

Evaluating Relationship Quality in a Business-to-Business Context



SEAN DE BÚRCA, ★ BRIAN FYNES ★
AND EVELYN ROCHE ★ ★

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the well-established transactional view of marketing has been increasingly questioned in the academic literature. As competition between businesses becomes more demanding and perceived product differentiators become less apparent, the relationship between a company and its customer takes on increased significance. Previous research has provided compelling evidence to suggest that the main reason why businesses lose the loyalty of their customers is that they simply do not pay sufficient attention to their relationships with these customers (Gummesson, 1997). It therefore seems logical to suggest that the most sustainable levels of customer loyalty are achieved through the development and maintenance of high-quality relationships with customers.

However, while the link between customer loyalty and long-term profitability is well established and while many firms have readily accepted the validity of the concept of customer retention, the principle of establishing customer relationships has been less successfully applied. This is in part due to an element of confusion over the concept of relationship marketing and also due to a lack of understanding of what constitutes a relationship between a customer and a company. The result is that many firms are beginning to understand that customer retention is fundamentally a good concept and that building a relationship with a customer is a good way to retain that customer for the long term. The problem that many companies may be encountering is that they have little insight into what constitutes a positive relationship from the customer's perspective and what it will take for the customer to feel that they have a high-quality relationship with a firm. Hence we feel that the

★*Smurfit Graduate Business School, University College Dublin*

★★*Waterford Institute of Technology*

relational orientation to marketing calls for a more complete understanding of relationship quality.

By investigating the relationship between buyers and suppliers in the software industry, the aim of this research is to contribute further to a greater understanding of relationship quality in business markets.

Accordingly, this paper specifically focuses on three research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of a high-quality business relationship?
2. Do buyers and suppliers agree on what constitutes a high-quality relationship?
3. What factors influence perceptions of relationship quality?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we examine the literature pertaining to business-to-business relationships and to relationship quality in business markets. Secondly, we report on our research findings in the software industry. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications and offer recommendations for further research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Theory development into the governance of buyer-seller relationships has built extensively on well-established contributions from the economic, social and behavioural sciences. Governance, as defined by Heide (1994), is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing the initiation, termination and ongoing relationship maintenance between a set of parties. Researchers have adopted different theoretical frameworks in order to explain relationship governance, including transaction cost theory, social exchange theory and resource-dependence theory (Robicheaux and Coleman, 1994). These frameworks have all contributed to the modelling of buyer-supplier relationships both in their identification of the underlying dimensions of relationships (such as trust, power/dependence and adaptation) and their selection of appropriate units of analysis (such as firm, dyad or network). There is also clear evidence of what Robicheaux and Coleman label "paradigm convergence" (1994: 40) both in terms of further theory building in relationship marketing.

Relationship quality captures the essence of relationship marketing. According to Ford (1980) quality relationships between buyers and sellers bind members to each other in such a way that they are able to reap benefits beyond the mere exchange of goods. This leads to long-term and more stable relationships in which both members mutually benefit. However, while numerous characteristics of relationship quality are proposed in the literature, there does not seem to be any real consensus regarding the conceptualisation of relationship quality. The following sections examine the dimensions of relationship quality most commonly cited in the literature. These are commitment, cooperation, trust, communication, adaptation and culture.

Commitment

Commitment is widely recognised as being a key determinant of high-quality relationships. Relationships are built gradually in the social exchange process through which the parties come to trust each other. As a consequence of interaction over time, commitment bonds of various kinds are formed by the parties (Hakansson and Johanson, 1992; Moorman et al., 1993).

In the marketing literature, commitment is seen as an essential ingredient for successful long-term relationships. It has been identified as the variable that distinguishes between relationships that break down and those that continue and implies importance of the relationship to the parties and a desire to continue the relationship in the future.

Gabarino and Johnson (1999: 73) define commitment as "customer psychological attachment, loyalty, concern for future welfare, identification and pride in being associated with the organisation". Dwyer et al. (1987) further define commitment as an implicit or an explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners. These authors argue that commitment implies a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to realise longer-term benefits. Indeed, Gundlach et al. (1995) argue that commitment is closely related to mutuality, loyalty and the forsaking of alternatives, variables that are at the core of the meaning of relationalism. This is in sharp contrast to the economic model of rationality and discrete transactions.

Commitment can thus be seen to be indicative of the most advanced stage of the relationship. At this point both parties are actively involved in maintaining the relationship. Once commitment is reached the emphasis moves to one of cooperation and long-term maintenance of the relationship.

Cooperation

Cooperation refers to the extent to which the work of buyer-seller relationships is coordinated (Metcalf et al., 1992). Anderson and Narus (1990) find cooperation to be a causal antecedent of trust. However, an alternative view is that trust generates a greater willingness to cooperate (Hunt and Morgan, 1994).

Campbell (1985) found that buyers and sellers who relate to one another in a cooperative mode intentionally seek common goals. In addition, it has been shown that members of buying and selling firms are often willing to engage in cooperative behaviour in order to maintain a relationship that is viewed as being mutually beneficial (Metcalf et al., 1992).

Cooperation is often seen as a product of the exchange episodes that take place between buyers and sellers (Hakansson, 1982). As representatives of the buying and selling organisations interact over time, agreement is reached as to the appropriate role and scope of both parties. However, cooperation is not just a product but is also a form of behaviour.

Trust

Trust is such a critical element in determining the quality of a relationship that Spekman and Strauss (1986) claim it is the cornerstone of strategic

partnership. The importance of trust pervades the most diverse situations from personal relations to economic development. Indeed, it is constantly alluded to as a fundamental ingredient or lubricant, unavoidable in social interaction. However, while the importance of trust is often acknowledged in passing in business relations, it tends to be relegated to one of those intractable dimensions.

Gambetta has defined trust as a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action (Gambetta, 1988). The central argument of this definition is that parties must be vulnerable for trust to become operational. In other words, decision outcomes must be uncertain and important to the trusting party (Moorman et al., 1992). The vulnerability is created by the high degree of interdependence usually found in close long-term relationships (Gundlach and Cadotte, 1994). This vulnerability makes way for trust to become operational.

Trust has also been strongly suggested as having an important role in facilitating closer buyer-supplier relationships by reducing the tendency of firms to take advantage of each other (Zaheer et al., 1998). Trust reduces the perception of risk association with potential opportunistic behaviour and increases the confidence that short-term inequities will be resolved over the long period.

Communication

Anderson and Narus (1989: 44) define communication in an industrial context as being "the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms". Leek et al. (1999) confirm this by stating that open and trustworthy communication are essential to positive interactions; breakdown in relationships can be caused by a lack of understanding and knowledge of each partner's business and market.

Hunt and Morgan (1994) observe that willingness to share timely, meaningful information is important when choosing a partner, since communication is an important part of resolving eventual disagreements. It is also vital to developing trust, commitment and understanding between parties.

Adaptation

When buyers and suppliers establish and develop long-term relationships with each other and where the volume of business in such relationships accounts for a considerable share of the supplier's sales and/or the customer's needs, there is reason to expect that significant partner-specific adaptation occurs (Heide and John, 1988). Thus it can be expected that that suppliers adapt to the needs of specific important customers and that customers adapt to the capabilities of specific suppliers (Hallen et al., 1991). Such adaptation frequently occurs by way of investing in transaction specific assets such as product/process technology and human resources (Hakansson, 1982).

Adaptations are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they can represent considerable investments by one or both parties. Secondly, they may be of critical importance for the conduct of business. Thirdly, the investments frequently cannot be transferred to other buyer-supplier relationships. Fourthly, the adaptations may have significant consequences for the long-term competitiveness of firms: adapting to one relationship may enhance the competencies and attractiveness of a particular supplier/customer (Hakansson, 1982).

RESEARCH DESIGN

A single representative case perspective using a leading multinational corporation in the software industry was adopted for the purposes of this research for several reasons (for reasons of confidentiality the name of the company cannot be disclosed). Firstly, the logic of selecting case studies in a case-based research strategy is mainly determined by the body of ideas or theory with which the researcher is concerned. Research should always begin by examining theoretical concerns and move from there to elaborating a logic of case selection (Roche, 1997). This is in line with Stake (1994), when he argues that the role of a case study is to provide insight into an issue or refinements of a theory. Examining the literature pertaining to business-to-business relationships and to relationship quality in business markets, it is clear that the theory in the area posits reasonably clear and unambiguous theoretical generalisations. In such circumstances the logic of a critical case strategy might meet all the conditions for testing the theory. Roche (1997) argues that a critical case design strategy involves the selection of one case with a view to providing a compelling test of a well-known theory. Given the nature of the research question, to gain a deeper understanding of relationship quality in business markets the selection of a critical case design strategy would seem the optimum research approach. In this study, the case can be seen as doing both. It provides insight into the issues of relationship quality and customer loyalty by reflecting on the theoretical concepts in empirical reality. Finally, the information concerning perceptions of relationship quality is a complex area and requires an understanding of the constructs used by both the supplier and customer in their evaluation of relationship quality. It was felt that such perceptions would not be captured in other research methods, such as questionnaires, for example.

As good access and multiple sources of evidence are deemed critical to a case study, it was decided by the researcher to concentrate efforts on gaining such access and sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). The case study combined several types of data: interviews of individuals involved in the relationship, archival data, such as annual reports, records of company and supplier information and correspondence, strategic business plans as well as industry statistics and information, articles in professional publications and interviews and informal discussions with various company employees. In addition, taking into account both the organisational and customer perspectives makes it easier to focus on the relationship itself and gives a more balanced impression of the perceptions of relationship quality. Consequently, in order to achieve a dyadic approach, it

is essential to examine business relationships from both perspectives. It was decided that a selection of the company's key account managers would represent the supplier's perspective of their business relationships. In-depth interviews were hence conducted with four key account managers. In order to facilitate a broader and more international scope of the research, it was decided to interview an Irish account manager, a Dutch account manager, a South African account manager and a German account manager. Interviews were also conducted with the respective people in selected customer companies with whom the afore-mentioned account managers had most interactions. These were felt to be most representative of the customer's perspective of the relationship. The customer companies consisted of two Irish customers, one Dutch customer, one German customer and one South African customer. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of these companies are not disclosed.

In order to provide a balanced account of the supplier company's different relationships with its customers and to broaden the scope of the study further, it was decided to be preferable to interview customers with a background in different industries. Therefore the customer companies chosen were from the high-tech, transportation, telecommunications, industrial manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries.

FINDINGS

We arrange our findings in the context of our research questions, namely:

1. What are the key characteristics of a high-quality business relationship?
2. Do buyers and suppliers agree on what constitutes a high-quality relationship?

What factors influence perceptions of relationship quality?

Key Characteristics of a High-Quality Relationship

The following section outlines the characteristics mentioned by respondents in this research when asked which components they felt were crucial to a high-quality business relationship.

Characteristics mentioned most frequently by suppliers included the following:

- Flexibility
- Trust
- Technical information readily available
- Personalisation of service
- Good value for money
- Effective resolving of problems
- Speed of technical support
- Good humour

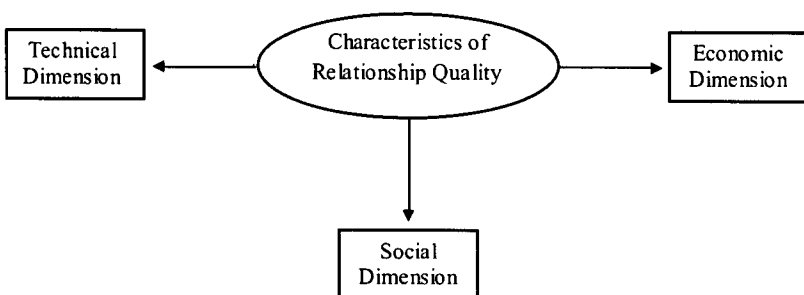
- Long-term commitment
- Willingness to help
- Elimination of frustration
- Honesty
- Two-way offering of advice and recommendations
- Knowledgeable and experienced staff
- Delivering according to promise
- Constant communication
- Professionalism
- Understanding of respective party's business
- High-quality product
- Having a personal relationship with the other party
- Special benefits and discounts.

From this preliminary enunciation of the components of a high-quality relationship, we can distinguish between three "categories" of characteristics. Firstly, several items refer to the social dimension of the relationship. These items describe the characteristics of the people involved in the human interaction between the two parties in the relationship such as trust, professionalism, understanding, honesty and personalisation of service. Secondly, the technical dimension of the relationship can be described as involving the technical issues related to the service or the product. These characteristics consist of, for example, the availability of technical information, the speed of technical support and the level of knowledge and experience of employees. Finally, the economic dimension refers to how each actor perceives the economic issues related to their interactions with the other actor in the business relationship. This category incorporates characteristics such as profitability, effectiveness and efficiency.

Comparison of Buyers' and Suppliers' Perceptions of Relationship Quality

In order to evaluate comparatively buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of the key characteristics of a high-quality relationship, it is necessary to examine each party's perspective under the three categories.

Figure 5.1: Characteristics of Relationship Quality



Social Dimension

From the buyers' perspective, the social dimension of the business relationship was not seen to be paramount to building a high-quality relationship. In fact the only social characteristic which was referred to consistently by all customer respondents was that of *trust*. The common consensus seemed to be that if there was no trust, there could be no relationship. However, the trust of customers was primarily captured by their confidence in the quality of the product and the reliability of the support teams in providing the necessary after sales service. In this case, the quality of service for customers is ultimately determined by the degree of efficiency, knowledge and expertise with which any post sales service is offered to the customers. Customers need to trust that the supplier's promise will match the technical deliverable. Failure to do so will result in a reduction of trust and satisfaction with the supplier and negative referral of their products and services. This was seen to be the case in several of the relationships examined between the supplier company and their customers.

Contrary to this, from the supplier's perspective, the most common characteristics mentioned throughout referred to the social dimension of the relationship. More specifically, the characteristics of honesty, trust, building a personal relationship and understanding of the customer's needs and problems were generally viewed as being central to the building and maintenance of high-quality business relationships.

Honesty, particularly on the part of the supplier, was a characteristic that was undoubtedly felt to be critical in a relationship with a customer. Many of the account managers acknowledge the fact that a customer needs to be able to believe that their supplier is being honest with them. They make a strong link between the concept of honesty and trust. The general consensus is that if the supplier is honest with their customers, a bond of trust will automatically form between the two parties. In addition, the account managers all indicated that the existence of a personal relationship with their customers substantially increases the propensity for successful relationships. The most frequently cited reason was that when there was a personable, friendly element to it the relationship tended to be calmer and stress free.

Understanding of a customer's needs and problems also emerged from the suppliers' perspective as being the crux of a solid relationship. Several account managers refer to how the supplier values a good relationship with their customer as much as the customer values a good relationship with them. It is therefore necessary for both parties to work together to reach a mutual understanding of the objectives of the relationship.

Technical Dimension

From the buyer's perspective, there was a strong emphasis on the technical dimension of the relationship. In fact the characteristics most often mentioned by customer respondents relate to the provision of timely and relevant information, the professionalism of the technical support service and the knowledge and expertise of technical support staff.

The majority of customers acknowledge that the timely provision of relevant information is an essential characteristic of a high-quality relationship. It is felt that if a customer requests specific information regarding a technical or other issue, failure to facilitate the request promptly could result in frustration and impatience on behalf of the customer. Conversely, the immediate transmission of the required information would be greatly appreciated and would lead to higher customer satisfaction and hence a greater perception of the quality of the relationship.

In addition, the professionalism of technical support service is also cited as having a major influence on customers' perceptions of the quality of their business relationships. In many cases, the knowledge and expertise of the technical support staff are particularly acknowledged as being key contributors to the effectiveness of the support service and as such, key sources of satisfaction for the customer.

In sharp contrast, there was a distinct lack of importance attributed to the technical dimension of the business relationship from the supplier company's perspective. The fact that this aspect of the relationship is not viewed by suppliers as being key to the building of a high-quality relationship may be explained by the fact that many account managers consider that technical errors have simply got to be expected and accepted when buying and selling software. Such technical hitches are unavoidable and therefore, according to suppliers, technical efficiency cannot be distinguished as being necessary or vital for the development of a high-quality relationship in the software industry.

Economic Dimension

According to the majority of buyers, a key element of a high-quality relationship is that the supplier fulfils the promises made during negotiation or before the close of the deal. This refers to both the quality of the product and the level of service quality available. Several customers point to the fact that should the quality of the supplier's products and services satisfy the customer's expectations, the likelihood is that trust and confidence will develop in the supplier's ability to meet their needs. However, it is interesting to note that customer representatives made little reference to factors relating to the monetary value of goods or services received.

From the supplier's perspective, factors such as special privileges or fair prices, fulfilment of customer expectations and good value for money were briefly alluded to during the course of some interviews. However, again it must be noted that there was a considerable lack of emphasis placed on the importance of the economic dimension of the relationship as being critical to high-quality relationships.

It would thus appear that although buyers and suppliers agree on several characteristics of a high-quality relationship, buyers generally seem to attribute more significance to the technical dimension of the relationship while suppliers place more importance on the social dimension. This may lead to a significant gap between a customer's expectations of a supplier and their satisfaction

with the quality of the product or service actually delivered. The question arises as to why such disparity exists between the perceptions of suppliers and their customers regarding the characteristics necessary for a high-quality relationship.

In order to gain an insight into the differentiation between the two parties regarding their views on relationship quality, respondents were asked what they felt were the goals of their business relationship. On this point, there was a definite divergence of opinion. This serves to shed considerable light on the overall difference in the perceptions of buyers and suppliers with respect to the components of relationship quality.

For each of the suppliers, from the beginning of the relationship, the goal of the relationship is to increase the profit margin for the supplier company. Several account managers remarked on how the underlying motive for building high-quality relationships was essentially to "make money". Therefore any attempt to improve the quality of the relationship was driven by a profit-seeking motive. However, from the customer's perspective, this is certainly not the case. While customers claim to be prepared to pay high prices for superior quality products, they are not prepared to pay extortionately high prices. Their aim is to reduce the expenditure of their respective companies as much as possible.

It is therefore evident that both parties have entirely opposing views of what the party's objectives are. Both parties, however, agree that these diverging goals are characteristic of any buyer/supplier relationship. This simple but obvious differentiating factor may offer some explanation as to why buyers and suppliers look at the quality of their business relationships from different angles and hence why they attribute different degrees of importance to the various dimensions of their relationships. Management is therefore encouraged to communicate frequently with their customers in order to gauge what characteristics they value in a relationship and to focus on enhancing these in order to develop a relationship of superior quality.

Factors Influencing Perceptions of Relationship Quality

Two key factors emerged in our research that had a significant impact on how relationship quality is perceived in a business-to-business context. *Culture* was found to exert considerable influence on buyers' and suppliers' perceptions of the characteristics necessary for a high-quality relationship while the *prior experiences* of customers strongly influences their evaluation of the quality of their business relationships.

Culture

Culture is cited as being a crucial element in international business due to the impact of differences in national characteristics in conjunction with both physical and language differences. All of these factors are particularly pertinent in the context of this research, whereby the supplier is in communication with customer companies in Germany, the Netherlands and South Africa. Each of

these companies is therefore operating within different cultural contexts. As such, it is interesting to examine the different responses from each nationality of respondents partaking in this case study.

From a German perspective, the technical dimension of the relationship is most important. The predominant characteristics of a high-quality relationship are the quality of the product, the knowledge, expertise and speed of technical support, efficiency of problem solving and lack of time wasting.

The Irish respondents place more importance on the social dimensions of the relationship. Good humour, trust, honesty, personal rapport, communication and flexibility were most frequently cited as being the basis for a high-quality relationship. It is also important to note that the interviews conducted with both the Irish account manager and the two Irish customer companies were of the longest duration. This is illustrative of these respondents' willingness to communicate and their openness to discuss their business relationships.

The Dutch respondents display a tendency to value the economic dimension of a business relationship. Timely provision of information, fulfilment of customers' expectations, special benefits or privileges, efficiency of administration processes, fair price and reputation of supplier were greatly emphasised by the Dutch respondents. It is interesting to highlight that the Dutch interviewees make most reference to the fact that they would view the relationship as being predominantly a sales or a business relationship and made little reference to the personal aspect of the relationship.

Finally, the South African respondents appear to have a more balanced view of the importance of each of the dimensions of a relationship. However, the *social dimension* is marginally preferred overall. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, in general, South African respondents displayed a tendency to prefer face-to-face communication and conceded that negotiations or discussions with customers are usually more successful if they are conducted face to face.

It is therefore evident that there exists a strong cultural influence on how relationship quality is perceived in business markets. Management should hence be aware of the different perceptions of international customers with regards to relationship quality and to accommodate for these.

Prior Experience

Prior experiences are defined as an accumulation of an individual's experiences and knowledge of others' experiences (Anderson and Narus, 1990). In the context of this research, the past experience of many of the customer companies was used as a basis for their future expectations of the supplier company. In the case where customers have positive past experiences with the supplier, they approached their relationship with them optimistically and with high expectations for the development of a high-quality relationship. Hence, evaluation of the actual quality of their relationship is based on high expectations. It can therefore be deduced that, assuming the customer is satisfied with the outcome of the relationship, they will relate their positive experience with their supplier to potential future customers.

Conversely, if the customer's prior experience with the supplier company is negative, they will be inclined to evaluate the current and future quality of their relationships negatively. Despite both Irish customers claiming to be currently very satisfied with the quality of the products and services provided by the supplier company, they would nonetheless rate the quality of their relationship as being poor on the basis of their past negative experiences with them. It is clear that negative past experiences are also shared with prospective customers in the future, thus diminishing the attraction of new customers to the supplier company.

Several respondents refer to the history of their relationship with the supplier company as having a profound impact on how they currently perceive the quality of their relationship. It was often highlighted how the supplier may not have been so customer focused in the past and that this reputation has had an enormous impact on how both current and future customers perceive the supplier company. Comments were also made referring to the fact that customers who have been with the supplier company for a number of years and who have had a poor experience with them do not have confidence in the supplier company's current ability to be customer focused.

From the above evidence, it can therefore be deducted that all prior experiences that a customer encounters with a supplier are remembered. These will have an enduring impact on how a customer evaluates their relationship with the supplier company. In addition, all experiences, be they negative or positive, are relayed to other customers of the supplier and also to possible future customers. In this regard, it is essential that management ensures that every experience a customer has with the supplier company is a pleasant and satisfactory one. This will guarantee that the customer evaluates their relationship in a positive light, thus enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty with the supplier company. It will also serve to attract new potential customers through positive referral from currently satisfied customers.

DISCUSSION

One of the reasons why businesses lose the loyalty of their customers is that they simply do not care enough about their relationships with customers. The quality of the product and service has taken precedence over a focus on relationship quality. While important, the achievement of excellence in product and service quality delivery is only part of the story. As competition between businesses becomes more demanding and perceived product differentiators become less apparent, the relationship between a company and its customer takes on increased significance. To grow and survive, a company must move to the more visionary approach of creating customer commitment and loyalty through creating and maintaining long-term, high-quality customer relationships.

This research reveals that there is no one formula for developing a high-quality business relationship. While buyers and suppliers are not of the same

view in terms of what constitutes relationship quality, there are basic elements which most customers recognise as being crucial in the development of any high-quality relationship. These predominantly constitute both the technical and social dimensions of a relationship. In terms of the technical dimension, factors considered to be critical include the provision of timely and relevant information, the fulfilment of the promises of the supplier in terms of product and service, and the efficiency, knowledge and expertise of support staff. Most frequently mentioned factors corresponding to the social dimension of a relationship include commitment, trust and communication. Suppliers should, however, be aware of the differences between what they perceive to be crucial to relationship quality and the significance that customers attribute to various aspects of the relationship.

It is interesting to note that several characteristics referred to in the literature were not mentioned by any respondent in this research. These included synergy creation, respect for privacy, adaptation, joint problem solving and uncertainty reduction. However, this is not to say that these characteristics are not important to the attainment of a high-quality business relationship. Rather, in the context of this research, it would appear that neither buyers nor suppliers would regard them as being critical to relationship quality.

Other characteristics mentioned by respondents but which were not predicted by reviewing the literature pertaining to relationship quality included good humour, marketing knowledge (knowing and understanding a partner's business), not wasting time, professionalism, superior quality of product and punctual delivery of it. It is difficult to offer a plausible explanation for their absence in the literature. Perhaps their oversight is due to the fact that many of these characteristics are too obvious or alternatively, perhaps their significance to relationship quality is not yet fully realised.

In addition, the findings of this research indicate that culture has a significant impact on the characteristics perceived necessary in a high-quality relationship, and in particular on the social characteristics of communication and trust. Supplier companies should therefore be attentive to how a focus on the different characteristics deemed important by their national and international customers could serve to enhance relationship quality. The relative importance of these characteristics in a high-quality relationship reflects the idiosyncratic needs and expectations of the particular customer base. Each supplier company should have its own balance. The more accurately the factors are balanced to reflect those needs and expectations the closer the business comes to achieving the ideal. Furthermore, this research reveals that the customer's prior experience with their supplier has an enduring impact on their evaluation of relationship quality. Hence, suppliers should ensure that each experience a customer has with the company is a pleasant one, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty at all times.

The area of relationship quality requires further in-depth investigation in the future to more fully validate the connection between relationship quality and customer loyalty.

Furthermore, in an increasingly global business environment, it becomes critical to maximise marketing efforts across different cultural environments. Finding a common ground is the key to creating effective and efficient marketing strategies. Although several differences with regard to perceptions of relationship quality were observed between the different nationalities in this study, future research could focus more deeply on how relationship quality is influenced by culture across the globe and how cultural barriers to developing high-quality relationships could be overcome.

Similarly, future research may include different industry sectors within the analysis, thereby making the research more generally applicable. This would facilitate an exploration of the same research questions but within different contexts.

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