

The Internal Marketing and the Commitment of the Employees When Managing the Customer-Oriented Business

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Abstract

The focus of this study is internal marketing and commitment of employees. Thinking of the concept of commitment and the aims of this study the relevant parts in the internal marketing are motivation, community spirit, internal information and training of employees.

Basic questions when analyzing the contents of commitment were: What is commitment and what are objects of it? What are the types of commitment? What are the terms of commitment and processes? What about conflicts and commitment?

In the empirical part of the study the main questions are: What are the opinions of managers about the commitment of the employees, and what are their opinions of their own management using concepts of internal marketing? Are they marketing oriented, customer relationship managers? Thinking of employees the main questions are: What are the contents of their commitment? What are the opinions of employees about internal marketing thinking specially of 'moment of truth'.

The analyse of the company's marketing and the interviews of managers proved that the company aims to be customer oriented and marketing includes features of customer relationship and other modern marketing theories. The contents of internal marketing connected with several concepts of commitment. The good community spirit committed the company with employees. Important things in motivation are salaries but also feedback especially from managers. Training will motivate if it is useful in daily work and customer service. Correct real time information is important when meeting customers. If there is lack of information, it frustrates. Workable and positive personal relationships towards managers, other employees and customers are important constituents for the continuing commitment.

Aim of this study

The main aim of this study is

to investigate how commitment of employees will be connected both a) to management/leadership and especially to internal marketing and b) to customers in the customer-oriented organization.

The research objects consist of representatives of top management, shop managers and employees. Customers are not empirical objects of the research, but they were strongly in discussions held with the top management, shop managers and employees.

After the theoretical discussions the research problems will be presented and specified for the empirical research. The object firm in this study is a co-operative firm of perishable goods, which be-

longs to the S-group in Finland. The successful internal marketing and the commitment of employees are supposed to cause loyal customer relationships, which are core goals of the firm.

Internal marketing

The internal marketing has been understood as a managerial tool. The basic idea is that the whole personnel of the company adopts marketing oriented thinking and behaviour when meeting customers. The target group in the internal marketing is a company's personnel starting from recruiting of new employees. So it is possible to ensure that employees will adopt the philosophy of internal marketing. The concept 'internal customer' includes an important idea of good and workable relationships between employees and employees/managers (Grönroos 1983, 12, 66-67; 1996, 7; 1998; Berry 1981, 33-40; Cahill 1996, 4; Berry 1988, 281; Berry & Parasuraman 1991, 151; Gilmore & Carson 1995, 298-300). The traditional 4P marketing was called 'external marketing'. An essential idea was that tools or activities of external marketing could be used also as tools in the internal marketing (e.g. Piercy & Morgan 1991, 85; Collins 1991, 267-268; Flipo 1986, 9-10) and that employees really understand the concept of internal customer all the time (Gummesson 1991, 72-73; Gilmore & Carson 1995, 300).

Basic activities of internal marketing are e.g. internal information, training of personnel, creating community spirit and motivation. These means include elements of personnel administration, and internal marketing has been seen as a part in management of personnel resources (Berry 1981, 34; Foreman et al. 1991, 1; Collins 1991, 261-269; Grönroos 1990, 261). The concept of internal marketing is thus multi-disciplinary in its nature (Grönroos 1997, 18). As a goal it is to commit employees to 'marketing-like behaviour', as Grönroos writes (1995, 254). Key things are then to develop service and communication skills of personnel in an organization. Continuing training and self-development and facilities to implement in practice his/her skills realize organizational learning. The training aspect demands information retrieval with the help of one's own experience or experience of others or using organizational information channels (Slater & Narver 1995, 64). Networking is not only the external phenomenon of the firm, but it also improves abilities of employees to serve each others.

From the managerial aspect it is important to recognize how employees experience the efficiency of internal marketing and also more widely, the efficiency of management and leadership when meeting customers. Is it possible to meet 'moment of truth'? Are there seen in the daily work continually the central things as training, community spirit, communication skills and motivation? How are these connected with commitment?

Internal marketing is often connected with interactions and relationships between customers and sales people as a goal to get loyal customers and continual customer relationships. It is important to keep old customers, because getting new ones is expensive for a firm. The great turnover of employees tells something negative of employees' commitment. Reicheld (1993, 68) connects the loyalty of employees with the loyalty of customers. Permanent and loyal employees indicate permanent and loyal customers. How to increase commitment of personnel? The skills and training are important in the loyalty management, but an especially important thing is commitment, as Reicheld writes (1993, 69).

Customer loyalty and employees

The main theme in customer relationship marketing is 'to get and keep customers' (Grönroos 1995, 253). Loyalty may mean quite a passive approval of situation. One hopes that bad things will change for the better in the future. A loyal customer has tolerance to approve for a while also inconvenient situation, for example bad price-quality relations. Fornell (1992, 11-12) thinks that loyalty is the function of satisfaction, switching barriers and voice. Loyal customers may not be always satisfied, but satisfied customers are apt to be loyal (Fornell 1992, 7). Bitner (1990, 71) describes loyalty as a process. At the end of the process satisfaction has effects to perceived quality, which could cause loyalty and intention to certain behaviour. For example, a shop's physical environment will cause positive experiences to a customer and attraction towards a shop, but also to sales people willingness to stay in a firm, commitment (Bitner 1992, 60). Not only customer-sales people relationships, but also social interactions between employees are important thinking of commitment and loyalty-based behaviour. A good relationship felt by a customer would include thus commitment, loyalty and satisfaction. Reichheld (1993, 68-71) found out that customers' loyalty and the loyalty of sales people depends on each other.

The trust is supposed to be a precondition to the stronger quality of relationship commitment. Trust can be seen a basement both for loyalty and commitment. Partners trust that the result is win-win-type; no winners, no losers. A customer may trust that goods are fresh and price correct every day. Morgan and Hunt (1994, 23-24) connect the concept of trust with such expressions as consistent, competent, honest, fair, integrity, responsible, helpful and benevolent. A customer has confidence and reliability towards a salesman or a firm which possibly has this kind of qualifications.

The core elements of 'customer-loyalty and sales people' -discussion will be described with questions as 'Do sales people feel that a shop manager support them when they are meeting customers'? Have they information and skills enough? How do sales people believe that promises of external marketing will fulfil? How an individual sales person does feel that managers and other employees are marketing driven and customer oriented?

Commitment

The commitment is "the state of intellectual and emotional adherence to some political, social or religious theory or action or practice Webster 1992, 197) or "the state of being obligated or bound" (as by intellectual or emotional ties) or "engagement or involvement" (Brown 1996, 233). There will be the strong belief to the goals and values of an organization (identification) and accepting them, the desire to strive much for an organization and the strong desire to keep membership in an organization. An individual is loyal an she/he is involved and psychologically attached to one's work and she/he has affective ties to an organization (Mowday et al. 1979, 1982, 27; Buchanan 1974, 533).

Many definitions of commitment emphasize an organization as the object of commitment (e.g. Allen & Meyer 1990, 1; 1996, 252). But an object will be also a person, a group of persons, an idea, practice, work or other causes (Brown 1996, 233) or objects will form many commitment relations and commitment to many objects at the same time (Reichers 1985, 469; 1986, 508). In the business organization employees may commit themselves to the goals and values of the company, but at the same time to other employees, which emphasizes the social character of commitment (Reichers 1985, 513; Becker 1992, 232; Hunt & Morgan 1994, 1568-1587; Meyer & Allen 1997, 19). If an

employee accepts the goals and values of the firm, there is the congruence between the firm and an individual. Work itself includes elements of commitment. Not only occupational attributes or work tasks, but also people with whom an employee is working, especially other employees, the nearest manager and customers (see Tubbs & Dahl 1991, 708-710; Donovan & Radosevich 1998, 308).

The object of commitment may be the macro level concept, as an organization, but at the same time very micro level concept, including then e.g. certain work tasks or habits. So it is reasonable to ask, what kind of objects an individual is committed to and what is the state of commitment? The strength of commitment may vary from the strong loyalty to alienation. But what kind of commitment is relevant if a firm aims to get efficient customer relationships. What is, for example, the desire of an individual sales person to strive for goals of a firm and how is this seen in customer relationships?

Brown (1996, 232) divided commitment into two main groups, prejudiced and behavioural commitment. The attitude commitment includes affective, continuance and normative commitment.

Affective commitment has been described as a positive desire to act in a certain way. Positive attitudes mean commitment to the goals and values of the object. Penley and Gould (1988, 43-48) attach moral commitment to affective commitment. Moral attachment and normative obligation are certain types of commitment. An individual may have, for example, internal normative pressures to act for the goals and values of the organization and then it would mean moral attachment and striving for the congruence of values (O'Reilly & Chatman 1986, 492; Hackett et. al. 1994, 15).

Calculative or instrumental commitment happens when an individual behaves reasonably in order to get external rewards (Meyer et al. 1993, 540). It can be seen input/output-type evaluation including terms or exchange between an individual and a firm (e.g. Oliver 1990, 19-20).

Continuance commitment means that withdrawal from the object would cause costs for an individual, because of invests and offers ('side-bets') one has done. Costs may be social and economic in nature (Brown 1996, 231; Jaros 1997, 320; Mathieu & Zajac 1990, 172).

Continuance commitment will include also 'compulsive' traits. This may cause alienation and thus alienative commitment. Perhaps an individual wants to stay in an organization waiting for one's pension (commitment to stay; Angle & Perry 1981, 4-5; see also Mullins 1995, 606). What does it mean when thinking of customer-employee relationships?

The terms of commitment would cause a desire to behave as agreed, implicitly or explicitly (Mayer & Schoorman 1992, 671), to produce something. The terms are results from negotiations between partners (Brown 1996, 230-232). This is called also an exchange. The value of the exchange between an individual and an organization consists of the quantity and value of inputs and the quantity and value of outputs. This aspect emphasizes calculative commitment and instrumentality according to side-bet theory (Hackett 1994, 15), and it means that the compliance to an organization happens with external rewards. The contract and the terms of employment are typical, when recruiting new people to the company. When thinking of longer time of an individual's life period, terms of commitment will get more psychological features or social meanings (e.g. Allen & Meyer 1996, 252; Mayer & Schoorman 1992, 673).

An input will mean time, striving and professional competence, but also risks. An output means fulfilment of expectations and satisfaction, certain work values, social interactions, good fellow

workers, nice customers, salaries, good working conditions etc. (Mottaz 1988, 467). But is there a balance between inputs and outputs? Is somebody a winner and someone else a loser?

The state of commitment will change and cause new intentions to behave. An individual evaluates one's commitment when conditions are changing. Commitment will strengthen or weaken and the behaviour changes. For example, terms of commitment will change and an individual will make new decisions. Commitment to stay is more general for older people than young people. Changes in prestige and participation will cause value commitment (Mayer & Schoorman 1998, 15-21). Advances in career are positive signals for commitment.

The conflicts cause hesitating and uncertainty and the state of commitment will decrease. An individual is uncertain of one's identity, role or self image and she/he is not able to use energy effectively for the organization (Reichers 1985, 469-470; 1986, 509; e.g. intrapsychological and psychosocial conflicts). This disconfirmation will activate an individual to search new alternatives and one's behaviour changes. But there are many restrictions. The threshold to leave an organization may be high.

The commitment process has been seen as a part of the socialization process when a new person comes to a firm (Saks & Ashforth 1996, 301-302; Ashforth et al. 1998, 922). The socialization process will be easier to a new worker if a firm has a good training programme.

The process of commitment is complicated and covers perhaps quite a long period of time. The commitment will vary quite a lot depending e.g. on the phase of career and physical age.

Frame of Research

In the theoretical discussion were presented questions concerning research aims. In the frame (figure 1) these questions are collected in a compact form for the empirical research. The focus is commitment of sales people and commitment related to internal marketing and customers.

* Management and internal marketing

How successful do top management and managers see internal marketing?
Have employees skills enough to meet customers?

What are opinions of top management and managers about marketing orientation of the firm?

What are opinions of top management and managers about the state of commitment of sales people?

* Commitment of sales people
* Experienced internal marketing

How sales people do experience the support of management in customer service?
(state of internal marketing)

What are opinions of sales people about marketing orientation of the firm?

What are objects and terms of commitment?
What is the state of commitment?
What kind is commitment?
Are there conflicts decreasing the state of commitment?

* Customers
* Experienced marketing

Opinions of top management, managers and employees

Figure 1. The frame of research: research questions

An interesting question is also, how opinions of top management and managers differ from those of employees. The important viewpoint in interviews was to find, how customers were 'present' in them.

In the figure 2 are collected key concepts of the study, which were also included in theme interviews.

Internal marketing

- * motivation
- * community spirit
- * internal information and communication
- * training of personnel

Commitment

- * objects
- * types of commitment
- * processes
- * terms
- * conflicts

Figure 2. Key concepts in theme interviews.

Empirical Research

Description of the case firm

The object organization is a co-operative firm, which belongs to S-group in Finland and only the part of the firm, which sells perishable goods. The firm consists of selling units of different sizes (Prisma = hypermarket, S-market = supermarket and Sale = smaller market -type shop). The total turnover of perishable goods in 1999 was 507 million FIM (85 million EUR) and the share of market in its market area 26,8 % (+1,9 %). About 25 % of households are so called 'customer owners' of the firm, and the share is growing. Deposits of customer owners in the company are increasing strongly, which tells about their trust in the firm. Also average monthly FIM-purchases per a customer are increasing.

Methods

The empirical data has been collected using group interviews (employees) and individual interviews (top management, managers) in the selected co-operative firm. The total amount of interviewed people was 21. The field study was implemented in December 1999 - January 2000. The interviewed employees represented all kinds of selling units. Shop managers were chosen from the same units.

The themes in interviews were partly ticklish, which might cause somewhat to sincerity of the interviewed employees, especially when interviews were recorded. But employees used also critical words and they criticized different things in the firm. This proves that there was quite a confidential relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed employees and managers.

Results

The opinions of top management and managers

The customers' feedback is especially important, when managers are doing decisions concerning on assortment, but the chain concepts settle limits to decisions. There were lots of expectations towards the new feedback system of customers. The new system is more controllable and compact compared to the old system. The employees and managers get this feedback and in certain cases also the customer gets answers to his/her feedback.

Top management and managers told that they try to recognize values of customers. Important values are good assortment, quality, fresh goods, advantageous prices, membership benefits, convenience, rapid buying, and specially in smaller shops: reliability or confidence.

Good partnerships in doing business will cause benefits to customers. Increasing number of bonus partners is a good example. This means that a customer increase her/his bonus purchases when buying from a bonus partner. The bonus system is progressive and bonus will be paid according to monthly purchases. The discount percent (bonus) varies between 0.5 ... 3%.

Managers discussed marketing and customer orientation of the firm also a little critically. Sometimes they found bureaucratic features in internal operations of the firm, not so much between the firm and customers. The chain control may be too tight when thinking of assortment decisions. The lean organization may cause that managers and employees will not get always instructions enough for their practical problems and they are forced to do decisions independently.

The analyse of the company's marketing and the interviews of managers proved that the company aims to be customer oriented and marketing includes features of customer relationship and other modern marketing theories (see eg. 'guidelines for the market-driven manager', Webster 1994, 9 of 11).

The internal motivation system got also critics. The system is generally thinking good, but it must be developed in the future. It is difficult to find more qualitative measures. How, for example, customer satisfaction would be a part in the rewarding system of employees? Are goals too hard to reach, especially in smaller shops?

The managers evaluate, that spirit is quite good in the firm. Work morale is fair, although employees are working sometimes under pressure and in the busy. Managers hope to find more time for discussions with employees and they understand that community spirit depends also on managers.

Internal information and communication is the thing, which seems not to be in order in any organization. Managers evaluate that they have succeeded quite well in their information and communications. Also employees are responsible for communicating. Small meetings between a shop manager and employees will help in information retrieval. Part time working is a cause for the lack of information.

The firm invest in training of employees. New methods are to be developed as 'leader-training' for managers and 'mood for work 2000' programs this year. Older employees are not so eager for training.

Top management and managers evaluate that employees' commitment to the firm and to its goals is quite good. The employees are proud enough of the firm and of their work. Employees are responsible for their work tasks and they are working in a customer oriented way.

Salaries are not high and work is heavy. The problem is in the future, how to commit young employees. More means to tie employees with the firm are needed. Turnover of employees is not high. There are conflicts sometimes and managers want really to find solutions to problems.

The employees have skills and abilities enough to meet customers. Some managers think that all employees are not so good in customer service. But they are able to solve daily problems with customers.

The opinions of employees

The contents of internal marketing connected with several concepts of commitment. The good community spirit committed the company with employees. Important things in motivation are salaries, although they are not good, but also feedback especially from managers. Training will motivate if it is useful in daily work and in customer service. Correct real time information is important when meeting customers. If there is lack of information, it frustrates.

There is the salary system, which rewards if goals are reached. But the system is too quantitative and does not pay attention enough to smaller units. The system demands more development. Employees told that an alternative is to connect the new customer feedback system with salary systems. But money is not the only thing. The employees want to get more feedback from their managers. It is important to get feedback from customers as well.

Co-operation with other employees and nearest managers is important when serving customers. This emphasizes the meaning of internal customer relationships.

The commitment of young employees is instrumental or calculative. Older employees emphasize more normative-moral and continuance commitment. The features of the continuance commitment are to be seen also in the advance in the career, although with small steps. The permanent job is an important factor of commitment. Employees found also important the success of the company and implementation of its goals.

Features of affective commitment connects with other employees and customers. Older employees have strong affective ties with the company. Then commitment gets sometimes features of vocation. Alienative commitment will last a short time and it is to be seen in conflict situations.

The harmony between the occupational image and the contents of work causes commitment. The employee finds customer service as his/her strength. Although the contents of work include negative features (low salaries, strong work, pressure and busy work), those factors are stronger, which

commit an employee to the organization (satisfied with customer service work, interesting and variable work and nice fellow employees).

The employees experienced that managers emphasized the importance of customer relationships, but they were sometimes too distant from practical interactions with customers. Both managers and employees believed that employees have skills and competence enough to meet customers.

Conclusions

Factors, which strengthen or weaken commitment are often connected with other people. This is illustrated in the figure 3, 'People committing each others'. There are two 'circles', which touch each others.

There are many kinds of relations between customers and an employee, although the work is mainly quite routine. Co-operation between employees must be good. They need each others in solving daily problems with customers. Sometimes they need help from employees of other product groups or maybe from other departments, too (the greater 'circle' 1). There must not be thresholds between departments and product groups. The community spirit is not only the thing of nearest employees, but also the thing of departments and the hole firm. In the work also the support of the shop manager is important, his/her physical presence in the shop, when thinking of customer relationships (circle 2).

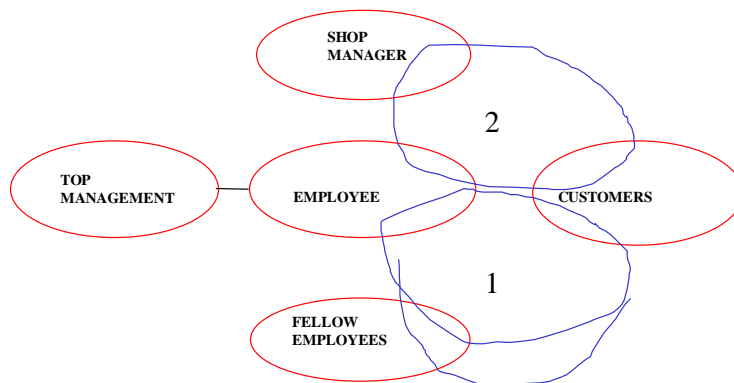


Figure 3. People committing each others.

The top management is to be seen quite distant thinking of daily work. The communication with it is formal and based mainly on written information. This is an important area of development in the future. The top management and shop managers pay attention to the development of customer relationships and customers' commitment. It is essential that the top management and shop managers try also to learn to recognize more accurately elements of commitment of employees as well, especially those concerning the quality of interactions between employees, and between employees and shop managers. This is important, if they accept the idea that the high level commitment of employees may be parallel with the level of commitment of customers.

Limitations and future research

The study was implemented using so called theme individual/group interviews. The aim was to get deeper information from research persons (managers, employees). Some of themes were sensitive in nature, but research persons answered quite openly using also critical statements. Discussions were confidential and implemented by the author, which is a very important prerequisite of the qualitative research process, because the stage of analyse begins in the stage of interview. In interviews research persons used concepts, which were to be connected to corresponding theoretical concepts. For example different features of commitment were described carefully. Theories of commitment give good tools for analyzing also internal marketing and customer relationships.

The case study has some limitations thinking of generalization. I think, however, that main results of this study are valid for business area of perishable goods.

This study did not cover the opinions of customers, only opinions of managers and employees about customers. The real loyalty, trust or commitment of customers were not the aim of the study. The statistical data, the former market researches and other measurements tell, that the loyalty and commitment of customers have increased in the firm.

A problem in the future business is how to commit young employees. What are means for that?

The next research would reach to the opinions of customers about their motives and factors of commitment. What kind is a customer, who is committed to a certain firm? The aim would be to create a model or description of the really committed customer and her/his behaviour. This kind of study might give also scientific contribution and more holistic understanding of the chain: Marketing orientation of management and their success in internal marketing - Commitment of employees - Commitment of customers.

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