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THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

I. Kahraman Arslan

Istanbul Commerce University, Turkey

Email:karslan@ticaret.edu.tr

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Abstract

In today's competitive environment, where products and services have more and more similar features, and consumer demands and expectations are constantly changing and increasing, increasing the customer satisfaction in the marketing process and thus creating loyal customers have become the primary objectives of the businesses. In an environment where acquiring new customers is much more costly than holding customers at hand, the fact that businesses have loyal customers is a very important factor in terms of business continuity. Improving customer loyalty is possible by establishing strong long-term relationships between the business and the customer. These relationships with the customer can increase the order frequency and quantity of the customer from the business, provide economic benefits to the business, and recommend new businesses and products to the surrounding people, and gain new customers at less cost. The purpose of this research is to reveal the importance of creating customer loyalty in businesses, to determine the factors effective in creating customer loyalty, and to contribute to the strategy formation of the enterprises. For this purpose, the relationship between the value offered to the customer and customer satisfaction in terms of creating customer loyalty has been examined through the literature review method, which is one of the qualitative research methods. For this purpose, it has been concluded that using customer loyalty programs as an effective marketing technique and using relationship marketing method to develop a long-term and loyalty-based relationship with customers is an important factor.

Keywords: Customer, Competition, Customer Loyalty, Complaint

1.Introduction

Customer loyalty is characterized as a brand or company commitment. According to another definition customer loyalty is to what extent the consumer resists all competitive effects and how determined the business is in using its products and services (Villas-Boas, 2004). Customer loyalty is evaluated as the customer is satisfied with the products offered by the company, forming a long-term trust-based relationship with the company, making repeated purchases and promoting the business and its products to its community.

There are many studies in the literature on customer loyalty. In this context, Chiou and Cornelia (2002) stress the importance of perceived service quality, satisfaction, and trust in

creating customer loyalty. In addition to the service quality, the price of the product is effective in creating customer loyalty and the cost of switching to competitor has proven to be important in building customer loyalty (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). In the same direction, Lam *et al.* (2004) consider the value perceived by the customer, customer satisfaction and the cost of switching to a competitor as the basic elements in creating customer loyalty.

Today, the definition of the customer is redefined as "more free, more participative and more valuable" (Alabay, 2012). It does not seem possible to retain customers only by expanding the product range and increasing service quality. Acquiring new customers is more expensive than holding a loyal customer. On the other hand, it is seen that successful businesses place more emphasis on customer relations and strive to create customer loyalty in order to gain competitive advantage by differentiating themselves from their competitors. For this purpose, businesses tend to adopt a variety of strategies to realize customers' desires, wishes and needs, and improve service quality and customer satisfaction. For this reason, in order to better understand the concept of customer loyalty by the enterprises, academic research on this subject is of great importance. In most of the developing countries like Turkey, which is believed to be dominated by the traditional marketing concept, it is thought that this work is important in terms of raising awareness (Alabay, 2012).

By considering these factors, this study tries to draw attention to the importance of creating customer loyalty and possible gains in terms of business or brand. In most of the developing countries like Turkey, which is believed to be dominated by the traditional marketing concept, it is thought that this work is important in terms of raising awareness.

2. The concept and importance of customer loyalty

Loyalty is defined as the frequency of being a customer of a product or service, constantly choosing the same goods and services or company (Zeithalm *et al.* 1996). Loyalty includes the attitude of repurchasing the product or service in the future, renewing the agreement and choosing the same product or service provider (Selnes, 1993).

Customer loyalty refers to the tendency of customers to become repeat customers based on their past experiences and future expectations. A business successful in customer loyalty management attracts customers (Bell and Bell, 2004). Therefore, customer loyalty is one of the current and future success indicators of businesses. Customer loyalty provides long-term economic benefits to companies by improving their customer relationships and allowing new customers to be gained at a lower cost.

Customer loyalty is one of the most important goals that businesses desire to achieve. Loyal customers can be an economic source of income for companies as well as affecting people around them with their advice and incentives, enabling the business to gain new customers at less cost. Therefore, establishing customer loyalty provides a great competitive advantage, customer losses are prevented, revenue streams are secured and new customers are easier to reach.

Customers want to trust the business they share value with, know that their employees are interested in them, and do not want to encounter oppressive sales or hidden costs (Geller, 2003). As the customers become more conscious, they evaluate the adequacy and benefits of the business and this evaluation increases the trust expectations of the customers. When customers become distrustful, there exists a departure from the business regardless of the size or order of the business. By transforming customer satisfaction into loyalty, the customer repurchases from the business increases and it is possible to pay higher prices for their products. They also recommend the company to their surroundings. Thus, it brings new cost-effective customers to the company (Fecikova, 2004).

3. Types of customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is defined in several ways. Basically, loyalty types are described as single-brand loyalty, split loyalty, and weak loyalty or disloyalty (Uncles *et al.* 2002). Single brand loyalty is a type of loyalty where the consumer has a strong positive attitude and belief towards

a single brand. The fact that the psychological and social values of certain products and brands override their functional values (car, perfume) or take place among the basic issues determining the life of the individual may result in loyalty to a single brand.

Split loyalty represents behavioral loyalty to several brands in any product group, with the effect of their usual buying behavior and buying experiences. In certain products and brands, consumers tend to show loyalty to several brands due to factors such as not being able to perceive differences between brands or constant new entrances into the market. The resemblance of brand attributes and loyalty programs lead to this result. Weak loyalty or disloyalty is the form of loyalty resulting from the desire of consumers to use various opportunities and make changes. In certain products and brands, consumers may have weak attitudes towards brands due to the urgent need to use them, price reductions or promotional practices. Such attitudes negatively affect brand loyalty.

In another study conducted by considering the attitudes and behavior dimensions of customers, the types of loyalty are listed as loyalty, latent loyalty, spurious loyalty, and no loyalty. Customers' highly positive attitude and repeated purchasing behavior is loyalty; low fidelity of purchasing behavior despite high level of positive attitude is latent loyalty; despite the low level of positive attitude, having frequent purchasing behavior is spurious loyalty; in the case of weak attitude and sparse purchasing behavior, it is stated that the type of no loyalty has emerged (Hirschman, 1970).

When customer loyalty is handled at different levels; cognitive, affective, conative and actionable loyalty types are described. Cognitive loyalty arises when the business or its products are superior to other business or products. Affective loyalty emerges as individuals are satisfied with the purchase decision process. Conative loyalty emerges after the affective loyalty is one step after the individual declares its intention to re-purchase the product satisfied with. Actionable loyalty is formed by the presence of an effective desire to prevent situational factors and competitive efforts that can lead to behavioral change. When it comes to the level of actionable loyalty, the consumer will reach a certain commitment to repurchase the business' products and can isolate itself from the possible effects of other businesses and their brands. Building loyalty at the level of action depends on the existence of various conditions. These:

- The product should be perceived to be superior to competing products.
- The product should be a big admiration.
- The product must have the ability to enter a social formation.
- The business must be willing to make an effort to create its customer portfolio (Sorce, 2002).

In many product classes, it is difficult to achieve loyalty at the action level due to the absence of the mentioned conditions. Therefore, the strategies that businesses operating in different sectors and sub-sectors can follow to create customer loyalty are different from each other. In a study by Costabile (2000), different levels of customer loyalty and stages between these levels were revealed.

According to Costabile (2000), customer loyalty can be classified as behavioral loyalty, mental loyalty and customer loyalty. The consumer, who is satisfied with the purchasing behavior of business and starts to trust the business, reaches a behavioral loyalty level if he enters the repeat purchase behavior. After this level, it reaches the level of mental loyalty as a result of the consumer's comparison of the product offered by the business with other products and deciding that the product he is purchasing is "the best" for him. After this stage, the consumer analyzes the relationships he has established with the business that he buys his products, and determines what this relationship has earned or lost him. The positive decision of the consumer after analyzing the customer-business relationship enables the individual to reach the level of customer loyalty (Costabile, 2000).

As a result of research conducted by McKinsey research company in 1200 households on customer loyalty types, three different types of customers were identified in terms of loyalty. These are emotive loyalists, inertial loyalists and deliberative loyalists (Sorce, 2002). Emotive

loyalists make up the most loyal group. Emotive loyalists think that the product or brand they prefer is the best option for them and therefore, they do not go for a re-evaluation of their purchasing processes. The inertial loyalists prefer the products they are used to without any evaluation. Deliberative loyalists prefer that product as long as the products they prefer to remain the best option for them. In this group, they determine their preferences by following the rational processes and constantly evaluate their purchasing processes in the light of new products, knowledge, and experiences.

4. Elements determining customer loyalty formation

Customer value and customer satisfaction are the primary factors that determine the formation of customer loyalty. Customer value is about what customers want and what they get after purchasing and using the product. It has been determined that the value perceived by the customer is more effective than customer satisfaction in the post-purchase behavior of the customer. However, the satisfaction of a customer after the purchase experience does not always guarantee that the customer will prefer its products. At this point, customer satisfaction emerges as a sub-goal that the company has to realize in order to reach its goal (Tam, 2004). This result supports the fact that satisfaction is insufficient in providing customer loyalty alone, besides satisfaction, an emotional bond should be established with the customer. Because although the customer thinks that he is satisfied with the evaluation he made after the purchase, the value he perceives may be low. Therefore, in order to keep the perceived value high, the companies should either decrease the price of the product or decrease the expectations of the customer.

Perceiving the value as "low value" by the customer may cause loss of the customer. The second factor that determines the formation of customer loyalty is customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is about the consumers' purchase of the goods or services that meet their expectations. Customer satisfaction arises as a result of the valuation of all elements involved in the purchasing process. It represents the level of customer satisfaction level and customer loyalty to the company. Customer satisfaction should be at the highest level in order to increase the level of customer loyalty. Disloyal customers can be expressed as customers who do not have a commitment and repurchase purpose for a particular product or service (Zhang *et al.* 2003).

Many factors determine customer loyalty formation such as customer satisfaction, service quality, market share, customer value, and replacement cost. The most important factor that determines customer loyalty is customer value and trust. Trust has a direct impact on customer loyalty and has an indirect effect on replacement costs. The effect of replacement cost is important after the trust component. The effect of service quality comes in third place. In addition, the trust component has more impact on replacement cost compared to service quality (Aydin and Ozer, 2005).

One of the factors that determine customer loyalty is market share. Because the perceived risk of products with high market share is low. However, it has been revealed that the market share of the enterprise or its products is insufficient in forming loyalty alone (Dahaner *et al.* 2003). The most important factor in customer loyalty in service businesses is the service provider. Loyalty to the service providers is accompanied by loyalty to the service company. When considered from this point of view, it is possible to list the customer loyalty components in a service enterprise as trust in the service personnel, the helpfulness of the service personnel and the commitment to the service personnel.

Considering these components, two types of customer loyalty can be mentioned in service companies. These are personal loyalty and corporate loyalty. In service businesses, loyalty to individuals providing service is personal loyalty, and loyalty to service business is corporate loyalty. Personal loyalty contributes significantly to the formation of corporate loyalty. Personal loyalty increases employee satisfaction and organizational commitment. Personal loyalty raises the quality of service. Personal loyalty initiates the word-of-mouth communication process, enabling personal loyalty to become business loyalty. Besides these benefits, personal

loyalty is ahead of corporate loyalty. For example, the rate of corporate loyalty may decrease when the personnel providing services leaves the company (Yurdakul, 2015).

Considering that a large part of the dissatisfied customers will not come again, it can be said that the most important job of a business is to provide and improve customer satisfaction in a positive way. In addition, people are open to listening to other people's opinions about a particular product, and each customer tends to spread his bad or good experience (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006). If a customer is loyal, the order will be non-randomly placed. From this point of view, the main objectives of loyalty strategies are building loyalty, performance measurement and having a high market share.

5. The effect of customer satisfaction in creating customer loyalty

Customer loyalty; the value offered to the customer develops depending on factors such as product quality and customer satisfaction. Therefore, customer satisfaction is an element that increases customer loyalty. Customer loyalty requires ensuring customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. Providing and increasing customer satisfaction is possible with customer orientation.

Ensuring customer loyalty is possible by satisfying all the needs of customers before and after sales, preventing customer dissatisfaction by correcting the defects related to the product or service offered, and managing the complaints in this direction correctly and effectively (Lee and Cunningham, 2001). As customers' satisfaction with the company increases, their loyalty, intention to repurchase the products and loyalty levels increase (Anderson *et al.* 1994).

Often it is difficult for the customer to change the company where he buys the product. If customers are satisfied with the business or product brand from which they purchased the product, they may wish to continue their relationship in the future as a result of this satisfaction. The willingness to be the same in the long term is called loyalty. Loyal customers are the lowest cost and most profitable customer group for the business (Phau and Sari, 2004).

Businesses are trying to develop their existing customer retention strategies and turn these customers into loyal customers in order to sustain their lives and increase their profits. Loyal customers are an important profit tool for businesses. Businesses know that acquiring new customers is 5 or 6 times more expensive than retaining existing customers. For this reason, they try to provide perfect and high-quality products and services in order to turn their customers into loyal customers (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006). The image of the business and the trust in the business also have important effects on customer loyalty.

The main result of customer satisfaction is customer loyalty. Loyal customers are among the most important factors that increase business profitability. According to Wreden (2005), who works on the effect of "unhappy customer" or "dissatisfied customer", "unhappy customer that can not be kept" is one of the most important threats for the business. Because "happy customer" expresses this satisfaction to an average of 4-5 people, while "dissatisfied" share this issue with an average of 8-10 people. Especially in the internet environment, bad news spreads 2 times faster than good news (Sener and Behdioglu, 2013). Customer satisfaction can be based on quality, product delivery speed and reliability, flexibility, costs, competitive capabilities, product mix, and customer service. Customers with a high level of satisfaction are more loyal to the business.

Customer satisfaction has an impact on business profitability as it enables brand loyalty and higher rates for the business (Fecikova, 2004). Also, satisfied customers can recommend the business and / or products to those around them. In case of dissatisfaction, they can prevent new customers from coming to the business by explaining their criticism and complaints to those around them when switching to competitors. Therefore, the level of customer satisfaction affects the attitudes of non-customers and can increase the market share of the business. As a result, increased customer satisfaction leads to increased sales, lower costs and thus increased profits. Strong relationships between the customer and the business protect the business from factors that can cause customer dissatisfaction. Satisfied customers are able to

compensate for any disruption and maintain their loyalty to the business as they have confidence and tolerance towards the business (Yeung and Ennew, 2000).

6. The effect of customer complaints in creating customer loyalty

It is very important to meet customer expectations for increasing customer satisfaction. The main reason behind the demand for goods and services by consumers is the idea of getting the benefit. Consumers who feel that they are not benefiting from the goods and services they buy can show their dissatisfaction in several ways. These are; verbally indicating the discomfort, not going back to that business, complaining to the business, applying to corporate units that protect consumers or preferring the same business. Firms either change the product, return the price or apologize based on the complaints of consumers. However, sometimes it is difficult to know customer expectations unless customers want to provide feedback. Customer complaints are at the top of customer feedback. In this regard, complaints should be seen as the most meaningful and important source of feedback to increase customer satisfaction (Heung and Lam, 2003).

The complaint is defined as the negative feedback of the customer (Bell and Bell, 2004). The failure of a business to meet the expectations of the purchaser of the goods and services indicates the beginning of the complaint. Satisfaction or failure to meet expectations; it may have occurred in all marketing mix elements such as product, price, distribution, promotion, people, process and physical environment. Today, the resolution of customer complaints has become a huge economy. Customer satisfaction or reduction of customer complaints and effective complaint management lay behind the fact that customers come to the business at regular intervals and shop more frequently from them (Lapre and Tsikriktsis, 2006).

The main goal of businesses is to ensure that customers are satisfied after trying the product. However, it is possible for businesses to receive complaints despite their hard work to satisfy their customers. In this case, managing the complaints correctly is as important as ensuring customer satisfaction. It was determined that approximately 96% of dissatisfied customers did not complain and tried other ways to leave the business (Kim *et al.* 2007). The customer who complains is the customer who has not left the business yet and will decide whether to leave the business according to the solution of his complaint. This is an opportunity for business. By using this opportunity well, the business will be able to win again if it satisfies its customers. The more important it is for the customer to purchase the goods and services, the more important it is after the complaint to be satisfied.

The efforts of the businesses in handling customer complaints and improving their services positively affect the customers' satisfaction and loyalty to the business. Successful service improvement, while increasing customer satisfaction, intention to repurchase or visit the business and their intention to say positive words, an unsuccessful improvement attempt increases the effect of the first failure by creating a second negative effect on the customers (Heung and Lam, 2003). Many studies have shown that dissatisfied customers change their brands or suppliers and prefer to share their bad experiences with their friends or families instead of reporting their dissatisfaction to the business. At the same time, some customers may not react because of their lack of time and power to complain, not knowing where and how to complain, and their belief that nothing will happen even when they complain.

Customers who do not make their complaints directly to businesses do not complain for reasons such as they generally do not believe that solutions will be produced and they do not want to face employees. Customers complain if they believe their complaints will be considered. When they believe that their complaints will bring results in the direction they want, it will motivate them and continue to be customers of the business (Singh and Deepak, 2000). When customers believe that their complaints will not be considered by the business and will not deal with their complaints, they may think that their complaints will be meaningless and may not shop again from the same place even though they did not complain (Day and Landon Jr, 1976).

Without complaints, minor problems, minor errors and poor performance cannot be detected and resolved without causing larger problems. If dissatisfied customers do not complain, businesses will lose the chance to retain and protect their customers. Each complaint

provides an opportunity to correct the compromised relationship between the customer and the business. Complaints are therefore important signals for businesses that point to major dangers in the future. When businesses deal with customer complaints and produce solutions, they will gain loyal customers by switching their complaints to satisfaction.

Researches reveal that 95% of customers prefer to remain silent when they have a problem and do not buy products from that business again. It is known that unhappy customers often do not report complaints. However, brand loyalty is the most important factor that enables customers to report their complaints. By managing the complaints correctly, the company will have benefits such as increasing the number of loyal customers, protecting the brand image from negative effects, conveying positive messages to customers, increasing the perception of quality in the customer mind, and increasing the total income of the business (Strauss and Hill, 2001).

Complaint management is one of the most effective ways to retain customers and turn them into loyal customers. Complaint management refers to the evaluation of complaints by the business and converting them into value. It aims to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty by preventing customer dissatisfaction by correcting the defect of the goods or services offered (Altan and Engin, 2004). However, it cannot be said that businesses and those who work in the facility enjoy complaints.

When evaluated within the framework of the complaints of consumers, some variables come to the fore. These variables are cooling, controllability, attitude towards the complaint, the perceived value of the complaint and the probability of the complaint being successful (Kim *et al.* 2003). Consumers dissatisfied with the business are cooling against the business. The cooling of consumers from businesses is measured by the degree of dissatisfaction of consumers. The more a consumer cools off, the more negative emotions he has about the company. If sufficient benefits cannot be obtained, the cooling sensation that will occur from the consumer to the company may result in a negative attitude towards the complaint, the perceived value of the complaint is very low and the probability of the complaint is very weak (Alkan and Kaynak, 2008).

Failure of the firm to audit sufficiently is among the factors that push the consumer to the idea of complaints and cause them to have a negative opinion about the company. Firms' trust in control of consumers who cannot obtain the expected benefits from the goods and services they have purchased will positively affect the consumers' thoughts about the complaint, the perceived value of the complaint, and the probability of the complaint's success.

When consumers believe that their complaints will bring results in the direction they want, this will motivate them and cause them to be resolutely addressed in the future. If the benefit of complaint behavior is greater than its cost, consumers will be more willing to complain about their thoughts (Singh and Deepak, 2000). When consumers believe that their complaints will not be taken into consideration and dealt with by the company, they may think that their complaints will be meaningless, and therefore may not remain silent and shop again from the same place. In this case, when consumers believe that their complaints will be taken into consideration, they display a positive attitude towards the complaint. The possibility of a well-documented complaint to succeed positively affects the thought of the complaint (Day and Landon, 1976).

7. Effect of loyalty programs in creating customer loyalty

Customer loyalty programs are applied to reward customers who constantly buy an enterprise's products. Customer loyalty programs are designed to gently attach a clamp to customers by strengthening their loyalty to the business or the brands of the business (Uncles *et al.* 2002). With loyalty programs, the profitability of this loyalty is given to customers who do not evaluate many options around them and prefer the business and the products or brands of the business. While this may sometimes be monetary rewards, sometimes there may be applications that provide privileges.

Customer loyalty programs basically serve two purposes. These are to increase sales revenues and establish a closer link between the brand or brands of the business and existing

customers. It is seen that sometimes the first of these two goals could not be achieved. In a study, only two of the 6 loyalty programs examined were found to increase the frequency of repeat purchases. This result negatively affects the purpose of customer loyalty programs to increase the sales revenues of the business (Uncles *et al.* 2002).

There are two strategies that businesses can follow to avoid competition: creating a selection advantage for its customers and protecting their customers from competitive pressures. Customer loyalty programs especially use the second of these strategies. Customer loyalty programs need to follow by integrating two strategies such as making difference and building relationships (Meyer-Waarden and Benavent, 2002).

8. Conclusion

Conversion to focus on customer relations is one of the most important developments in marketing practice in recent years. Instead of maximizing transactions, it is important to consider customers as real value. The concept of customer loyalty includes every effort to establish personal communication with existing customers, customer loyalty programs and customer loyalty to achieve profitability in the long term. With the effect of the competition in the global world, the importance given by businesses to customer loyalty has increased. In order to create customer loyalty, it is necessary to establish a long-term one-to-one relationship with customers.

In establishing customer loyalty of businesses; adopting a customer-oriented organizational culture, developing relationships based on trust and value sharing with customers, offering personalized products tailored to each customer, creating barriers of change that can prevent customers from transitioning to a competitor company should be followed as strategies to increase customer retention rates with reward programs.

The increase in customer satisfaction may result in many increases in operating profits. A satisfied customer is 6 times more loyal than an average satisfied customer. While the satisfied customer affects 5 people positively; a dissatisfied customer negatively affects 10-20 people. In addition, only 4% of dissatisfied customers communicate their complaints to businesses, and it is very difficult to get dissatisfied customers back.

Businesses should see complaints as gifts from their customers. Because the customer who complains provides the business with the opportunity to continuously improve their products. While the customer tries to solve his problem by conveying the negativity about the product, the business will reintroduce these complaints to the production process and ensure that similar problems will not arise again, thus making the product and/or process higher quality. From an operational perspective, complaints are the result of faulty production of goods and services. From the perspective of the customer, it is a result of not meeting their expectations. Since the purpose of the enterprises is to meet the expectations of the customers, the situation of not meeting the expectations of the customers should be perceived as a result of a deficiency of the business. Although most businesses aim to produce products and services without errors, they cannot completely eliminate errors, inaccuracies or problems. Complaints should be handled as an important opportunity for businesses to detect deficiencies and mistakes.

The results of this study, in which the customer loyalty phenomenon is analyzed, can be summarized as follows: Customer loyalty types and loyalty levels are likely to vary depending on the characteristics of the market in which the business is located. Therefore, businesses are required to target loyalty types suitable for the dynamics of the market in which they are located. In the formation of customer loyalty; besides the many factors such as customer satisfaction, market share, service quality, it is important to consider the effects of emotional factors. Businesses should impose symbolic meanings on their products or corporate images, and thus try to create emotional loyalty with their customers. Businesses should impose symbolic meanings on their products or corporate images, and in this way try to create emotional loyalty with their customers.

As the findings of this study support, it is a great necessity for businesses that want to gain customers and establish long-term relationships with their customers, to know their customers and act in line with their expectations. For the continuation of the loyalty of the

business to the customers, it is very important to establish one-to-one relationships with the customers and make them feel special. For this reason, relationship marketing has been on the agenda in recent years and has emerged as an important subject in both academic and applied fields. However, it remains one of the least understood issues, although it is one of the oldest approaches to marketing. It can be suggested to consider relationship marketing in future studies and to focus on research that will reveal the role and importance of relationship shine in creating customer loyalty.

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