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The role of norms in the evolution of a relationship: the case of an asymmetrical process in the banking industry

Abstract

Few attempts have been made to empirically get an understanding of "what should be going on" at each stage of a relationship between two partners of any dyad.

This research investigates the evolution of a relationship in a B2B context using the Nominal Group Technique approach to collect the data and puts the emphasis on the actions to be taken. The data coming from account managers in commercial banking are applied to Macneil's contractual norms to portray this evolution.

Results emphasize the importance of role integrity through most of the stages in this evolution. Furthermore, a relationship is seen as a combination of transactional, relational as well as business related factors, which is rarely taken into account in the literature. Thus, relying only on the relational dimension to understand a marketing relationship has to be challenged.

Keywords: relationship marketing, norms, integrity.
JEL Classification: M31.

1. Modelling the evolution of a relationship

The relationship between a buyer and a seller is a potential source of competitive advantage, when: a) the potential for differentiation on the core of the offering is limited, and b) when both partners gain some tangible advantages from a long-lasting relationship (e.g., Day, 2000; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). But a relationship between the two partners of any dyad is also a dynamic process. As Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) clearly demonstrate, the exchange process underlying a relationship evolves through various stages, from the selection process to an eventual dissolution.

Few attempts have been made to empirically understand this evolution and to get an understanding of "what should be going on" at each of these stages. The objective of this paper is to provide a better understanding of this evolution of a relationship between two organizations, by emphasizing actions to be taken. More specifically we focus on the commercial banking arena. Previous empirical researches have justified the selection of this field of investigation in order to explore the relationships between two organizations (e.g., Perrien, Filiatrault and Ricard, 1993).

Within this research, and following conceptual stages in the evolution of a relationship as depicted by Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987), we identify four main stages in the evolution of a commercial relationship (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). At stage 1 the two potential partners evaluate the feasibility of a banking relationship. We name that phase the *selection process* (which gathers together phase 1, awareness, and phase 2, exploration, in the Dwyer Schurr and Oh model); phase 2 is identified as *the beginning of a relationship*, phase 3 refers to *the consolidation of a relationship* (what Dwyer Schurr and Oh (1987) mention as phase 4, commitment); and finally, phase 4 refers to the *dissolution phase*….unfortunately, as many marriages… a strong relationship may end up in a divorce. Our customization of the Dwyer, Schurr and Oh model is reflecting the empirical situation in the banking industry: exploration = awareness + exploration, namely there must be a preliminary formal analysis of the fit between a bank and a commercial customer. Furthermore, our model of the evolution of a relationship is simple and tends to be as exhaustive as the Dwyer, Schurr and Oh model.

2. Macneil's norms as a frame of reference

Having introduced the stages involved in the development of a relationship and bearing in mind our normative intent, we have to select a framework of analysis. Its contribution is to provide us with a well-grounded and exhaustive conceptualization of the investigated evolution of a relationship to clearly understand "what should be going on" at each stage, as stated earlier. Therefore, we decided to select Macneil's analysis of contractual norms as a frame of reference (1974, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1983, and 1985). Among the identified published empirical papers (coming from JMR, JM, JBR, IJSM, and IJBM) on IBI and Emerald databases from 1980 to 2007, which made explicit references to Macneil's works, few of them took into account the full set of Macneil's norms: marketers tend to follow a piecemeal approach which significantly departs from Macneil's contribution. As an indication, the average number of contractual norms which have been included in published empirical researches (explicitly referring to Macneil) is 2.72 when, as we will see, the author identifies many more contractual norms.

3. Macneil's contractual norms

First, let us stress that Macneil is a jurist and that his main objective was to improve the paradigm of contract law. In his straightforward definition of modern contract law Macneil emphasizes the notions of exchange and relationship between parties, a decade ahead of marketers (e.g., Berry and Thompson, 1982). But being ahead, from a conceptual standpoint, is not enough. One has to acknowledge that the very notion of a contractual exchange gains additional value when Macneil defines the critical features of what contractual norms are, and moreover, breakdowns these norms according to their contributions to the contract (i.e. the exchange). Macneil is the very first to introduce transactional and relational norms. Up to that moment, a contract as well as an exchange had been defined on purely transactional norms (as in transaction cost analysis and classical contract law). By widening the scope of the commitment between two partners, Macneil significantly improves our knowledge of a relationship. Hence, his work became the foundations of relationship marketing (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987), although in subsequent work marketing researchers often refer to Macneil without always depicting a clear understanding of his contribution.

4. Contractual norms: a typology

When referring to norms, Macneil gives us the basic parameters on the various forms contracts, and therefore exchanges between partners may take place. A norm is a component of an exchange and consequently contributes to the implementation of an effective relationship. These norms are therefore basic social and organizational ways on which to implement an effective relationship. Hence, they give us indications of what should be taken into account in the evolution of a relationship.

According to Macneil, there are 10 common contract norms. Five norms are transactional: reciprocity, implementation of planning, effectuation of consent, linking norms, creation and restraint of power. Five norms are relational: role integrity, preservation of the relation (including contractual solidarity), harmonization of relational conflict (including flexibility), supracontractual norms and propriety of means. In the marketing literature several researchers include another relational norm, namely communication that Macneil perceives as a component of role integrity (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Paulin, Perrien and Fergusson, 1997). The underlying hypothesis to include an additional norm such as communication is straightforward: communication between partners, from a marketing standpoint, is a crucial issue in the development of a relationship to such an extent it must be viewed as a specific relational norm that can be leveraged by marketing actions to strengthen a relationship. Table 1 (see the Appendix) gives a definition of the 11 norms we analyzed as well as examples of items related to each norm.

Measurement issues are not a concern for Macneil and some norms are fairly broad in scope. Nevertheless, they provide us with a unique and fairly exhaustive grid to understand a relationship (Graf and Perrien, 2005; Arnold and Joshi, 1997; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987). As we think, it is the most advanced framework to have been built up to portray a relationship, we intend to apply this grid to understand the evolution of a relationship in the commercial banking arena.

5. Methodology

To understand what actions have to be conducted at each step of the evolution of a relationship (see Figure 1 in the Appendix), we rely on the expertise of bank account managers, which means information is coming from the supply side of the relationship process. Such an investigation is backed up by research in the commercial banking arena depicting a commercial banking relationship as an asymmetrical process: the responsibilities involved in managing relationships rest in the hands of the banker (Ricard and Perrien, 1993). Furthermore, such an approach fits into the stream of managerial research such as in the development process of innovation, following classical measures of "decision calculus". We also have to acknowledge that sellers, through the expertise they gain by managing diversified relationships, have a more accurate perspective of what should be done simply because they gather together customers' expectations and managerial conditions of effective performance. Bank account managers are in charge of a portfolio of commercial accounts (i.e. businesses) and their key responsibility is to manage the relationships with commercial customers to such an extent that several Canadian institutions no longer speak of account managers but of relationship managers. Nevertheless, the common practice is still to refer to account managers.

For each of the four stages in the development of a relationship we used the Nominal Group Technique approach (Claxton, Ritchie and Zaichkowsky, 1980) the objective of which is to generate the maximum number of ideas. This data collection technique has never been used before as far as the analysis of Macneil's norms is concerned (Durif and Perrien, 2006).

In a first step, participants were presented with a simple question customized to each of the four stages that were introduced earlier. The format of questions was standardized: "In your opinion, how should bank identify a good customer to build up a long-term relation (relational approach)?" (Stage 1: the selection process); "In your opinion, how can banks build up a long-term relation with a good new customer (relational approach)?" (Stage 2: the beginning); "In your opinion, how can banks improve long-term relations with good customers (relational approach)?" (Stage 3: the consolidation), "In your opinion, how do you explain banks are loosing what were good long-term customers?" (Stage 4: the dissolution). Obviously, only the structure of the last question (regarding the dissolution process) was slightly different because of the very nature of the stage. Each respondent was only involved in one stage of the development of a relationship.

5.1. The NGT technique. Once they had been introduced with the question, the NGT approach participants went through six steps (see Table 2 in the Appendix). The results from this final vote were computed as input data for our analysis.

5.2. Participants. 239 account managers coming from the six major Canadian banks as well as the leading foreign bank (HSBC) were involved in the NGT sessions. All sessions were managed by the same moderator. Participants took part in meetings held by the Institute of Canadian Bankers in Western Canada, Ontario and Montreal. Sessions were conducted in English, as French speaking account managers had a good monitoring of English (the moderator was bilingual in order to solve any potential linguistic problem). All in all, it meant that we had an accumulated experience of slightly less than **20000 relationships** (at the time of the investigation, the average size of the portfolio was 80 accounts per manager). We did not collect information on profiles of account managers (i.e. education, number of years of experience, employer) as this information was part of the confidential agreement we had with the ICB.

The breakdown of participants with regards to the four stages of the development of a relationship was as follows: 58 for Stage one ("the selection"), 70 for Stage 2 ("the beginning"), 51 for Stage 3 ("the consolidation") and 50 for Stage 4 ("the dissolution"). Hence the overall sample consisted of 229 account managers from the top seven Canadian banks. Discrepancies between stages were due to the level of account managers' participation in ICB meetings. Groups of respondents were randomly assigned to each stage. A group consisted of 12 to 15 participants.

6. Content analysis and reliability of results

For each stage of the evolution process, a content analysis of items resulting from NGT sessions was conducted by two independent researchers having a good understanding of both commercial banking and Macneil's contractual norms. A preliminary analysis resulted in the addition of three dimensions at the first stage (selection): bank's characteristics (e.g., Credit policies), customer's profile (e.g., Management style) and business sector (e.g., Potential for growth). This inductive process resulted in a grid of 13 dimensions through which items extracted from the NGT process were analyzed. The reliability of the content analysis as measured by the Perreault and Leigh coefficient was 97% (an excellent score), only 15 items were misclassified by the two judges. The final agreement came from a consensus between the two judges.

7. Results

The following paragraphs present an overall evaluation of the evolution of a relationship in commercial banking as extracted from both the deductive (Macneil's norms) and inductive (business characteristics) grid we introduced earlier. The results are depicted in Table 3 of the Appendix.

The *selection process* is mainly the outcome of a fit between the two members of the dyad with a strong emphasis on the customer's economic and managerial characteristics such as the financial position of the firm and its management. Relational factors rank second with the ability to build a long-term relationship (solidarity) as the leading norm, closely followed by role integrity which mainly concerns the understanding of the potential customer and the professionalism with which to handle his needs. At this stage of the process transactional norms are paramount; although it must be emphasized they are less important than business and relational norms.

At the *beginning of the relationship*, relational factors lead the process, especially role integrity (professionalism, knowledge). Business issues are no longer playing a role, which may mean that before a relationship is set up, the business analysis is "final". Let us also stress the key role of communication between members of the dyad at this early stage (communication is a sub-dimension of role integrity). Transactional issues decrease through the evolution of the relationship. It means that building up a relationship (stage 2) mainly entails role integrity and communication between partners.

The *consolidation* of a relationship is, by far, a question of role integrity which explains over 50% of this consolidation process. At the same time, effectuation of consent (delivering promises), a transactional norm, impacts the consolidation stage. Hence consolidation is not only a matter of relational skills, it becomes also a matter of transaction handling. It is at this stage that communication as well as solidarity are the most effective through the various stages in the evolution of a relationship although well beyond role integrity and communication.

The *dissolution* of a relationship is the stage which is the least explained by our framework (see the scores) although once more, failures in role integrity play a critical issue. Bearing in mind the fact that the question on the dissolution process explicitly referred to a "good" customer one could easily suspect that external factors to the relationship may explain the dissolution (i.e. competitive pressures). The only available investigation on dissolution is clear proof standing of the above stated argument: competitive pressures are the leading defection purpose (Perrien, Banting and Paradis, 1985).

Role integrity is, by far, the leading relational norm which means that suppliers need to act with professionalism and expertise to build an effective relationship. Role integrity is the leading explaining factor at the development stage of a relationship. And is also an explaining factor of a divorce between the two partners. In Table 1 we define role integrity as "underlying actions and attitudes that favor more intimate relationships", from a more pragmatically standpoint it means role integrity encompasses: 1 – knowledge of customers, their organizations and business environments, 2 – the supplier (the organization as well as front line people) skills, 3 – the supplier ability to meet its responsibilities, 4 – the supplier coordination capability.

These four dimensions of role integrity are extracted from items generated through our NGT sessions. Table 4 (see the Appendix) presents some of the major items we identify as dimensions of role integrity through the various stages of the evolution of a relationship. Because the total number of items illustrating this norm is large, we only keep the most significant ones (based on final of scores.)

Interestingly enough, in the review of published marketing researches, only 8 of them measured role integrity, whereas solidarity is, by far, the leading norm, especially if we include the body of researches conducted on trust as a sub-component of solidarity.

Conclusion and recommendations

A relationship is not – and will never be – the sole outcome of relational norms. Although marketers tend to emphasize, if not over-emphasize, relational dimensions in the effectiveness of a dyad, they have to acknowledge that, several stages in the development of an effective relationship cannot be restricted to relational norms. Actually early stages of a relationship are significantly influenced by non-relational norms.

There is always, through the evolution of a relation, a mix of relational-transactional and business related factors, although relational norms could be prevalent. As far as the banking industry is concerned, a relation can only start if there is some kind of economic fit between partners…which is well beyond the scope of a relational exchange: the question is not "Do I fit with you priorities?" but "Do you meet my expectations?"… This simply means that a relational strategy at its early stages is mainly supplier driven.

From our investigation, role integrity is the leading relational norm. As mentioned by Durif and Perrien (2006), recent studies published regarding Macneil's Norms clearly highlight that this norm is typical of the phenomenon of interaction in business relationships (Kaufmann and Stern, 1988). It also has considerable impacts on: trust, satisfaction and quality in these relationships and could even represent a competing advantage for organizations (Dant and Schul, 1992). Furthermore, it also influences the perception of ethical and unethical behaviors of individuals in exchange relationships (Pelton, Chowdhury and Vitell, 1999).

In this study, we propose a four dimensional definition of role integrity as extracted from items generated by managers. No doubt that to improve our understanding of relationships between buyers and suppliers more attention should be devoted to this norm. Whether in terms of management or measurement, role integrity deserves more attention.

Our data are coming from account managers in the banking industry. Although we think that through their experiences they gain a good knowledge of how to develop an effective relationship, their "supplier" vision remains a limit. Indeed, even if a marketing relationship is an asymmetrical process where the main responsibility depends on suppliers, it has to be pointed out that it does not reflect a *perfect* vision of what should be done to implement and develop effective relationship with customers. Longitudinal investigations involving both members of the dyad should provide a more accurate picture. Unfortunately, it also means, in the realm of relationship marketing, an investigation which should start from the selection process to a possible dissolution…a story which may spread over many years if not many decades, especially in B2B. Meanwhile, contributions based on knowledge of experts may still provide some valuable information. It is the objective this paper aims to achieve.

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Appendix

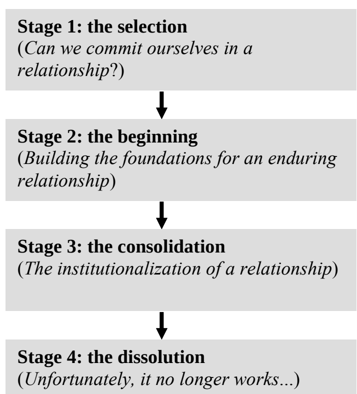

Fig. 1. The evolution of a relationship: the stages

Table 1. Macneil's contractual norms

NORM	CHARACTERISTICS	ITEMS
RECIPROCITY	Bilateral improvement of the situation of both partners	Desire for reciprocal relation Total relationship profits
IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANNING	Specifications of conditions Actions take place on due time	Schedule visits Timely delivery Established deadlines
EFFECTUATION OF CONSENT	Meeting contractual objectives	Achieving objectives Do it right Avoidance of errors
RESTITUTION, RELIANCE AND EXPECTATIONS INTERESTS	Clearly stated obligations and conditions	Guaranties
CREATION AND RESTRAINT OF POWER	A fair balance of power between buyer and seller	Customer's position as a centre of influence Client's competitive position on the market
ROLE INTEGRITY	Underlying actions and attitudes that favor more intimate relationships	Good knowledge of industry Clear understanding of customers' needs
PRESERVATION OF THE RELATION (CONTRACTUAL SOLIDARITY)	Finding a common ground of accord Continuity of the relationship	Develop long-term strategies Stability of account manager
HARMONIZATION OF RELATIONAL CONFLICT (FLEXIBILITY)	Capacity to adapt the contracts depending on the clients needs	Offer a wide variety of product Have a flexible offer
SUPRA CONTRACTUAL NORMS	Meeting social and political rules (justice…)	Ethical selling Involvement in the protection of the environment
COMMUNICATION	Effectiveness and timeliness of exchange of information	Rapid response Regular customers contact Make information available

Table 2. Steps used in the NGT

1.	Generation of ideas: after a clarification of the question presented to the group, participants were asked to write their individual responses (ideas) to the question.
2.	Round robin recording of ideas: On an individual basis, each manager was requested to verbally present his or her response to the group. Once the answer had been given, we proceeded to interrogate the next manager of the group in sequence. The "round robin" procedure continued until all the individual ideas had been exhausted.
3.	Discussion for clarification purposes: The objective was to ensure that all participants interpreted the responses in the same manner and to remove any possible duplication of responses.
4.	Preliminary vote: On an individual basis, managers were asked to select eight responses they judged to be the most meaningful with regards to the question (a screening process).
5.	Discussion on the preliminary vote: The purpose of the discussion was to have a general understanding of the vote in the preceding step.
6.	Final vote: Individually, each manager was asked to retain only five statements from the preliminary vote and to assign a mark to each, based on a ten point scale.

Table 3. Results

		STAGE 1		STAGE 2		STAGE 3		STAGE 4	
NORM	Relational, Transactional Business	Frequency	Score	Frequency	Score	Frequency	Score	Frequency	Score
Role integrity	R	7	209	15	851	41	1630	23	496
Preservation of the relation (Solidarity)	R	10	293	7	224	11	401	10	272
Harmonization of relational conflict (Flexibility)	R	3	194	2	54	6	114	0	0
Supra contractual norms	R	5	44	1	39	0	0	0	
Communication	R	3	50	16	567	21	723	6	140
Reciprocity	T	2	48	0	0	0	0	0	0
Implementation of planning	T	0	0	5	134	1	38	0	0
Effectuation of consent	T	4	179	4	176	5	245	4	56
Reliance	T	1	51	0	0	0	0	0	0
Power	T	2	17	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bank characteristics	B	2	63	0	0	0	0	0	0
Customer's characteristics	B	24	696	0	0	0	0	3	50
Business sector	B	5	123	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total Relational (1)			790		1735		2868		908
Total Transactional (1)			358		310		283		106
Total Business (1)			882				0		50

Table 4. Role integrity depending on the stage of the relationship

1.	The selection
	➢ Good knowledge of the industry ➢ Knowledge of the competition ➢ Account manager motivation ➢ Knowledge of the business industry ➢ Clear understanding of relationship needs
2.	The beginning
	➢ Well trained staff ➢ Provide efficient consistent service ➢ Have knowledgeable staff so clients feel comfortable when you talk to them ➢ Treat the client with respect/appreciate their business ➢ Efficient and accurate service ➢ Act professionally on first meeting ➢ Knowledge of industry ➢ Account manager experience ➢ Learn about customer business ➢ Understand customer expectation ➢ Identify customers needs and goals ➢ Product/service knowledge
3.	The consolidation
	➢ Adequate training of personnel ➢ Define the type of relationship wished for ➢ Employees should know the clients ➢ Friendly personnel ➢ Meet the clients behind closed doors ➢ Better product knowledge for employees ➢ Provide high touch personal service ➢ Get it right the first time ➢ Know top customers well ➢ Upgrade account manager skills ➢ Become more familiar with the industry ➢ Know the company better ➢ Know the customers expectations ➢ Empathetic and responsive to the customers needs ➢ Anticipate customers needs ➢ Get to know the customers market ➢ Be professional ➢ Be proactive instead of reactive
4.	The dissolution
	➢ Inadequate knowledge of needs for the client industry ➢ Poor/lack of negotiating skills ➢ Lack of attention to customers ➢ Inadequate training of bank staff ➢ Lack of banker understanding of customers needs ➢ Account manager doesn't understand clients business