

Relationship Marketing Competencies: Design for Sustainable Business and Competitive Advantage

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Abstract - A paradigm shift in marketing has been seen since the decade of 1980s. Relationship marketing has emerged as one of the effective ways to manage and growth of business. Transaction approach has been replaced by relationship marketing in marketing mix by business organization. Large corporations use strategy, technology and relational approach in order to gain sustainable and competitive advantage in the markets. Relationship marketing is equally important for business-to-business and business-to-customer transactions. Relationship marketing is equally important in tangible and intangible products. Every business aims to increase the level of satisfaction through superior quality of services in present competitive era. Further, developing relationship with superior quality of services adds value in business and matches customer expectations. Developing long term relationship with customers induces customer loyalty, repeat buying and referral business.

Relationship marketing requires unique proactive management approach to develop core competencies. Implementing relationship marketing across entire organization helps in developing dynamic capabilities in an organization. Relationship marketing is a management philosophy and approach in a particular risky business environment. Researchers have found that the level of relationship strength has positive effect on revenue and profitability of organization. The concept of customer retention is an important point in relationship marketing. A sustainable business model can be developed and maintained with development of relationships with key customers. Relationship marketing provides opportunities to understand customers and co-create a sustainable business with them.

Present work focuses to identify relationship marketing competencies to develop and maintain sustainable business model for an organization through extensive review of literature.

Keywords: CRM, Competitive advantage, Managing customer portfolio, Relationship marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing is one of the strategic approaches of an organization to create customer value with key customer segments. Long-term relationships with customers are developed by integrating relationship marketing strategies with information technology. Processes, people, operations, and marketing capabilities are integrated with technology in effective implementation of relationship marketing strategies (Payne and Frow 2005). Marketing literatures have focused on developing capabilities of firms through understanding needs and wants of customers and managing customer relationships (Srinivasan and Moorman 2005).

Acquisition of new customers, retention of existing customers, developing relationships through customized communications, cross selling, etc. are carried out to have a relational orientation with customers. Customer value can be enhanced through customer offer over different customer life cycle (Lanning, 1998). Researchers have investigated several issues such as satisfaction, trust, commitment, customer loyalty to understand different facets of

relationships (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Simon et al. 2005; Palmatier et al. 2007).

Consumer relational benefits are the key in long term association with customers. The Customer relational benefits referred to as benefits received by customers over and above fundamental service and product performance (Liljander and Roos 2002). Consumer expects three types of benefits, namely Confidence, social, and special treatment benefits in a long term relationship with a firm. Confidence benefits reduce the level of perceived risks with product and service offerings. Personal recognition and emotional exchanges with employees are part of social benefits in long term relationship. Economic and customization benefits are examples of special treatment benefits from a firm in long term relationships. (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Value proposition of customers is the results of customer experience out of his relational benefits.

Payne and Frow (2005) identified key cross-functional processes for strategic customer relationship management. These key cross-functional processes are: development

based strategic process, value creation process, multi channel customer experience process, information management process, and performance assessment process.

Retaining customers and maintaining relationships with customers is possible with fulfillment of promises made to customers (Berry, 1995). Communication and pricing should be taken as marketing activities to make and keep promises. For example, order, deliveries, and problem resolutions should be handled well in order to be a reliable partner in maintaining promises.

Gronroos (2000) pointed out the use of technology and other resources such as physical and information along with employees for maintaining promises. Promise is not a single variable. It has to be managed with expectation of customers. Customers may have explicit and implicit expectation for a group of product and service offerings. Some expectation may be unrealistic. Expectations of customers depend on promises in relationship marketing program.

Fulfilling individual expectations by keeping promises create value proposition for customer. Hence, value creation should be the goal of making relations with customers (Gronroos, 2006). During the process of creating value, relationship marketing aims to influence positive

customer perception towards brand and company. Favorable customer perception towards company may vary from one industry to another. Also, it depends on customer to customer. It is even more complicated when companies offer customized products. Relationship marketing would gain momentum and success with support of internal marketing and other organizational dimensions.

Ward and Dagger (2007) studied on complex issues of relationship marketing for service customers. Their research model included four dimensions for enhancing relationship strength between service providers and users. Customer relationship importance, relationship characteristics, customer demographic characteristics, and types of service products were four factors for relationship strengths. Ward and Dagger (2007) have found that longer duration of strength is positively affected by perception of customers towards importance of relational dimensions by customers. They found that length of time spent with a service provider enhance the level of strength of relationship. Also, this study confirms the perception of consumer towards importance of various dimensions of relationship has positive effect on relationship strength. In addition, study confirms variety of products have positive effect on increasing strength of relationship.

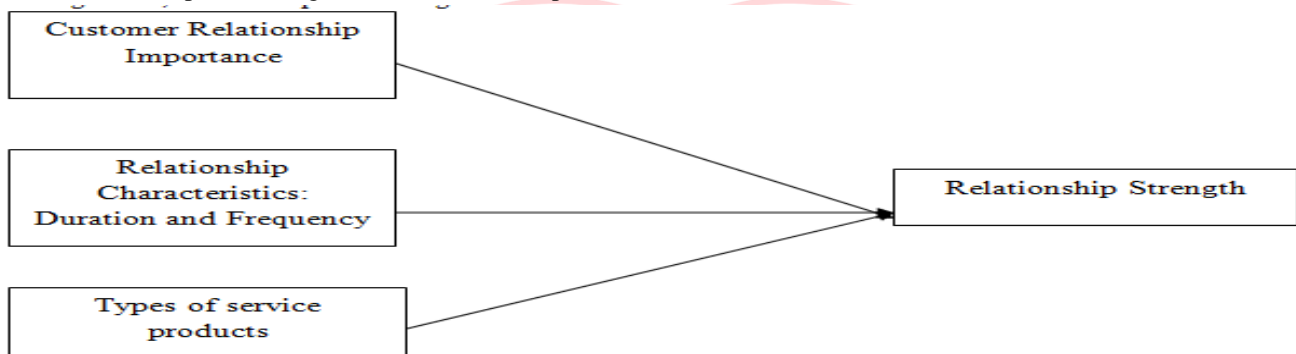


Figure 1: Determinants of Relationship Strength, Source: Ward, S., and Dagger, T.S. (2007)

II. RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Frow and Payne (2009) defined relationship marketing as “...the strategic management of relationships with all relevant stakeholders in order to achieve long term shareholder value. Critical tasks include the identification of relevant relational forms for different stakeholders and the segments and sub-groups within them and the optimal management of interactions within these stakeholder networks.”

Frow and Payne (2009) have found that bases of relationship marketing can be found out in the context of industrial relationship during 1980s. With development of service sector, relationship marketing has been considered as attracting and enhancing customer relationships. Relationship marketing research has been able to add proper understanding of concepts and fundamentals. Payne and Frow (2005) has differentiated terms relationship marketing and customer relationship management. They

concluded relationship marketing as a strategic approach to manage relationship with different stakeholders. On the other hand, customer relationship management is cross functional strategic approach. It aims to enhance shareholders’ value with key customer segment. Customer relationship management consists of several business and customer strategies. It tries to co-create products and services to have greater customer experience.

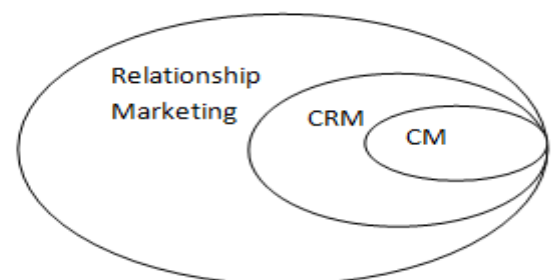


Figure 2: RM, CRM, and CM Source: Frow and Payne (2009)

Further, Frow and Payne (2009) have worked on concept of customer management. Customer management is implementation aspect of customer relationship management. It has tactical aspects with many tools like personalization, sales force automation, call centre management, and campaign management. Hence, these three concepts vary at the level of strategies, implementation, technique, procedures, etc.

Relationship marketing aims to have long term relationship with customers by attracting, maintaining, and developing relationship with them. CRM has been viewed as a subset of relationship marketing. Relationship marketing has been viewed as strategic and broader concept. Literature suggests the scope of customer relationship management is to maintain relationship with valued customer. It helps in improving stakeholders' value. One common aspect in relationship marketing and customer relationship is cooperative customer relationship between company and

customers. Sin et al. (2005) opined on key differences between RM and CRM. He pointed out RM as strategic and behavioral aspects of maintaining relationship with stakeholders. On the other hand, customer relationship management uses tactical approach to maintain relationship with key customers.

III. ANALYZING RELATIONSHIP MARKETING COMPETENCIES FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

In the age of intense competition and changing technology, achieving sustainable business and competitive advantage is very challenging task. Relationship marketing literature discusses several competencies to achieve sustainability in business. Present work tries to explore relational competencies required to achieve sustainable business and competitive advantage in long period of time by extensive review of relationship marketing research

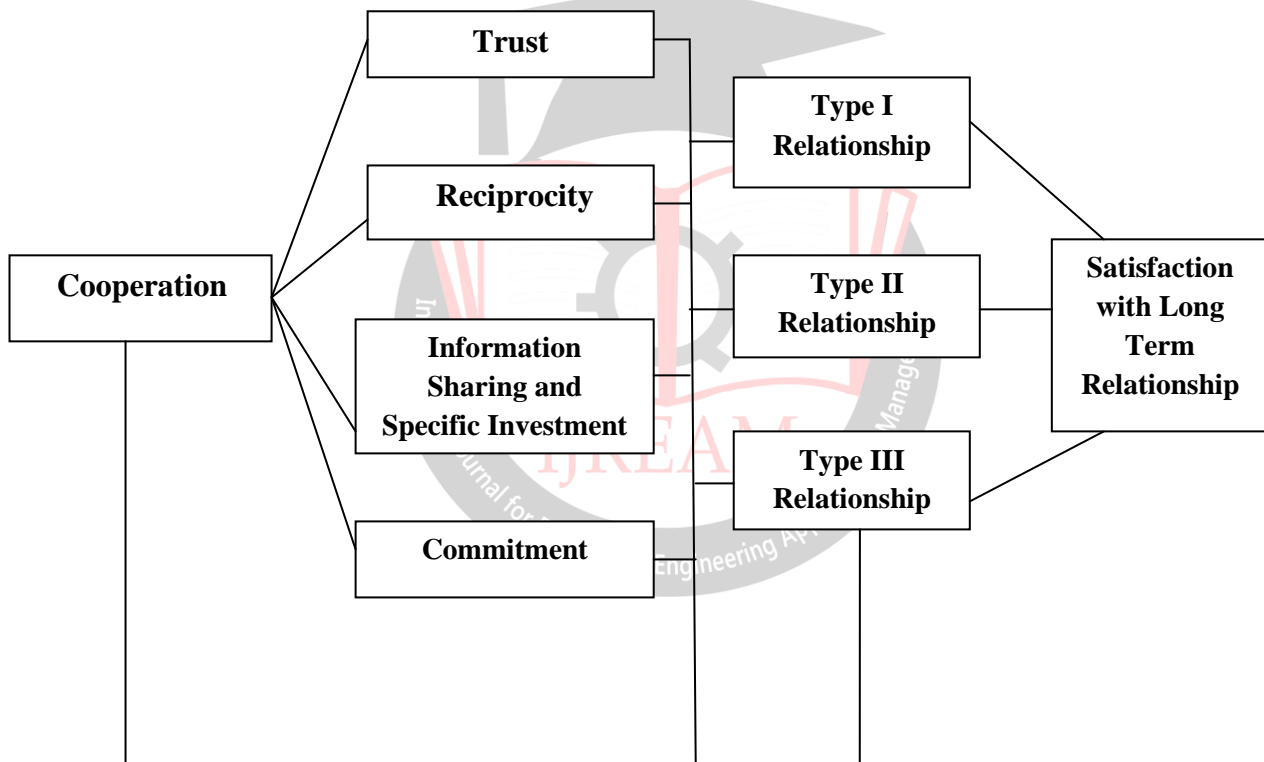


Figure 3: Developing relationship in logistics: Source: Juiacius and Grigaite (2011)

Juiacius and Grigaite (2011) have found positive role of cooperation with customers in attaining competitive advantage. Trust is another factor in developing relationships. It is more effective with mutual trust. Reciprocity is transformation exchange based events into relational exchanges. Information sharing and investment also contribute in relational exchange with customers. A firm intends to share relevant information for a group of products and services. This enables partnership with customers for long term. Commitment shows reliability and stability from both parties. Commitment is linked with trust. Commitment is a kind of pledge between exchange partners. Different types of relationship can be developed by firms depending upon database, duration of relationship, types of communication, etc. Relationship has been grouped in three categories.

Lin et al., (2010) have established relationship between customer relationship management and innovation capability. The study was conducted on Taiwanese computer manufacturers to examine innovation capabilities.

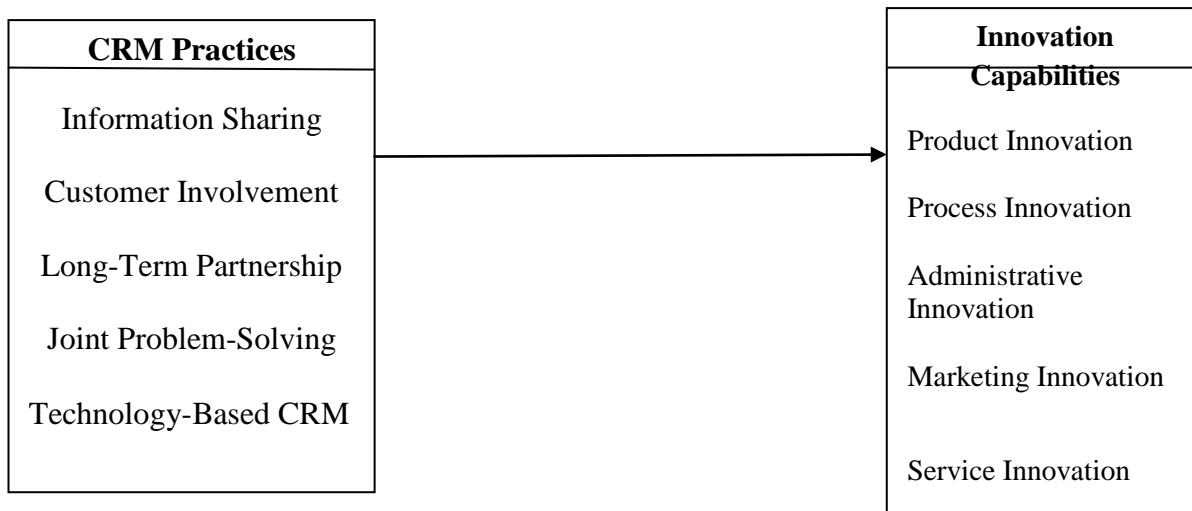


Figure 4: Relationship of CRM practices and innovation capabilities, Sources: Lin et al., (2010)

The study has investigated direct relationship between CRM practices and innovation capabilities. Findings of the study reveal that only technology based CRM has positive impact on development of different innovation capabilities. The study suggests implementing several mechanisms to have a complete program of innovation in an organization.

Lo et al., (2010) have investigated customer relationship management practices in hotel industry. The goal of CRM is to gain guest retention. Value creation can be achieved through evaluation and control. A modified value chain model was proposed for practitioners and academicians for effective CRM implementation.

Jarratt (2008) has developed dimensions of relationship management capability. He opined that relationship management systems should be implemented through collaborative and flexible behaviors. He stressed on adaptive approach in relationship management in existing relational programs. Relationship infrastructure, relationship learning and relationship behavior have identified as dimensions of relationship management capability. He stresses on continuous improvement in relationship management capability. These capabilities enable firms to gain competitive advantage in the market.

Islam et al., (2012) have studied the relationship between customer related performance and growth capabilities of companies. Results showed positive relationship between customer related performance and growth capabilities of companies. HR capabilities, marketing capabilities, IT service capabilities, and company learning have direct association with customer related performance.

Storbacka and Storbacka (2009) investigated business to business relationship. The findings of the study suggest that firm should have optimum mix of customer base and relationship. Companies should recognize the diversity of performance in customer relationship. Based on diversity in customer base, companies should manage their customer portfolio. Firm may have different business model for each group of customer.

Mithas et al., (2005) have evaluated the effects of customer relationship management on customer satisfaction and customer knowledge. They found that CRM technology and applications have positive relationship with enhanced customer satisfaction and customer knowledge. In addition, the study advocates share of customer information with supply chain partners. It improves customer knowledge in many ways. Hence, study proposes integration of CRM capabilities with its supply chain.

Becker et al., (2009) have investigated the relationship of technological and organizational implementation with CRM performance. The study has assessed the mediating role of employee role and management support in CRM performance. The research reveals that CRM implementation does not have equal impact on various aspects of CRM processes. They advocated proper and enough support by the stakeholder for enhanced performance.

Song et al., (2012) studied the role of relationship value in buyer-supplier relationship and performance of buyers. Findings of the study reveal that business relationship has direct and indirect impact on buyer's performance. This relationship has mediating effects by relationship quality. It was found that business relationship has strong impact on relationship quality as compare to performance of buyers. Management should fulfill business relationship functions to develop and maintain long term relationship. In order to handle intense competition, companies should focus on fulfillment function.

Yang (2012) investigated relationship of individual service capabilities and CRM performance. Human resource, information technology, and market knowledge have been analyzed on effectiveness of customer relationship management. The study found that human resource, information technology, and market knowledge have vital contribution on improved CRM performance.

Ryding (2010) assessed the effective implementation of new technology on business to business relationship. The

study reveals that technology is essential and beneficial for sales people for maintaining long term customer relationship. The study pointed out on appropriate balance between use of technology and costs implementing it. It is important to have skilled sales people to use technology effectively. Technology helps in maintaining commitment with customers. Hence, it helps in developing trust and reliability in customers.

Dimitriadis and Stevens (2008) proposed integrated framework for implementing customer relationship management system in service organization. The study has proposed integration of customer expectation and reaction in CRM strategy. In an integrated approach of CRM strategy, organizational, technological, and human components have been considered for value addition in relationship quality.

Yang et al., (2010) have proposed an integrated model of CRM, service delivery, and customer satisfaction. The study proposed performance orientation, customer focus, and innovation for business excellence and sustainable profitability. The entire system should emphasize on investment in intangibles and utilization of intangible assets. Companies should aim to become a learning organization in long term.

Lambert (2009) analyzed a framework to maintain relationship in cross functional and CRM process in business to business relationship. The study stresses on interaction of top-to-top relationship in maintaining relationship. Relationship may have many one-to-one interactions.

Bin-Nashwan and Hassan (2017) reviewed the relationship of CRM, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The study was based on analysis of literature published from 2005 to 2015.

Service quality, service access, and handling complaints of customer have been found as dominating factors in maintaining long term relationship. Service quality, service access, and handling complaints of customer have been found positive impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Alshourah (2015) studied CRM performance on overall organizational performance in hotel industry. The study confirmed CRM performance has significant relationship with organizational performance. Key customer focus, customer centric marketing, personalization, co-creation in marketing, knowledge based CRM, etc. have identified as key determinants of customer relationship management.

Sigala (2018) has analyzed technological based transformation of CRM as social CRM. She stressed on co-creating customer experience with customer dialogue and engagement. To implement it, five approaches have been proposed in the study. Collection, analysis, and interpretation of customer insight, personalized experience, linking CRM & loyalty program, and developing

community based relationship management, and controlling CRM program were proposed to have social CRM in the organization. She stressed that social CRM has capability to transform customer experience as co-creator of value in every interaction.

Rocca et al., (2018) studied on customer relationship in the context of new organization. The objective of study was to investigate the role customer relationship portfolio for new firms. Findings suggest that customer portfolio is the outcome of diverse network connections. First time customers can be developed on future interaction in various transactions.

Zhang and Du (2018) pointed out the role of competitive and non-competitive factors on CRM performance. The study confirms the negative relationship between competitive value appropriation and CRM performance. Contrary to it, non-competitive value appropriation has positive impact on CRM performance. It is suggested to have harmonious and value creation relationship with customers.

Chiang (2019) emphasized on online customer relationship management in digital marketing or e-commerce. Companies, especially in services, should focus on data driven marketing strategy.

Marino and Presti (2018) studied the relationship satisfaction and behavior based CRM performance. Findings suggest that cognitive and emotional engagement influence the degree of satisfaction. Emotional engagement has direct impact on behavior based CRM. The study confirms that social engagement does not influence satisfaction and behavior based CRM performance.

Alhathal and Sharma (2019) studied the impact of service separation on building and maintaining customer relationship. It was found that service separation has negative impact on social benefits, trust, and commitment. It has negative consequences on customer loyalty and customer relationship. Study indicated trust and commitment as major factor to build customer loyalty in online and mobile technology. Strong and long term relationship can be build through face-to-face interaction with customer. It is also recommended in presence of online and mobile technologies.

Guillet and Shi (2019) studied the integration of customer relationship management in revenue management at individual level. Findings suggest that attitude of marketing and revenue managers for integration of information technology based infrastructure is essential to strengthen customer loyalty and relationship.

Valmohammadi (2017) empirically tested the relationship between CRM practices, innovation capabilities, and organizational performance. Findings show CRM practices have positive relationship with innovation capabilities and organizational performance. It was confirmed that

innovative steps in CRM has positive impact in organizational performance.

Diffley et al., (2018) examined the effect of social CRM on financial performance of the firm. It was found that social CRM activities have the ability to improve capacity in linking customer capabilities. It results in higher customer performance. Therefore, higher customer performance results in higher level of financial performance. Service innovation and customer linking capabilities have been seen as the results of improved firm performance.

Cambra-Fierro et al., (2018) studied the role of customer relationship life cycle on relationship quality and value co-creation. Customer passes through various stages such as exploration of customers, building relationship, maturity in relationship, and decline phase. It was found that relationship has more positive and influential power on value co-creation in stage of building and maturity phase of relationship. It has weak effect in decline phase of relationship. In exploration phase, quality in relationship does not have any impact on value co-creation. It is suggested to adopt personalized marketing strategies in long term customer relationship.

Rahimi (2017) analyzed some traits of organizational culture on components of customer relationship management. Consistency, involvement, adaptability, and mission of organizational culture have been tested on process, people, and technology of CRM. Results confirmed positive impact of four traits of organizational culture on three factors of CRM. Managers in service sector should properly analyze organizational culture for effective implementation of CRM strategy at each level of the firm.

Boateng (2019) worked on online relationship marketing and its consequences on customer loyalty. Online relationship marketing is gaining popularity in recent time with robust growth in the development of online transactions across the globe. However, it is very new area to be studied for analysis of its impact on achieving objectives of relationship marketing. Study explains that interactivity and engagement have considerable role to improve better results in relationship marketing. Customers should be communicated regarding effective and safe online tools to perform transaction. It enables to enhance online trust, loyalty, overall relationship marketing objectives.

IV. RELATIONSHIP MARKETING COMPETENCIES FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Relationship Marketing Competencies	Contributors
Information sharing, customer involvement long-term partnership, joint	Lin et al., (2010)

problem-solving, technology-based CRM	
Collaborative and flexible behaviors in existing relational programs, continuous improvement in relationship management capability	Jarratt (2008)
HR capabilities, marketing capabilities, IT service capabilities, and company learning	Islam et al., (2012)
Optimum mix of customer base and relationship, diversity of performance in customer relationship, managing customer portfolio	Storbacka and Storbacka (2009)
CRM technology and applications	Mithas et al., (2005)
Technological, organizational implementation, employees role and management support	Becker et al., (2009)
Relationship value in buyer-supplier relationship	Song et al., (2012)
Individual service capabilities, Human resource, information technology, and market knowledge	Yang (2012)
New technology and Skilled sales people	Ryding (2010)
Managing customer expectation and reaction	Dimitriadis and Stevens (2008)
Performance orientation, customer focus, and innovation	Yang et al., (2010)
Interaction of top-to-top relationship in B2B relationship	Lambert (2009)
Service quality, service access, and handling complaints	Bin-Nashwan and Hassan (2017)
Key customer focus, customer centric marketing, personalization, co-creation	Alshourah (2015)
Co-creating customer experience with customer dialogue and engagement	Sigala (2018)
Diverse network connections	Rocca et al., (2018)
Competitive and non-competitive factors	Zhang and Du (2018)
Online customer relationship management	Chiang (2019), Boateng (2019)
Cognitive and emotional engagement	Marino and Presti (2018)
Managing Service Separation	Alhathal and Sharma (2019)
Revenue management at individual level	Guillet and Shi (2019)
Innovative steps in CRM	Valmohammadi (2017)
Social CRM	Diffley et al., (2018)
Managing customer relationship	Cambra-Fierro et al., (2018)

life cycle	
Traits of organizational culture	Rahimi (2017)

Table 1: Relationship Marketing Competencies for Sustainable Business and Competitive Advantage

In order to have sustainable business and competitive advantage, literature has identified several strategies. These strategies are to be implemented with support of top management of the organization. Literature reveals several strategies such as Relationship value, continuous improvement in relationship management capability, HR capabilities, marketing capabilities, IT service capabilities, and company learning, new technology and skilled sales people, Managing customer expectation and reaction, Service quality, service access, and handling complaints, Revenue management at individual level, Innovative steps in CRM, Managing customer relationship life cycle, etc.

V. CONCLUSION

An effective CRM program tries to achieve the objectives of business. It is challenging tasks to achieve competitive advantage in the markets. Keeping customer interest alive with company is one the most challenging tasks in business. CRM aims to understand customers and consumers in any business cycle. Firms find it difficult to implement every aspect of relational exchange.

Findings of the study reveal that firms are diversifying their relationship marketing strategies by implementing different set of program such as revenue management at individual level, innovative steps in CRM, relationship life cycle management, handling customer complaints, managing customer expectation & reaction, social CRM etc.

It is suggested to use mix of both traditional and latest strategies in managing relational exchange. Although, it is very difficult to implement entire set of relationship marketing program but it is expected to implement an optimum set of relationship marketing program for achieving sustainable business and competitive advantage in the markets. Traditionally, marketers have been using a set of strategies in relationship marketing program such as technology based CRM, information sharing, personalization, key customer focus, etc.

Firms should encourage long term partnership and joint problem solving for developing relationship marketing competencies. Collaborative and flexible behavior is key factor in the development of relationship management capabilities. Companies should optimize their market knowledge to improve individual service and employees capabilities.

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