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RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN REAL ESTATE COMPANIES

Literature
Review

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Abstract

Customer loyalty is becoming a topic of interest which is winning increasingly more importance lately, as a result of the focus of marketing research on business relationships. One of the most important factors that determine customer loyalty is Service Quality. The stage of qualitative research consists of analyzing the research literature from this domain, which highlights the Relationship Quality construct as a distinct dimension, relevant for the real estate field. The summary of the main models of relationship quality indicate the most commonly used variables to describe this construct. The stage of quantitative research aims at testing the proportion of content validity for the most commonly used variables. The results describe an estimation of the dimensions of the Relationship Quality construct for the case of real estate services.

Introduction

Real Estate Marketing is the organizational process that deals with identifying, anticipating and profitably satisfying customer requirements while trade real estate properties. The real estate market is the main economic and social mechanism through which the activities of operators are guided. It represents a complex system where demand interacts with supply and they are mutually conditioned. The real estate market represents all transactions that involve right of ownership or use on lands and buildings. A real estate transaction consists of a permanent or temporary transfer of a right from one party to the other in return for a compensation which is usually an amount of money.

Due to the specific nature of real estate field, the transfer of property or its use does not involve the actual transfer of the good. Every sold or bought building is different from others by positioning, composition, infrastructure etc. The fact that each building is unique causes the great complexity of this market and leads to its segmentation according to areas and the purpose for which the immobile will be used. Therefore, the estate agents' communication skills are important aspects that contribute to establishing a long-term link that leads to creating customer loyalty toward the real estate agency's staff.

In the context of marketing field, the research done on the real estate field analyzes customer loyalty in terms of service quality offered to them (Johnson, Dotson and Dunlap, 1988; Nelson and Nelson, 1995; Tuzovic, 2009). Thus, the so called "real estate service quality" (RESERV) was developed, which is a version of SERVQUAL scale. It is designed for real estate domain and it contains 31 items in seven dimensions. Other articles analyze the customer loyalty as renters or buyers. The results of this research show that buyers' loyalty turned out to be more solid than the loyalty shown by the clients who rent properties and it is an important factor that contributes to providing quality services in real estate domain.

Loyalty – the key outcome for Service Quality

Customer loyalty is a decisive factor in increasing business competitiveness (Gremler and Brown, 1999) and also one of the most common marketing initiatives implemented by practitioners (Kumar and Shah, 2004). The main objective of relationship marketing is the establishment and the maintenance of customer relationships for a longer period of time as this is possible by keeping them faithful to the company. Loyalty has a central place in relationship marketing literature. Loyalty is the main objective of relationship marketing and, in some cases, it is even equivalent to this concept (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002).

The importance and the benefits of attracting and keeping loyal customers are highlighted due to the general acceptance of the fact that loyalty generates profitability (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). The economic value of customer loyalty has been discussed by Jones and Sasser (1995). Therefore, a full understanding of the concept of loyalty underlines the need for a value balance between customers and the company and the opportunity of developing customer loyalty as a long-term investment.

Loyalty is defined as a complex construction that incorporates behavioral and psychological (attitudinal) components (Dick and Basu, 1994; Bennett et al., 2006; Filip, 2009). An accurate picture of the term involves considering both service provider's perspective and the one of the buyer. For the service provider, loyalty is a set of consecutive transactions, namely an exchange of information, money or goods accompanied by a positive atmosphere within the business relationship. In the case of the buyer, loyalty involves a positive attitude towards the provider combined with the willingness to develop transactions in the future.

From a company's perspective, the process of gaining customer loyalty is explained by the fact that keeping a customer is more profitable than earning a new one, because: (1) the cost of serving loyal customers is lower, (2) loyal customers are less price sensitive and (3), loyal customers spend more money with the company (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Dowling and Uncle, 1997). Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) state that a little growing in the number of loyal clients can be translated as a major increase in efficacy. Also, in the case of services, Pullman and Gross (2004) believe that the fact of gaining loyal customers is the key to success in a business.

From the client's perspective most customers are willing to invest their loyalty in businesses that can offer superior value compared to what competitors propose to them (Caceres and Papatoidamis, 2005). Similarly, Yang and Peterson (2004) state that there is a trend in customer behavior to avoid searching, locating, and assessing purchase alternatives, a fact that predisposes to a loyal behavior. When they become faithful, clients tend to avoid such time-consuming and effort-consuming activities to get accustomed to new providers.

Finally, relationship marketing activities are assessed depending on the profitability obtained by the company. However, many variables enter profit calculation, that do not relate to marketing activities. Under these circumstances, it is more appropriate to obtain the assessment of the marketing activity results at a more concrete level, by studying their potential determinants.

Behaviors and attitudes that underlie loyalty are changing over time due to some factors' actions.

They can have either positive or negative effects on loyalty, depending on their importance and their frequency with which they occur. The effects of these factors can lead to beneficial results through cooperation between companies in order to achieve mutual objectives, by developing and enhancing the relationship, by sending favorable recommendations to other potential customers or by establishing a solid business through additional service purchase. For a service provider company, providing quality services is regarded as an essential strategy for success in the competitive business environment of today (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra, 2005;).

In the research literature of service marketing the subject of defining and the measurement of *Service Quality* construct is a disputed subject because of its complexity. (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2005).

As services are intangible, the consumers' assessment of quality is subjective. Thus, researchers refer to quality service using the term "elusive" (Parasuraman, 1998; Smith, 1999), and the conclusions of the studies written about this concept agree that this subject may be developed in future research. (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2005). The first definitions of the concept of *Service Quality* are related to the so-called "disclosure paradigm". *Service Quality* perceived by clients may be appreciated as the difference between what clients think they should obtain and the efficiency of the service execution that the company gives to them. (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Malhotra, 2005). The dimensions of services are the following: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibility. Another definition for *Service Quality* concept surprises the dissimilarity between "received service" and "expected service" (Grönroos C., 1990).

Grönroos, considers two dimensions for *Service Quality* concept: technical and functional. If the technical part makes reference to the service itself or to the final outcome of a service, the functional part is also important because it makes reference to the way the service is provided: professionally, in time, with attention. The model developed by Grönroos states that a customer is not only interested in what he receives as a result of a commercial activity, but in the activity itself as well. The way a service is perceived is the result of how a customer sees these dimensions: technical and functional. The perceived quality of a service is the result of the perception of a service and the expectations desired from that service.

Another model developed for measuring *Service Quality* is SERVQUAL. This scale was very disputed by: Caraman (1990) Babakus and Boller (1992) Brown et al. (1993), Cronin and Taylor (1992, 1994) Teas, (1993, 1994), Smith

(1999). (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2005) These debates cover both conceptual issues and methodological limitations. The main controversial aspect refers to the fact that the scale used the same starting point of developing as the satisfaction scale. The researchers who developed SERVQUAL scale considered it as an attitudinal model. This view becomes questionable when *Service Quality* is perceived by clients as the difference between what clients think they should obtain and the efficiency of the service execution that the company gives to them.

From an empirical perspective, Carman (1990) showed that the five SERVQUAL dimensions cannot be generalized to any type of activity, but they should be adapted to the specificities of each activity. There are also another studies that consider more than five variables for describing the construct of *Service Quality* (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2005). Caraman also refers to the value of the measurements made in the case where customers have exaggerated expectations. This tendency is noticed after negative experiences with a certain service provider, compared to those who had positive experiences and had lesser expectations from them. The researcher Smith (1999) showed that in the case of regularly provided services (such as telephone services), clients assess service quality only depending on performance.

The model developed by Caceres and Paparoidamis (2005) presents two aspects of *Service Quality* (technical and functional) as a form of five dimensions. (See Figure No. 1) Thus, variable *Advertising Campaign* captures the technical aspect of *Service Quality* and *Commercial Service*, *Administrative Service*, and *Communication* highlights the functional part.

The literature that analyzes the relational factors that influence loyalty in the service sector, the construct of *Service Quality* is a dimension of the *Relationship Quality* construct (Rauyruen and Miller, 2006; Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2005).

The Concept of Relationship Quality

The concept of business *Relationship Quality* has emerged as a must in relationship marketing theory (Crosby and Lawrence, 1991). The final result of relationship marketing activities consists of strengthening existing relationships and gaining customer loyalty (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Previous researches on business *Relationship Quality* (Crosby and Lawrence, 1991; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002; Kumar and Shah, 2004; Storbaka, Strandvik and Grönroos, 1994) addressed and tested this concept in different research contexts. Thus, defining and operationalizing the *Relationship Quality* is different and depends on the field of research. However, the authors agree that the concept of

Relationship Quality is a superior complex construct made of several distinct but interlinked components or dimensions. These dimensions are: opportunism (Dwyer and Oh, 1987), customer orientation (Kumar and Shah, 2004), seller trust (Crosby and Lawrence, 1991; Dorsch et al., 1998), trust (Dorsch et al., 1998; Grönroos C., 1990; Henning-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Kumar and Shah, 2004), satisfaction (Crosby and Lawrence, 1991; Ennew and Binks, 2005), commitment (Dorsch et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997 ; Kumar et al., 1995) and perceived quality (Hennig-Thurau and Klee 1997, Rauyruen, Miller and Barrett, 2007).

As a critical measure of organizational performance, *Relationship Quality* is a topic of interest approached in marketing literature, in general, and also in service marketing in particular (Kumar and Shah, 2004). The authors Rauyruen, Miller and Barrett (2007) consider the *Relationship Quality* construct as consisting of four different, but related dimensions: *perceived service quality*, *commitment*, *trust* and *satisfaction*. These four dimensions were selected based on the literature and are deemed to be appropriate in the context of service markets. Several researchers, based on empirical researches, found that *trust*, *commitment* and *satisfaction* are the basic components that make up the *Relationship Quality* construct (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002; Ennew and Binks, 2005). While a large number of dimensions of *Relationship Quality* have been proposed, most commonly studied are the variables of *Trust*, *Commitment* and *Satisfaction* (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002).

Practitioners and theorists are willing to measure *Service Quality* in order to understand better its antecedents and consequences and finally they will identify ways to improve quality, in order to gain a competitive advantage and build customer loyalty (Storbaka, Strandvik and Grönroos, 1994). A number of *Service Quality* models have developed in the literature. Table 1 presents a summary of studies on *Relationship Quality*, underlining the factors that are influencing it, in the case of services.

Methodology

The first stage for the study of loyalty in real estate services consists of a documentary research. In the first part of this article a review of the research literature in the field of relationship marketing and of service marketing from the perspective of the influence of *quality* construct on loyalty was made. In the literature that analyzes the relational factors that influence Loyalty in the service sector, the *Service Quality* construct is a dimension of the *Relationship Quality* construct (Rauyruen and Miller, 2006; Caceres and Pappardamis, 2005).

A synthesis of the factors that comprise the *Relationship Quality* quality is shown in Table. No. 1. The next step is to set up a meeting with a number of 10 experts from the real estate field. Initially, they are informed about the results of the documentary research and, after that, they are asked for their opinion about the variables that comprise the *Relationship Quality* construct in the case of real estate services. Because the peculiarity of real estate agents' activity primarily involves strengthening close relationships with the clients, the authors considered that it was necessary to approach this subject in a distinct stage. In order to ensure an information categorization and also a starting base, a quantitative research was initiated at this stage.

The analysis of the examined data from the literature reveals that the variables *Trust* (20%), *Satisfaction* (16%) *Commitment* (14%) and *Perceived/Overall Service Quality* (14%) are found in most models and register high frequencies of appearance. Therefore, these dimensions can describe the *Relationship Quality* construct. This analysis is a statistical one and has a descriptive role. In order to obtain a more specific capture of the construct's dimensions, in the case of real estate field, additional validations, that will be obtained from real-estate professionals, will be used.

The role of this quantitative research stage is to provide an additional validity of the one obtained from the literature, in order to develop a customer loyalty model of real estate agencies. Validity represents the extent to which a construct measures what it wants to measure (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). The reason for choosing this stage, that is developed in this article, may be argued by the diversity of the methodologies presented in the literature. Thus, the literature may be shared among authors who consider that the validity of a construct must have a theoretical ground and other authors who argue in favour of empirical testing (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, and Roth, 2008; Jarvis, 2003). Diamantopoulos (2008) and Jarvis (2003) believe that the empirical analysis provides an important basis for the content validity, especially for detecting errors, incorrect specifications or wrong theories. Thus, in order to test the validity in this paper, the methodology proposed by Lawshe (1975) was used in addition to the theoretical justification for the development of the research instrument.

According to the specifications of Rungtusanatham (1998), who presents the method proposed by Lawshe (1975), a panel of experts has to decide on the relevance of the variables that measure a certain construct. In our case, we chose only the variables presented in Figure no. 1, which can be found in several models. The experts have the following options for an answer: "1 = Irrelevant", "2 = Important, but not essential" and "3 = Essential".

According to Lawshe's methodology (1975) it is necessary to calculate a PVC indicator that takes into account answers given by experts, in order to calculate the proportion of content validity.

The formula of PVC indicator is: $PVC=(n-I)/N$, where

n - the number of experts who have chosen "Essential" or "Important, but not essential";

I - the number of experts who have chosen "Irrelevant";

N - the total number of experts.

Thus, if the number of experts who are in favor of an item that they marked as "essential" or "important" is high, the conclusion is that the content validity is of a greater proportion. According to the formula, we will have a negative indicator when less than 50% of the experts mark "Essential" or "Important". A zero value for the indicator means that 50% of them will check "Irrelevant". For a number of 10 experts, the significance level of this indicator is 0.62.

Thus, in Table no. 2, a positive assessment on the variables *Trust*, *Satisfaction* and *Commitment* is observed. These dimensions were considered by the specialists in the field to be relevant for the measurement of the Service Quality offered by real estate agents to clients who purchase or rent a property. The ability to adjust their offer to the particular conditions of each property, the willingness of the real estate company's staff and the atmosphere or the general environment in which a service is provided, represent other aspects that also contribute to the description of the *Relationship Quality* construct.

Conclusions

This article consists of two parts: the documentary research on the *Service Quality* construct and a brief quantitative research which has a descriptive role on the analyzed literature and an informative one on the peculiarities of the real estate field. The results of the literature analysis indicate that in the case of real estate services there is a low number of papers which analyze the service quality as a factor which determines loyalty. The analysis of the *Service Quality* construct revealed a specific dimension which is approached as a distinct construct in most articles: *Relationship Quality*. Thus, the approach initiated in this article consists of analyzing the models developed in the literature for the *Relationship Quality* construct and then, based on this data, the Romanian real estate professionals' opinion in regard to the dimensions found in the literature, and which can be put together to describe the *Relationship Quality* construct, in the case of real estate services, was surveyed.

The results of the research synthesized in the values registered by the PVC indicator show that only the variables *Trust*, *Satisfaction* and *Commitment* are

located, in terms of value, above the statistical significance level. This is also confirmed by the results achieved in the first stage of research: descriptive statistics.

Because this stage is just a first research approach on the dimensions that can describe the *Relationship Quality* construct for the real estate field, the authors also believe that the variables which have values located just below the level of significance are important and will be analyzed in a further research: *Adaptation*, *Willingness*, *Atmosphere*.

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Tables

Table No.1
The dimensions of the Relationship Quality

Authors	Dimensions	Definition
Dwyer and Oh, 1987	<i>Satisfaction, Trust and Opportunism</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is reflected in the satisfaction and confidence intended for a business partner and in a low degree of opportunism
Crosby and Lawrence (1991)	<i>Trust, Satisfaction</i>	A high level of <i>Relationship Quality</i> means that the client is able to rely on the integrity of his business partner and has confidence in his future performances, because the previous performance level was always satisfactory
Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, (1995)	<i>Conflict, Trust, Commitment, Desire to invest in the relationship and continuity</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is the result of the following constructs: conflict, trust, commitment, desire to invest in the relationship and continuity
(Henning-Thurau and Klee, 1997)	<i>The perceived quality of services, Trust, Commitment</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> can be generally seen as the adequacy level of a relationship in meeting customer needs
Roberts, Varky, and Brodie (2003)	<i>Integrity trust, Willingness trust, Commitment, Emotional conflict and Satisfaction</i>	Integrity trust, willingness trust, commitment, emotional conflict and satisfaction contribute to building <i>Relationship Quality</i>
Beloucif et al. (2004)	<i>Trust, Satisfaction, Commitment</i>	The relationship quality is defined by these dimensions.
Woo and Ennew, (2004)	<i>Cooperation, Adaptation, Atmosphere</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is an overall assessment of the relationship between buyer and seller and focuses on identifying the construct
Bell, Auh, and Smalley (2005)	<i>Functional quality and Technical quality of services</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is defined by the functional quality and technical quality of services
Caceres and Paparoidamis (2005)	<i>Trust, Satisfaction, Commitment</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is defined by trust, satisfaction and commitment. These, along with service quality, influence loyalty.
Rauyruen, Miller, and Barrett (2007)	<i>The perceived quality of services, Trust, Commitment, Satisfaction</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> includes the following different dimensions that mutually influence each other: the perceived quality of services, trust, commitment, satisfaction
Tuzovic (2009)	<i>Quality of the virtual service environment, Quality of the physical service environment, Process-based quality, Overall Quality, Satisfaction, Customer intentions to recommend</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> consists of four components that influence customer satisfaction. The outcome of this process is represented by the customers' intentions to recommend the service provider.
Cater and Cater, (2010)	<i>Product quality, Know-how, Cooperation, Adaptation, Trust</i>	The <i>Relationship Quality</i> is defined by these dimensions and its effect on behavioral and attitudinal Loyalty is mediated by the following types of commitment: emotional, positive, negative and normative.

Note adapted from

Table No.2
 PVC Values- Lawshe Test

Variable	PVC
Trust	1
Satisfaction	0,7
Commitment	0,7
Conflict/Emotional Conflict	0,1
Adaptation	0,5
Willingness	0,4
Cooperation	0,2
Perceived service quality	0,2
Atmosphere	0,3
Others	0,2

Note authors' calculations

Figures

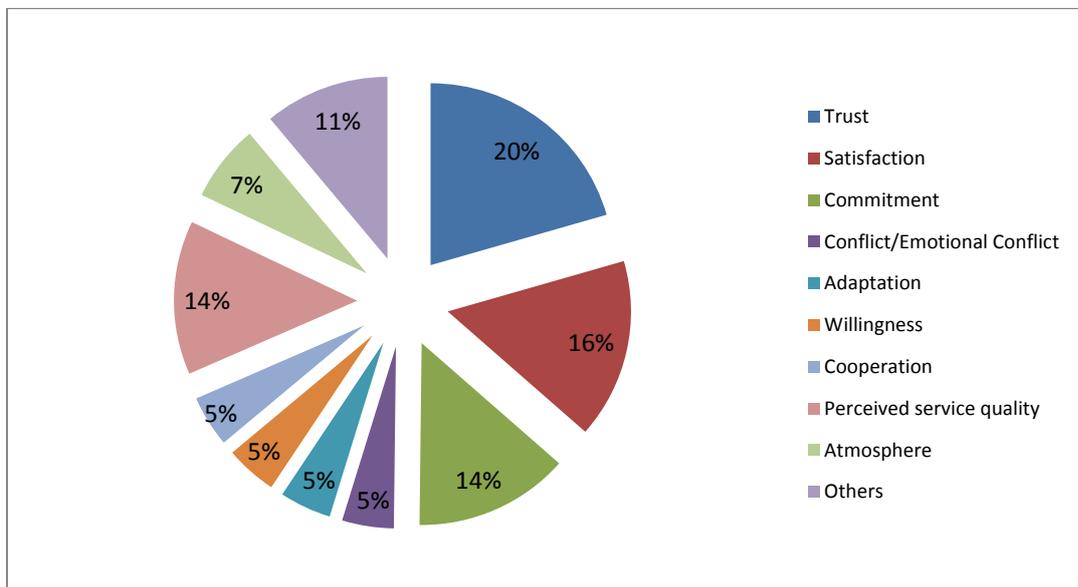


Figure No. 1 Relationship Quality Dimensions-Real Estate