Business Marketing Face to Face

4

The Theory and Practice of B2B Marketing

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Contents

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4 Relationship Marketing

Overview

The relationship marketing approach is presented here as a contemporary basis upon which to consider business marketing. It is regarded as a successor to the 4Ps approach, which is considered by many to be irrelevant and outdated.

The development of collaborative and mutually rewarding relationships between buyers and sellers is considered to be fundamentally more appealing and an intuitively appropriate interpretation of business-to-business marketing. This view also sees the development of partnerships with other organisations as more suitable than former adversarial ideas based on competition and where the sole focus is on customers.

Organisations are shown to have a portfolio of relationships with a range of stakeholders, most notably suppliers, employees, customers and shareholders. This chapter considers the nature, development and characteristics of interorganisational relationships and examines the potential of technology to enhance relationships with customers and suppliers based on trust and commitment.

Aims and objectives

The aims of this chapter are to consider the scope and nature of interorganisational relationships and to explore how this impacts on the contemporary view of business-to-business marketing.

The objectives of this chapter are to:

1. Explore the development and evolution of relationship marketing.
2. Examine the conceptual underpinning associated with relationship marketing practices.
3. Introduce ideas concerning the customer relationship life cycle.
4. Examine the nature and characteristics of partnerships and alliances with suppliers and other stakeholders.
5. Consider trust and commitment as key elements of business relationships.

A Slice of Life – The Devil You Know

I have burnt my fair share of bridges over the years. We work in a creative services industry and with creativity comes artistic differences, philosophical differences and even differences in procedural administration that places a strain on a business relationship. It's inevitable that there will be breakdowns in client agency relationships – some involving door slamming and shouting and doorsteps that are never to be darkened again and others that simply reach natural conclusions. The latter is preferable, although not always achievable. It's my experience that even when a project reaches a natural conclusion, if it carries with it any degree of success, the business relationship is never really 'over'. It'll probably come back, sporadically, or years later when you least expect it. Stakeholders move jobs and take their little black book of relationships with them, or the need arises (again) and the phone rings. So it's important to nurture the relationship and not just the database.

I delivered a brand project for a technology solutions provider a few years ago that never really fulfilled my expectations, but the relationship didn't crash and burn either. What actually crashed was the stock market. The 'dot com' bubble that burst in 1999 was formative for many business relationships – I lost about 85% of my client base in under two weeks. They all cut-back, many of them went bust and we all had the joy of figuring out how we would survive in the new millennium.

In the subsequent years this solutions company certainly survived, but the market for their partner-based technology changed significantly – as did their marketing activity. During that period of reconstruction, I received a call from the CEO asking me to pick up the brand and fix it. Again. The company had done what it could in the post-dot com years, but the marketing and brand strategy was functional rather than exceptional. Development work had been undertaken internally and with another agency, but the CEO wasn't satisfied with the outcome.

I worked with the CEO for the next year or so to build the brand strategy in line with his business goals which was to attract the attention of a prospective buyer for the company. The plan worked, but not quite as expected. The company was duly bought as part of a multiple IT/Telecoms acquisition by an investment company and my client's company was recognised as the group brand holding the most brand equity.

The CEO was appointed as the Group CEO of what had become four disparate technology companies with very different audience profiles and his task was to unify the whole. His task became my task, because as he wrestled with the integration at the organisational level, he asked me to fix the brand(s).