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Abstract

Long-term customer relationships are becoming very important to several companies. Especially companies operating in business-to-business markets have acknowledged the benefits that can be gained from long customer relationships. In business-to-business marketing the importance of close long-term customer relationships is larger than in consumer marketing. As buyers operating in b-to-b markets make the purchases in order to achieve organizational objectives, they are generally interested in the value that can be generated with the equipment rather than only its features. For example support services can be used to increase this value. Support services were chosen to be the element with which to b-to-b relationships are discussed as it has transpired from the literature, that the role of support services is becoming increasingly important in b-to-b marketing.

The aspects of relationships receiving most interest in this study are the establishment and development of relationships. The research problem of this study is:

- *How can support services be used to enhance customer relationships?*

The research problem is divided into two sub-problems:

- *How can support services be used in creating new customer relationships?*
- *How can support services be used in developing existing customer relationships?*

The development of a relationship was discussed using a development stages model. The effect of support services offered by the supplier on the customer relationship was discussed using concepts of customer value, customer satisfaction, and customer commitment.

The theoretical framework was empirically tested by applying it to high-technology b-to-b marketing context. The empirical research was conducted as a qualitative research by interviewing six representatives of partners of the case company. The case company in this study was Nordic ID, a Finnish supplier of handheld devices used in wireless automated data capture.

On the basis of the research support services were generally found important and very useful in creating value for the customer before the purchase, and thus they can effectively be used in creating new customer relationships at least in this industry branch. The results also indicate that relationships develop over time and that the perceived importance of support services is even bigger after the purchase. Furthermore, customer relationships can to some degree be systematically developed by using support services. However, besides the support services also other factors are needed to do this. These factors are social exchange between individuals, information exchange, mutual trust, and long term mutual commitment.

Key words	Business-to-business marketing, customer relationship, development, support services
Further information	