INTIMATE RELATIONS – FACT OR FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS TO BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS IN IRISH COMPANIES

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Business relationships are very complex socio-economic phenomena due to history, situational effects, and embedded contextual issues. Part of the complexity and embeddedness arises out of the characteristics of the companies themselves, the nature of their business relationships and their interaction with others. This study investigates to what extent practices in business markets have moved from the traditional 'markets/hierarchy' perspective where business relationships are seen as isolated phenomena to the relationships perspective, which stresses interdependence, connectedness and intimate relations.

From the Traditional 'Markets/Hierarchy' Perspective to the Relationship Perspective

Research into relationships between organisations has changed radically during the past two decades. From a situation of neglect, the existence and the role of relationships between companies have been the object of a number of studies in Europe (Hakansson, 1982; Ford, 1984; Turnbull and Valla, 1986; Gadde and Mattsson, 1987; Hallen and Johanson, 1989; Sako, 1992; Grabner, 1993; Johanson, 1994), in the US (Dwyer et al., 1987; Frazier et al., 1988; Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Van de Ven and Poole, 1989; Anderson and Narus, 1990; Heide and John, 1990; Powell, 1990; Saxenian, 1991; Miles and Snow, 1992; No-

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hria and Eccles, 1992; Alter and Hage, 1993), and in Japan (Takeuchi and Nonaka, 1986; Nonaka, 1991).

While these studies are framed from varying perspectives, they provide interesting insights concerning the interaction processes within relationships and how business relationships are developed and managed. However, the predominant view from these studies suggests that relationship practices in business markets have moved from the traditional 'markets/hierarchy' perspective where business relationships are seen as isolated phenomena, to the relationship perspective, which stresses interdependence, connectedness and intimate relations.

Traditionally, the problem of business co-ordination was viewed from a 'market/hierarchy' perspective. This perspective is based firmly on traditional microeconomics and can be elaborated simply as follows: the firm is seen as an island, with clear boundaries separating it from its environment. Business co-ordination is considered as some mechanism 'out there' to be managed and business relationships are seen as isolated phenomena.

In contrast to this 'market/hierarchy' view of business co-ordination is the relationship perspective, which stresses interdependence and connectedness. The relationship perspective to business markets is important because it focuses on an alternative view of business co-ordination, which is quite different from the 'market/hierarchy' view. Business relationships are not considered as isolated phenomena. The relationship perspective assumes that business co-ordination takes place in a network setting where different businesses are linked to each other through direct and indirect relationships. The network of relationships is the unit of analysis, not the individual firm. This is in stark contract to the microeconomic view of business co-ordination, which does not attempt to capture these direct and indirect relationship effects.

It is important to put the distinction between the 'market/hierarchy' and the 'relationship approach' to business co-ordination in business markets in context. The importance of understanding the dynamics of business relationships is critical in business markets for no other reason than the relationship is the unit of analysis, not an individual purchase or the marketing company itself. However, this is not the traditional text view of business to business marketing espoused by the Kotler pastiche (Cutler and Javalgi, 1994). The traditional approach both to understanding and to managing a company's marketing activities had its roots in consumer marketing, particularly in the marketing of fast-moving consumer goods. This approach was essentially built around the idea that the creative task of marketers was one of manipulating the marketing mix. Market research was used firstly to gain a greater understanding of the effectiveness of different approaches within each mix variable, and secondly to understand customers better, particularly, the processes by which they responded to the marketing mix. The main implication of this notion of marketing is that the seller is the active party in the process of marketing, with the task of assembling the marketing mix. The role of the customer was seen as passive and limited to choosing to respond or not to the mix.

The same approach was followed when marketing researchers turned their attention to industrial or business markets. Business marketing was considered as some sort of special case of normal marketing. Most textbooks have chapters on business marketing outlining it as some sort of special case. This way of considering business marketing had three significant characteristics. Firstly, it was based on a separate analysis of marketing and purchasing. Secondly, it concentrated on the purchase process for a single purchase. Finally, it viewed the buyer as individually insignificant, passive and part of a relatively homogeneous market.

The development of the interaction approach to understanding business markets started because of the realisation that the prevailing literature did not seem to relate closely to what actually happens in business markets (Turnbull and Valla 1986; Ford 1997). In particular, business markets do not consist of a large number of individually insignificant customers. Customers vary widely in size and requirements. Business markets do not consist simply of active sellers and passive buyers. Often, a buying company, faced with a particular requirement, has to seek out suitable suppliers, assess them, and even sometimes persuade them to meet those requirements. The product is often modified or designed especially at the customer's request. It may be delivered on a mutually agreed schedule and at a price that is individually negotiated. Many people from different functional areas in both companies are likely to be involved in the process, not just marketing, sales and purchasing staff, but also from engineering, production and finance. This means that the process is not one of action and reaction but one of interaction.

Furthermore, sales and buying people in business markets do not simply meet, do a deal, and then never see each other again. Sometimes, there may be a long period before the first purchase, involving many interactions with months of initial meetings, product and production development, and negotiations.

All this means that each business purchase is just a single episode among many in a relationship between two companies, and each purchase can only be fully understood within the context of that relationship. Understanding these relationships is crucial because a company's relationships are important assets and without them it could not operate, or even exist. A similar view of business markets has been taken by a large number of other researchers in Europe (Hakansson, 1982; Turnbull and Valla, 1986; Hakansson and Snehota, 1995; Ford, 1997) and in the USA (Phillips, 1960; von Hippel, 1986; Pfeffer, 1987; Nohria and Eccles, 1992; Sako, 1992; Webster, 1992; Ebers, 1997).

Finally, the study of business relationships has been recognised and well received for a variety of reasons by others, especially those who espouse the network approach to studying business markets (Hakansson and Snehota, 1995). These researchers consider that the interaction in intercompany business relationships is broader and thicker than solely economic transactions revolving around a given product. As a result, this paper sets out to explore the broad area of intercompany relationship practices in business markets and presents an analysis of the management of business to business relationships in Irish companies. The study investigates to what extent practices in business markets have moved from the traditional 'markets/hierarchy' perspective to the relationship perspective.

Research Methodology

The research findings presented in this paper draw from a recent comprehensive survey of work organisation practices conducted at the Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business at University College Dublin. The survey, *Irish Management Practice in the Changing Marketplace*, examined a range of issues including human resource management and work organisation, manufacturing/services management, quality practices, business performance and buyer/supplier relations. Administered as a postal survey, the study covered workplaces/plants/establishments in all areas of the private sector, with the sole exception of the construction industry, and also included commercial semi-state companies.

The survey fieldwork was conducted between mid–1996 and mid–1997 and was administered by the Survey Unit of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Dublin, in conjunction with the authors. As no reliable population list of Irish workplaces existed, a two-stage sampling strategy was followed. Stage one involved drawing a sample of enterprises from the enterprise population file maintained by the ESRI. The population for this stage comprised all enterprises in the sectors employing more than 20 persons. Stage two involved inspecting the sample of enterprises to distinguish single and multi-establishment enterprises. For 39 per cent of firms, the enterprise and the workplace were not synonymous. All multi-establishment enterprises in the sample were then decomposed into their constituent workplaces/plants using a range of sources and business directories, and in many cases following detailed discussions with managers in the enterprises concerned. The multi-site sample companies were then re-sampled and the selected plants/workplaces/establishments were added to the single-establishment sample. A disproportionate stratified probability procedure was employed whereby a proportionately higher number of larger enterprises was selected at stage one. The overall response rate was 36% – very much higher than is common for postal surveys.

Questionnaires were sent to the key respondents responsible for managing the companies' business to business relationships. These relationship managers were requested to consider their most important business relationship as the unit of analysis for the study because this relationship was considered most likely to capture the nature of the dynamics and complexity involved. The decision was left up to the companies as to which relationship constituted their most important one.

Description of the Sample Companies

A detailed profile of the participating companies based on company characteristics such as company origin, number of full-time employees, the breakdown between manufacturing and services companies, between buyers and suppliers and industry sector is given in the survey. It is vitally important to obtain a clear picture of the parties involved because such a description provides the context to understanding the complexity of business relationships.

As expected, the majority of companies are Irish. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note the high incidence of US (13%) companies in the sample. Mainland European companies are also well represented (11%), with Ireland's membership of the European Union (EU) being the likely explanation. UK companies are not featured as prominently (7%) as one might expect. This is surprising given the historical nature of trading patterns between the two countries. Irish industrial policy plays an important role here, with its recent propensity to attract electronic and software companies form the US. In addition, many UK companies may consider that the Irish market can be effectively served from the UK.

With respect to company size, the largest category of companies (35%) have between 20 and 50 full-time employees. Employee numbers are fairly evenly spread across the other employment categories (27%), except for companies in the 100 to 200 category (12%). In addition, company representation is spread across a wide selection of industry sectors with manufacturing companies representing 40% and service companies 60% of the sample. The majority of companies are categorised as suppliers (75%) with buyers accounting for the remainder (25%).

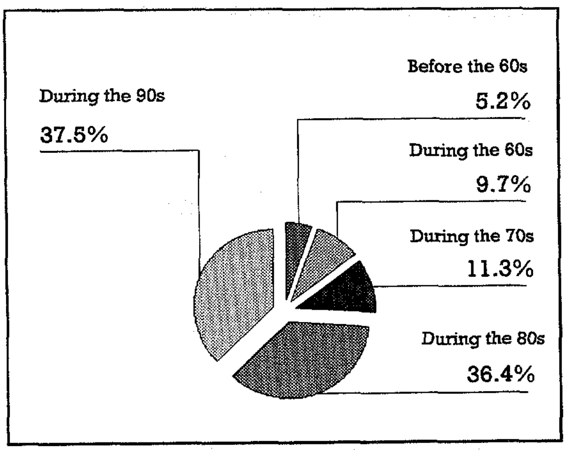
Relationship Practices in Business Markets

The research findings presented below outline the nature of relationship practices in business markets. Details of practices are provided with respect to the duration of the relationship, the extent of personal involvement, the structure (single versus multiple), and the formality of the relationship. Where appropriate, perspectives from manufacturing and service companies are outlined and the perception of buyers is contrasted with that of suppliers.

Duration of Business Relationships

There was strong evidence of stability in these business relationships particularly with respect to the duration and the extent of personnel involvement. Relationships were predominantly long-term (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: WHEN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS STARTED

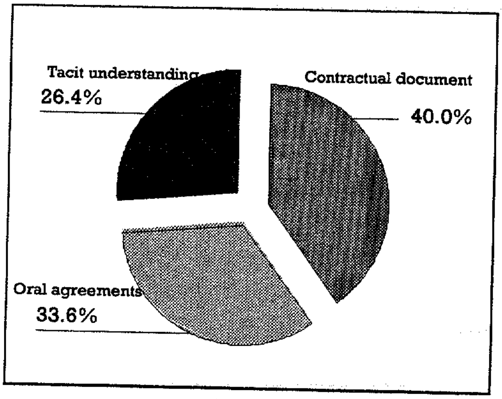


The largest category of these business relationships (38%) started in the 1990s. However, many of them are over ten, twenty, thirty and even over years old. This indicates high levels of stability. Further evidence of the stability of these relationships is the extent of personal involvement. The majority of managers were personally involved in managing these relationships for up to ten years.

Formality of the Relationships

The evidence from this research study suggests a considerable level of informality between companies. Indeed, little evidence of formality was demonstrated in these business relationships (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: FORMALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS

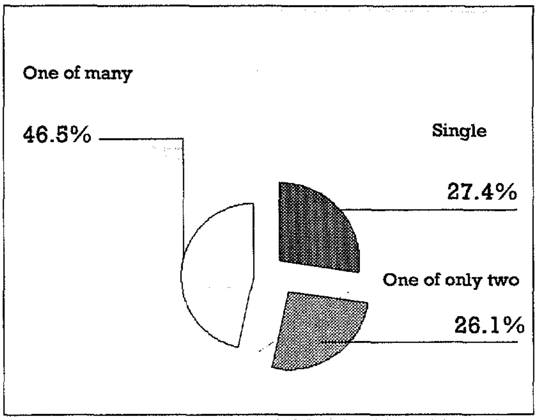


While companies ranged from detailed contractual agreements to oral agreements and tacit understanding in their business relationships, the majority (60%) exchanged on the basis of oral agreements and tacit understanding.

Extent of Single versus Multiple Relationships

The stability of business relationships can be further assessed by the extent to which companies have single or multiple relationships. The evidence shows that the majority of companies (54%) had no more than two and many had only one main business relationship (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: EXTENT OF SINGLE VERSUS MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS



This is significant when you consider that the level of exchange options open to companies was high, with only 17% of companies having no choice in their exchange.

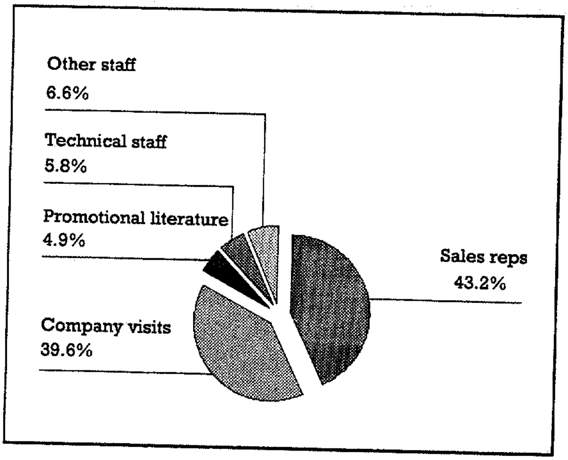
Business to Business Interaction

How companies interact, the mode of communication they use to keep one another informed about their main activities, the diversity and concentration of contact and the extent of co-operation through their adaptations are key indicators of the interaction process.

The Nature of the Communications Process

Personal contacts either through sales representatives or company visits are clearly the main ways utilised by companies (83%) to keep one another informed of their main activities (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: MODE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COMPANIES: FREQUENCY



In addition to the mode of communication, the diversity and concentration of intercompany contact provides another dimension to how companies interact (Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1: DIVERSITY OF CONTACT BETWEEN COMPANIES

Frequency of Contact	CE/MD %	Finance %	Marketing/ Sales %	Production %
Very frequently	30.5%	24.6%	53.5%	58.7%
Sometimes	42.1%	43.6%	19.6%	24.2%
Rarely	27.4%	31.8%	26.9%	17.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

On a continuum of 'very frequent' to 'rare contact', the diversity is considerable. At this level of analysis, the functional area with the highest level of contact in the highest percentage of companies (59%) is production. The marketing/sales function has a relatively high level of very frequent contact (54%), but it is surprising that many of them (27%) are rarely in contact. Chief executives and managing Directors have less contact (31%) and the finance function shows the lowest level of frequent contact (25%). In their research into intercompany contact patterns Cunningham and Homse (1986) found that interface contacts in business markets between suppliers and customers rarely take the form of simple relationships between salesman and buyer.

Several people in different functional departments in supplier companies are involved in a network of contacts with their counterparts in the customer firm, and this embraces multiple levels in the organisation. Many different roles formed by these contacts were identified by Cunningham and Homse (1986) and supported by Turnbull (1979). These roles include information exchange role, assessment role, negotiation and adaptation role, crisis insurance role, social role and ego-enhancement role.

The concentration of intercompany contact by functional area is of major importance to the management of business relationships. The extent to which companies rely on a particular functional area is given by the percentage of companies that have 'very frequent' contact in that area. This concentration by functional area for all companies is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: INTERCOMPANY CONTACT BY FUNCTIONAL AREA

Functional Area	**% Companies With 'Very Frequent Contact'**
Production	25%
Marketing/Sales	13%
CE/MD	2%

In the largest category of companies (25%), the production function has the most frequent level of contact, followed by the marketing/sales function (13%). Chief executives and managing directors are not in frequent contact (2%). This high incidence of 'very frequent' intercompany contact undertaken by the production function is further evidence of the important role played by production personnel in the day to day management of business relationships. Turnbull's (1979) research provides further evidence of the diversity of intercompany contacts and he also draws attention to the lack of awareness by marketing managers of the extent of the contacts. This study provides evidence supporting this lack of awareness by marketing personnel.

Co-operation and Commitment

Through interaction, various levels of co-operation are enacted. Co-operation leads to commitment, which is crucial to the development of effective business relationships. Co-operation and commitment can be measured by investigating the level and extent of adaptation between companies (Ford, 1982; Ford and Gadde, 1998).

It is evident from this research that companies engage in a considerable amount of adaptation. The main areas of adaptations engaged in by buyers are stock-holding policy, quality control procedures, production/service processes, and production schedules. On the other hand the main areas of adaptations engaged in by suppliers are stock-holding policy, quality control procedures and final product/service (Table 3).

Perceptions of Companies' Adaptations

While companies engage in a considerable amount of adaptation, the perception of their adaptations is very different. Buyers and suppliers were asked to give their perception of each other with respect to the level and extent of their adaptations. The perception of buyers is contrasted with that of suppliers. Areas of consensus and major differences are outlined. Firstly, the range of adaptations in rank order undertaken by buyer companies is shown. These adaptations are juxtaposed with supplier adaptations, again in rank order. Areas of consensus and difference are outlined. An overall summary view of the situation is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: PERCEPTION OF COMPANIES' ADAPTATIONS

Adaptations	Buyer Companies' Perceptions (Rank order)	Supplier Companies' Perceptions (Rank order)	Areas of Agreement	Areas of Major Differences
Stock-holding Policy	1>	1	No	Yes*
QC Procedures	2=	2	Yes	No
Production Schedules	3>	5	No	Yes*
Production Processes	4=	4	Yes	No
Final Product/ Service	5	<3	No	Yes*

* Differences are statistically significant at 10% level

> Direction and strength of company perception (buyers perceive that they make greater adaptations than suppliers)

< Direction and strength of company perception (suppliers perceive that they make greater adaptations than buyers)

= Buyers and suppliers agree on their respective levels of adaptations.

The evidence from the research shows that the perception between companies of their co-operation with each other varies dramatically (Table 3). It is clear that both parties to business relationships often fail to recognise these differences. Specifically, there are significant differences between buyers and suppliers with respect to their adaptations. Indeed, companies were not always in agreement with respect to the level of co-operation and commitment between them. While buyer companies believed they made widespread adaptations, supplier companies often failed to recognise the extent of these adaptations. As a result, a considerable perception gap exists between the parties.

On close inspection buyers perceive that they adapt their stockholding policy and production schedules more than their suppliers perceive they do, and the difference is statistically significant. On the other hand, suppliers are of the view that buyers change their final product or service, which is at variance with buyers' actions, and the difference is statistically significant. Supplier and buyer companies agree that they make adaptations in production /service processes, and quality control procedures.

The perception gap or misunderstanding between companies regarding their co-operation and commitment is significant, especially when we consider that the most important business relationship is in question. This demonstrates a lack of understanding between the companies. The perception gap with respect to buyers' adaptations indicates poor communication, which in turn can lead to a breakdown of trust resulting from a perceived lack of co-operation in the relationship.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study demonstrates that business relationships are very complex socio-economic phenomena due to history, situational effects, and embedded contextual issues. Part of the complexity and embeddedness arises out of the characteristics of the companies themselves, the nature of their business relationships and their interaction with others. This study investigates to what extent practices in business markets have moved from the traditional 'markets/hierarchy' perspective, where business relationships are seen as isolated phenomena, to the relationships perspective which stresses stability, interdependency, connectedness and intimate relations.

Two key conclusions can be drawn from the findings. Firstly, while there is evidence of long-term stability and a move to the relationship perspective, there is a major perception gap between companies with respect to their day to day interactions. Secondly, this research found no evidence to support the thesis that marketing plays the key role in the management of the interface function between companies.

The study suggests that there is considerable evidence to support the relationship perspective or partnership approach particularly with respect to stability, interdependency, connectedness and intimate relations. However, on closer inspection, there are major issues that need to be addressed, especially with respect to the long-term stability of these business relationships. While there is strong evidence of stability in these business relationships particularly with respect to the duration, the extent of personnel involvement, the formality and structure, there is a major perception gap between companies that eventually can only lead to problems.

Companies' main business relationships were predominantly long-term stable relationships that have stood the test of time. Further evidence of stability was indicated by the extent of personal involvement. Indeed, the majority of managers were personally involved in managing these relationships for up to ten years. There was little evidence of formality. While companies ranged from having detailed contractual agreements to oral agreements and tacit understanding in their business relationships, the majority exchanged on the basis or oral agreements and tacit understanding. It can be argued that this high level of informality in business relationships is another indicator of stability, because companies do not find it to contract legally on everything. If these relationships were considered unstable the situation would be very different. Companies would be motivated to cover themselves by legally contracting as much as possible because of the risks of instability.

The stability of business relationships was further supported by the extent to which companies had single or multiple relationships. The evidence showed that the majority of companies had no more than two and many had only one main business relationship. This is significant when you consider that the level of exchange choice open to companies was high with only a small number of companies having no choice in their exchange.

Given the high level of stability evidenced above it would not be unreasonable to expect that the perception between companies of their co-operation and commitment to each other would not vary dramatically and that exchange would be seen as a form of long-term investment in the relationship. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that these business relationships are not seen as investments. The research highlighted the differences in perceptions between the various parties involved in the day to day interactions in business relationships. It is worth noting that these findings are based on the opinions and attitudes of executives responsible for the day to day management of these important relationships. While previous research studies have pointed to differences in perceptions (Hakansson, 1982), the overall representativeness and diversity of this study lends support for these studies and increases their generalisability.

The perception between companies of their co-operation and commitment to each other varies dramatically. Unfortunately, parties to business relationships often fail to recognise these differences. For instance, there are significant differences between buyers and suppliers with respect to their adaptations. The evidence suggests that buyers perceive they make more adaptations for suppliers more than suppliers make for them. As a result, a considerable perception gap exists between the parties.

The perception gap or misunderstandings between companies regarding their co-operation and commitment are significant, especially when we consider that it is the most important business relationship that is in question. This demonstrates a lack of understanding between the companies and indicates poor communication, which may eventually lead to a breakdown of trust resulting from a perceived lack of co-operation and commitment in the relationship. If the perception gap between companies in business relationships fails to be recognised and managed, these relationships will not develop and survive. Changing the perception of managers of co-operation and commitment to one of investment is a major challenge that needs to be addressed.

Finally, with respect to the management of the interface, the findings challenge the conventional wisdom. The idea that marketing plays the key role in the management of the interface function is still widely held and debated in the marketing literature (Mc Loughlin and Lambkin, 1998). This research found no evidence to support these marketing claims. On the contrary, this research provides evidence of the important role played by others, especially production, and the diminished role and responsibility of marketing personnel in the day to day interactions and management of business relationships.

While personal contacts either through sales representatives or company visits were the most important means utilised by companies to keep one another informed, diversity of contact between the various functional areas was widespread. This supports earlier research on the diversity of intercompany contact (Turnbull, 1979, Cunningham and Homse, 1986). Turnbull 's (1979) research also draws attention to the lack of awareness by marketing managers of the extent of the contacts. This study provides further evidence supporting this lack of awareness by marketing personnel. Indeed, the production function engages in the highest level of frequent contact. This concentration of intercompany contact by the production area overrides marketing claims to be the major interface player. This is of course not suggesting the unimportance of marketing thought and action. Indeed, on the contrary it may provide evidence that marketing principles have permeated organisations and are not only the preserve of marketing personnel.

The evidence from this research points to the need for greater emphasis on strategic planning of all activities. Restructuring of the organisation may be necessary to achieve greater efficiency and control. There is a clear need for a 'relationship manager' and the adoption of a 'total purchasing concept'. The 'relationship manager' would have the role of co-ordinating all aspects of the company's relationship with major clients. The adoption of a 'total purchasing concept' calls for the co-ordination and integration of various company functions involved in the selection and control of suppliers. The creation of these roles is a necessary consequence of this research when we consider the differences in perception and the lack of understanding between organisations. The management challenge is to change managers' perception of co-operation and commitment to one of investment and this necessitates an integrated team approach.

Other strategic considerations arising out of this research include the formulation of decision rules and guidelines for single and multiple relationships. The structure of business relationships, whether they are single or multiple, has a major influence on company strategy. For example, suppliers have more relationships to manage than buyers do. This can have profound implications for suppliers. Firstly, their resources might not be sufficient to meet the task of managing multiple relationships, and as a result, their performance may not be as effective. Secondly, engaging in multiple relationships eschews the potential for developing interdependent relationships because these relationships demand a level of co-operation and commitment that is not possible with multiple relationships.

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