's advisory. Here to mention are several systems suggested such as

MDMSS, the Marketing Decision Making Support Systems (Van Bruggen et al., 2001), Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Technologies (Stuart, 2005), ERPS, the Enterprise Resource Planning System (Van Bruggen et al., 2001), and HRMS, the Human Resource Management Systems (Roos et al., 2004; Afiouni, 2007; Pietsch, 2007).

Therefore, the use of technology not only is linked to openness but also to increasing the capability of service evaluation for organizations in diverse market settings to remain competitive.

METHOD

The researchers aimed to find out first how far and with which variables the openness to listen to customers and capability of service evaluation in the organizations help for making use of customer's advisory in Turkey. They were interested in finding out (a) if and which factors constituting the responsiveness, empathy and technology focus of the organization are contributing to the openness to interact with their customers, (b) if bidirectional information sharing in business units, information sharing frequency, and technology capability of the organization are contributing to the capability of service evaluation.

Assessment of research objectives were made through a descriptive cross-sectional empirical research constituted as field survey. The primary data was obtained through a self administered questionnaire, composed of 32 statements on a 6-point balanced and forced Likert-scale. The survey was open to unique online access for 45 days based on invitation through individual e-mails sent to a sample of middle-managers working at 7,500 organizations in Turkey. Finally, 301 valid responses collected. The data obtained through the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 15.0 for Microsoft Windows.

Reliability analysis for the two constructs (openness to listen to and analyze responses of customers and service evaluation capability of the organizations) and the core concept (customer's advisory) were found significant (Cronbach's Alpha values of $\alpha_{\text{core concept}}=0.717$, $\alpha_{\text{openness}}=0.704$, $\alpha_{\text{capability}}=0.742$, where all above 0.700). An explanatory principal component analysis on each construct, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy were assessed and found significant ($\text{KMO}_{\text{openness}}=0.789$, $\text{KMO}_{\text{capability}}=0.777$, where both are above 0.500). The openness construct consisted of three sub-dimensions of responsiveness, empathy and technology focus of the organization. The

capability to service evaluation construct was consisted of two components of information sharing and technology capability of the organization. The results showed that the constructs, openness of the organization to interact with customers and capability of organizations to service evaluation were representative for the core concept, customer's advisory.

Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation proved that there is no autocorrelation among the variables. Finally, F-Test in the ANOVA approved that the relationship of constructs with core concept is a valid model. Verifying the model, significance of t-test results about the coefficients claimed that both openness and capability constructs were significant in contribution to the explanatory power of the model with an adjusted R^2 of 0.258. Beta values of both constructs (openness=0.368 and capability=0.178) indicated that the effect of openness to listen to customers is higher than capability to service evaluation of the organization for the making use of customer's advisory. Details are presented in Table 1, below:

Table 1 Pearson correlations among the core concept (making use of customer's advisory) and constructs (openness and capability)

		1 (Core Concept)	2 (Openness)
1.Making Use of Customer's Advisory (Core Concept)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (1-tailed) N		
2.Openness	Pearson Correlation Sig. (1-tailed) N	0.494 0.000 240	
3.Capability	Pearson Correlation Sig. (1-tailed) N	0.412 0.000 240	0.605 0.000 240
R^2 Adjusted R^2 Durbin-Watson <i>d</i> statistic value ANOVA			0.264 0.258 1.983
	F Sig.		42.549 0.000

FINDINGS

First, the data was analyzed for descriptive statistics and results pointed out that: the respondents were mainly from services sector (58 %), having a flat hierarchical structure in their organizations (81 %), and their organizations were not listed among in Top 500 Companies (73 %). Their organizations mainly employed less than 300 people (65 %) and the revenues generated in 2007 were less than 50 million TL for the 70 %. For the majority (72 %) of these middle line managers contacted, the environment they operated was highly competitive. For about 58 % of the respondents, their organizations are B2C (business-to-customer) oriented in their mainstream operations.

Findings about the components of the two constructs, openness and capability, and their subscale items are presented below in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Components of Openness Construct

Variables	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Responsiveness (Promise)	300	4.80	1.251
Responsiveness (Willing)	296	4.60	1.492
Empathy (Options)	294	4.54	1.187
Responsiveness (Serious)	297	4.44	1.327
Empathy (Concerns)	297	4.29	1.391
Technology Focus (Email)	295	4.13	1.742
Technology Focus (Web)	299	4.03	1.410
Responsiveness (Quick)	299	3.90	1.493
Technology Focus (Forum)	299	3.55	1.722
Empathy (Jargon)	295	3.54	1.384
Technology Focus (Chat)	298	2.90	1.791
Technology Focus (Blogging)	293	2.76	1.599

N= number of responses; 6 point scale 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree

According to findings belonging to openness construct (Table 2), the most strongly supported variables are about *responsiveness* and *empathy* of service providers. The two factors most strongly agreed upon are about *responsiveness*: the promising attitude in relationship with customers (mean = 4.80), that is, being open to fulfill the needs and expectations expressed;

followed by willingness to understand what the customer wants to say (mean = 4.60) about the services offered by the organization. Among *empathy* components, providing more options to the customer (mean = 4.54) was the factor more agreed upon compared to the other two items of empathy. Amongst technology focus e-mailing and websites were the forerunners (means 4.13 and 4.03 respectively). Interesting to note is that the respondents did not feel a strong tie to blogs where customers freely talk about the services and service providers (mean = 2.76).

Table 3 Components of Capability Construct

Variables	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Frequency of Information Share	298	4.90	1.182
Bilateral Information Share	295	4.11	1.457
Technology Capability (HRMS)	296	3.73	1.774
Technology Capability (CRM)	291	3.30	1.801
Technology Capability (Intranet)	296	3.20	1.667
Technology Capability (ERP)	283	2.86	1.865

N= number of responses; 6 point scale 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree

Findings for the capability construct (Table 3) reflect that the most strongly supported two variables are *frequency* and *bilateral* nature of information sharing among the business units of the organization (means 4.90 and 4.11 respectively). Although technology capability was rated to be at medium level of use by the respondents, its most contributing subscale to capability construct was found to be the Human Resource Management Systems (HRMS) used in the organization. Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) on the other hand is rarely made use of.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the effectiveness in the use of various marketing technology tools for interpretation of customer's advisory in service evaluation was an objective of this study to meet. For this purpose, two basic constructs, openness of the organization and the capability of the organization, were the focus of attention.

Regarding the openness construct, *responsiveness* with promising attitude towards the customers for fulfilling needs and meeting expectations as well as the willingness to

understand the customers were rated to be the focus of attention of the service providers. *Empathy* was rather related to providing more options to customers. The best marketing *technology tools* for the use of customer's advisory are websites of the organizations and e-mailing where generally more options of services are discussed with the customers.

The most strongly supported two variables of the capability construct proved to be *frequent and bilateral* information sharing. This implies that service evaluation is dependent upon the efficiency of information sharing among production and marketing business units. Every organization is in need of finding out what customers are willing to buy from its offerings. Different business units in the organization define requirements to satisfy customer separately. Marketing-oriented view and production-oriented view contain priorities of their own, looking at various market dynamics and production constraints in their own way. Their collaborative anticipation of the market and designing new services accordingly assures the best results. Among the capability construct was found that *HRMS* is the priority in organizations. Hiring well educated, well trained and good skilled people, better management of these resources and collaboration among business units drive the organization forward in making use of customer's advisory.

Organizations employ these different tools to get their relationships well going with their customers, to collect their responses and complaints, and to capture their feedbacks, recommendations and advisory. By this way, organizations lead the way to increase efficiency of limited marketing resources by alignment of human resources and technology that decrease the time spent on planning, production and measurement of marketing communication activities.

Value creation is a customized process for any organization and should be directed under a scope drawn by long term strategies of the organization itself. As co-creation of value (Lusch and Vargo, 2004) is one of the dominant factors of determination in modern marketing strategies for services, an organization is responsible of sustainability in creating value propositions together with their customers and following a proper systematic accustomed for itself. The results of this research explained that co-creation of value together with customers, customer retention, and innovative corporate thinking in customer relations were related with openness of the organization.

Additionally, in the evaluation of service to a higher satisfactory level for customers, implementation of a strategy to make use of customer's advisory directed from brand communities is valuable. The effect of diffusion of newly developed version of any service in the brand community would be easier and faster in response to the support of identified contributors in that community. In parallel to our findings, the co-creation of value in consumer networks for organizational adaptiveness to useful impulses from customer in innovative corporate thinking also discussed as innovations through customers. Michel et al. (2008) mentioned that the traditional and attribute-based view of innovation should be replaced with more radical service dominant logic of marketing (SDLM) perspective in order to use customers' value co-creation roles in innovation. Here, responsiveness and empathy of organization to capture and make use of customer's advisory is blended with technology focus.

This research exposed that the Internet and comprehensive organizational web sites, new forms of integrated marketing communication tools and advancements are bringing out opportunities for organizations beyond just having conversations with customers. Listening to their comments about services offered, collection of their feedbacks about fulfillment of service, and getting clues to improve services are the ways to reach a superior customer value. A good understanding of results driven out from the synthesis of customer's advisory supports customer-oriented organizations to step ahead from the crowd. Compromising the results from this research, academia and business gained appreciation of the opportunity to be collectively integrated with target market's need assessments, apply a holistic perspective with the network focus and many-to-many approach in marketing, and also enable higher level anticipation of dynamics in consumer behavior.

Besides, the sample of the study, middle-managers, is worth to state here again in terms of their importance for any organization. A primary role to middle line managers was assigned by Mintzberg (1979) when he discussed the organizations' design in a structure of five basic configurations: in the "Divisionalized Form". Middle line managers of today play an important role in organizations with greater responsibilities for wider range of duties with more control over their resources, being in close interaction with other departments (Dopson and Stewart, 1993). With more freedom to innovate and take risk, to implement changes (Dopson and Stewart, 1993; Hornsby et. al, 2002) and their involvement in the formation of strategy is associated with improved organizational performance (Wooldridge and Floyd,

1990; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). When an organization communicates with its customers by web sites and interaction through email contacts, the middle-managers are the liaison for these creative ideas to be used for implementing new strategies and change to foster the sustainability and competitiveness.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study was conducted in Turkey using the responses of middle line decision makers in various organizations. Therefore, the results are limited with the Turkish business environment. For this study, the customer concept is rather limited to the end users of the products and services. However, all internal and external customers within the stakeholders' system can have an important customer's advisory role for the organizations. Finally, design and implementation of survey in this research has been realized through the Internet website and based on sending e-mail invitations to a sample of the target population. The study can be extended to a face-to-face interview with the top managers to get more insights. Beyond the structured questionnaire applied so far, the use of open ended questions can help to collect more detailed information about the reasons why and why not to focus on customer's advisory in an organization in the competitive business environments of today for future operations.

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