

Chapter VI

Summary, Conclusions, Limitation, and Recommendations

In the present market place situation, a consumer's main contact with manufacturing (i.e., the production process) is through retailers or other middlemen, such as mail order catalog companies. When consumers want to communicate, they complain to or request information from retailers, not manufacturers, about products (Kincade, Redwine, & Hancock, 1992). Manufacturers rarely receive information directly from consumers. Instead, they get second-hand reports from retailers or they get no information at all. Many trade journals emphasize that a relationship between manufacturers and retailers of fashion products is needed to reduce waste (Gaffney, 1997; Silverman, 1998b); however, this relationship between manufacturers and retailers of fashion products remains undeveloped (Ko & Kincade, 1998; Musselman, 1997).

Development of long-term relationships has the potential for benefits to both manufacturers and consumers. Direct receipt of information by manufacturers of fashion products could lead to higher efficiency, reduced waste, increased profitability and satisfaction, and better customer relationships along the entire pipeline. In the fashion industry, little connection exists between manufacturers and consumers. A large distance exists between these two segments of the fashion industry pipeline.

To be competitive, manufacturers in the fashion industry must reduce the distance with consumers and increase their ability to respond to changing consumer demands. Manufacturers in the fashion industry must know consumers' specific, product demands and complaints to reduce the lost opportunity to sell or to raise the level of consumer satisfaction. The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between manufacturers and consumers during the relationship process. The major research question was: What will happen in the Relationship Spiral Model when the consumer becomes a part of the manufacturer/consumer relationship?

Summary

The conceptual framework for this study was developed based on three fields, which are integrated and reinforced: relationship marketing, services and manufacturing systems. The overall conceptual framework consists of four factors: market environment, consumers, manufacturers, and encounter between consumers and manufacturers. The structure of the model was developed based on Gronroos' conceptual model (1983b, 1990). The model focuses on two segments of the fashion industry pipeline (i.e., manufacturers and consumers).

The preexperimental research design used a longitudinal case study with a panel study technique. Twenty female participants out of 35 females who answered the screening questionnaire were selected. The participants were selected from students and other acquaintances of the research in Blacksburg, VA. For the experiment, a simulated Web site was used by the participants to order custom made shoes. The screening questionnaire contained questions about demographics, shopping orientation, past experience, expectations, and relationship with manufacturers. Eight questionnaires were used to guide the interviews throughout the two phases shopping process. Data were analyzed through de-contextualization and re-contextualization methods for interpretational analysis. The results of this study were used to answer several questions.

What does a consumer expect from the relationship?

In general, all the participants expected a quality product with the desired color and thought that the product should be the same as seen in the web site. They also expected that the product should fit their feet. This issue was particularly important because the product was customized. Delivery time was anticipated to be two or three weeks. This time frame is longer than what is reported in the literature for Internet shopping. The fact that the product was customized influenced the participants' expectation of delivery time. These issues are the basic components of the product and services that were perceived as important by the participants. Expectations seemed to coincide with the categories of product and services that the participants rated as important.

At the start of the experience, expectations were based on importance criteria and broad-based experience. After the product was delivered, the participants had had specific experience with a customized product. For the next shopping process, the experience became the expectation. Throughout the shopping phases, the researcher observed that experience became expectation and expectations became experiences. According to the findings in this research, the two concepts were not a gap, as indicated in previous literature (e.g., Swartz & Brown, 1989). Instead, the two concepts were integrated and somewhat continuous in their existence; however, the transformation between the two concepts was not one hundred percent. Not all expectations are met or transformed in the experience and not all aspects of the experience are incorporated into the next expectation. Some gap continues to exist especially when the time between order and delivery is long. At any one point in the shopping process, a gap does exist between expectation and experience, but over time in the relationship process, a continuous merging takes place between expectation and experience. New gaps are continually emerging as old expectations and experiences merge and close old gaps.

The merging and emerging of the expectation and the experience varied for the participants. Based on the numbers collected about expectations, the expectations were similar and equally high for most participants at the beginning. In the interviews, the participants revealed differences in expectations based on their fit problems. This difference affected the reaction of the participants and their evaluation of the gap and subsequent merger of expectation and experience varied. Participants who knew they had fit problems, prior to the study, had different reactions than those participants who had no such fit problems. These participants were more tolerant when the product did not meet their expectations.

Another issue about expectations is the changing focus of expectations. Participants' expectations were broad at the start of Phase One. After the participants received the product, their expectations became more specific. As the shopping process continued and the participants moved along the relationship spiral, the expectations became more focused based on the experience with the product and with the result of the fit of the shoe.

How does distance, within the encounter, between manufacturers and consumers change?

The distance within the encounter is represented in the initial relationship spiral model by the space between the manufacturer and the consumer. In the general model (see Figure 10) or the ideal model, the distance between the manufacturer and the consumer should shorten as the relationship progresses. This finding is similar to the literature that suggests that as a relationship becomes a long-term relationship, the closeness between services provider and consumer should improve (Gronroos, 1990). The results of the study revealed that, for these 20 participants, four models of relationship were in existence (see Figures 11 - 14). Within these four models, the distance between the manufacturer and the consumer (i.e., participant) changed relative to the participant's response to the product and services. Their responses were developed based on their evaluations of the product and services. In Model 1 (see Figure 11), the participants in Group 1 had a match, although not perfect, between their expectations and their experiences. In contrast, Group 2 had two negative Phases. Their expectations were not met with the experience in Phase 1. At the beginning of Phase 2, their expectations, according to the Likert-scale numbers, were similar to the other groups, but in the interviews they expressed more hope for a better product than the other groups. In Phase 2, the product did not fit for most Group 2 participants, their elevated expectations were not met, and they were very disappointed. One participant in Group 2 declared that she "would not buy again from this company." Again, the match between expectations and experiences, the consumer's evaluation of this comparison, and the reaction to the evaluation became the driving forces for their next Phase expectations.

What are the keys to maintaining the relationship with the consumers?

The primary key to maintaining the relationship between the manufacturer and the participants was the delivery of the 'right product'. The concept of the right product is a basic tenet in marketing (Berkowitz, Kerin, & Rudelius, 1989). In addition, the findings in this study confirm that the definition of the right product varied according to the participant. Services as well as the product were important in determining the right product. Fit was the major concern for all participants. Other product issues included

color, quality of the leather and other materials, heel height, stitching, and craftsmanship. Style and seasonality were also important. Services issues of provision of appropriate and correct information, price, delivery, and shipping and handling costs were important in determining the right product. The definition of each of these variables and the weight that each variable carried in the reactions of each participant varied. So, maintaining a long-term relationship with a consumer is dependent on delivery of the right product, both services and goods. Determining the right product will be a major challenge for a manufacturer, and being able to maintain a relationship with a consumer will be a difficult and continuous task for a manufacturer, even when the right product is delivered.

How do consumer characteristics affect the Relationship Spiral Model?

The consumer, not the manufacturer, determines the definition of the right product. Among the demographic variables examined in this study, fit problems of the foot and shopping orientation were the two variables that were related to group membership. For example, Group 1 had no fit problems and easily found shoes to fit. They were satisfied at the end of Phase 1 and at the end of Phase 2. They appeared to be developing a relationship with the manufacturer; however, when asked if they would continue in the relationship (i.e., reorder and enter Phase 3), they said they may or may not be interested in continuing the relationship. They were dissatisfied with the limited range of styles and colors and liked to shop in the store to touch and feel the product. The participants in Group 1 said that they wanted variety in product selection and were not strongly interested in maintaining a long term relationship with a manufacturer. This consumer type might be easily drawn to other shopping formats. Manufacturers may find that developing a long term relationship with a consumer, who has the characteristics of the participants in Group 1, is difficult because of the capriciousness of this consumer. Satisfaction with the physical aspects of quality and fit might be easy to maintain but delivering the services and intangible product features for the Group 1 type of consumer may be difficult to impossible.

Maintaining a relationship with consumers who are similar to the participants in Groups 2, 3, and 4 would be done on a different basis from the formation of the relationship with Group 1 type consumers. Many of these participants had fit problems

and/or multiple children. These participants are interested in using the Internet as a method of reducing stress in their lives. These participants are difficult to satisfy because their criteria for the right product are very specific, including the services that are demanded. If the product and services are not exactly as they expect, they are not happy with the product and do not want to continue in the relationship. If the manufacturer can meet their specific expectations, they are surprised at having their expectations met and are willing to continue in the relationship. The next research question becomes is fit a minimum expectation and the higher expectation will also be style and color and intangible goods for these participants also.

Why does the consumer end the relationship?

The answer to this question is both easy and difficult. Some clear reasons for ending the relationship were seen in Group 2 and Group 1. Group 2 participants were clearly not satisfied because the shoes did not fit. In Group 2, the manufacturer failed twice to make a shoe that fit. Some of these women said that twice was enough, and they would not order again. Determining the reasons for Group 1 ending the relationship is more difficult for a manufacturer. In Group 1, everyone received good fitting shoes twice; however, some participants were not interested in buying again. They wanted to shop other places with varied assortments. They did not have fit problems and could find shoes anywhere. Although Group 1 and Group 2 had opposite experiences, participants did not want to continue. In both groups, the manufacturer failed to meet the expectation of the groups, but the expectations were different between the two groups. The criteria of the right product were different.

Conclusions

Communication between manufacturers and consumers is not easy. This relationship can be built on an encounter format that is much closer than that of store retailers. The Internet can reach consumer's home directly, and the Internet allows consumers to regulate when they communicate with the manufacturer. Sometimes, consumers do not want to communicate with companies, and companies may have a hard time knowing when is the best time to communicate with consumers. For instance, many

catalog companies send catalogs to consumers almost everyday. How many consumers read them and purchase from companies at that rate? If a company wants to develop a close relationship, the company needs to use a communication tool to promote communication with the consumer. In this study, participants expressed that they wanted to have private and customized services directly with the manufacturer. As a result of this study, the research found that the Internet could provide the communication tool for a long-term relationship with a consumer.

In this study, as in real business activities, many variables were incorporated both on the company's side and the participants' side. Sometimes companies have a hard time knowing why consumers return a product, even though the consumer might be satisfied with the product. The consumer may have reasons that are based on the intangible aspects or the tangible aspects of the product. For example, the consumer could have some small reason such as a minor difference in color, which might not be perceptible to other consumers. At the same time, consumers also feel uncertainty about the company's services such as payment and return policy. These seemingly minor events could be the reason that the consumer left the relationship. The major events such as a badly fitting shoe could also cause the consumer to end the relationship.

The formation and continuation of a long-term relationship is similar to the workings of two gears (i.e., a manufacturer and a consumer). The relationship is more than a hand-shake, which is a single event. Where the two gears meet is the moment of truth. As Carlzon (1987) said the moment of truth is the point of encounter, when the manufacturer and the consumer meet and the product and services are created and exchanged. The consumer is unique, such as the gear with its own distinct shape, and its own interconnections with other people and the environment. The manufacturer also has a unique set of company characteristics and its own interconnections within its market environment. The question for the manufacturer and the consumer, in making a long-term relationship, is how to fit the two gears together. Sometimes in the working of the two gears the fit can be improved through lubrication. The lubrication in the manufacturer and consumer relationship, as evidenced in this study, can be the Internet. Through the Internet, the manufacturer and the consumer can communicate directly to improve the meeting of the gears and the moment of truth. The manufacturer in this relationship must

constantly seek information from the consumer to determine the expectations and the results of the experiences with the manufacturer's product and services.

In specific conclusions, the researcher suggests that the manufacturer has to deliver the right product. The right product is one that has the right fit, the right color, and the right deliver time. For Internet shopping, the product should be the same as the product that as seen in the web site. The right product is always changing. The definition of the right product is not static but dynamic. These changes occur because the expectations and needs of the participants are always changing from moment to moment. This change variable can include the product and the services of the manufacturer. The right product is always changing but if the manufacturer has continuous contact with the consumer the changes can be identified and addressed by the manufacturer. With frequent contact, anxiety among participants might have been reduced. In other words, with communication between manufacturer and consumer the distance might be reduced.

Limitations

- Developing of products: The researcher delivered the product directly to participants in this research. Realistically, consumers would receive products by mail or other delivery companies. Also, the researcher interviewed them about the products face to face when presenting products to them. Therefore, participants may have limited their negative comments.
- Bias in the interview: Although the researcher had trained for the interviews and trained to be neutral in the interview process, the researcher could influence participants' answers in the interviews. The researcher's motions and expressions could affect the participants' responses. Also, the researcher could be affected by participants' movements and expressions. This could limit the range of responses and the depth of understanding.
- Limited focus area: This research concentrated only on the consumer side. The research did not explore the manufacturing side of the encounter; however, activities in manufacturing did affect the study.

- Limited products: This research selected a few items to display on the web site to limit the number of variables in the study. Consumers, however, may want to choose one product from a variety of products.
- Limited web site: This web site was developed for this research under a limited budget. Although a web consultant was used and model sites were identified, this site was simplistic compared to other sites. Participants had difficulties ordering their products because of some site limitations. For example, participants had to return to order page when they chose a product. Usually consumers can order from the product page on the real web site.
- Limited web site communication: The site was not actually connected to the manufacturer. Participants could not communicate with the manufacturer when they wanted to obtain additional information.
- Limited self-measurement: Although pilot tested and evaluated to be understandable, the measurement system confused some participants.
- Limited number of participants: The number of participants was restricted to 20, and the sample was a judgmental sample. The lack of random selection and the small sample prohibited generalized results.
- Lack of the information of price: No price was given in the study to prevent biasing the expectation of the participants. This omission became a weakness because participants expected to know a price range and found the omission also influenced their experience.
- Bias in services: The researcher had limited control over product quality and delivery time. Inconsistent delivery time affected participants' evaluation for services.

Recommendations for Research

- This research concentrated only on the consumer side of the encounter; however, research on the manufacturer side is also necessary to understand the entire relationship between consumers and manufacturers. For future research, the manufacturer's side should be examined. Topics to include could be the relationships among businesses, business responses to consumers (e.g., handling consumers' information), and the customized manufacturing system on a long term basis.

- The researcher concentrated only on adult female consumers; however, other groups may react differently such as males, children, other age groups, race, and location (rural and urban areas).
- Specific groups who have special problems of fitting shoes, could be the focus of a study.
- With this simulated web site, participants could not communicate with the manufacturer or the researcher when they wanted information. To increase understanding of consumers' behavior, participants should be able to communicate with a manufacturer or a researcher using e-mail or other communication linkages.
- A researcher should cooperate closely with a manufacturer in this type of study. Prior to initiating the data collection, a researcher should develop efficient communication systems with manufacturers, and predict the plan of production and distribution to avoid uncertain happenings.
- Measurement of the distance between consumers and manufacturers could be explored in more depth. The researcher did not ask the participants about the feeling of the distance between consumers and manufacturers. For example, how do you evaluate about the distance? How close or far?
- This study could be applied to another products such as apparel and home furnishing.

Recommendation for business practices

- Most manufacturers employ a mass production system. In order to introduce the mix of mass and custom production lines, they have to develop new systems in terms of managing goods and services. The researcher may investigate the impact of companies' marketing on production strategies.
- The general assumption in marketing and services literature is that timing is crucial to develop the long-term relationship with consumers. For many products, the time between order and delivery is expected by consumers to be quick (i.e., two to five days). Based on this study, timing for custom products is also critical, but the time span is different. Consumers may wait for custom products up to a month if a company provides information about the production process, and the consumer must

- be made aware of any delays in delivery time. Future research may investigate the timing of delivering products and handling delays in delivery time.
- This study had limited consumer involvement with manufacturers about the measurement of foot size, and selection of colors and products. Participants recommended several ideas relative to this topic. Some participants recommended very specific ideas to improve the shoes: stopper on the bottom, inside sole, and arch supports. More consumer involvement factors are necessary to develop real business practices. The researcher may continue to investigate the possibility of more consumer involvement with manufacturers and how the involvement affects the relationship.
 - Another study could apply to apparel and footwear retailers and investigate their communication practices with consumers. One participant expressed that she received catalogs from the same company almost every week even though she just purchased once. Also, she received similar junk mail from other retailers. To save cost of catalogs and resources, and avoid consumer stress, a researcher could investigate how to manage catalogs and improve relationships with consumers.

Implications

If manufacturers have consumers similar to these participants, manufacturers should receive consumers' information continuously to develop new products. For long-term relationships, manufacturers should contact their consumers based on the requirements of the consumers. For consumers with problems related to the fit of shoes, including overall size, size of both feet, and specific shapes of the feet, manufacturers could contact health-related companies to find new markets, and they could form market alliances or joint ventures with these health-related companies. To serve consumers in a long-term relationship, manufacturers may find that they must have partners such as marketing and services oriented companies. Manufacturers may find obtaining information from consumers on a long-term basis to be difficult. They may not have the equipment or personnel to handle the volume of data and the frequency of encounters that are needed to service the consumers in a long-term relationship. These partners would

serve a different function from the role of the retailer as an intermediary between manufacturers and consumers.

Questions formed as a result of this study include the following:

- How will each participant group react in a third or future shopping phase? Specially, would the distance change occur as predicted in each group model?
- What services from the manufacturer and other events would create the next encounter for each of the four participant groups?
- What are the criteria that can be used to measure distance? What variables influence the change in distance?

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