

Impact of relationship marketing on performance of pharmacies (the mediating role of satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage)

Ghasem Zarei^{1*}, Amir Lalisarabi², Mina Jahandideh Topraghlou³

¹Assistant professor, management, university of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, I. R. of Iran, ² Assistant professor, department of management, Payame Noor University, I. R. of Iran, ³ M.A. student, management, university of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, I. R. of Iran.

Correspondence: Ghasem Zarei. Assistant professor, management, university of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, I. R. of Iran. Email: info@drz.ir

ABSTRACT

In current situation, organizations are obliged to change their responses to the market. Based on this, they mostly pay attention to consumers and adopt long-term perspectives rather than short-term ones. Hence, organizations are facing a new relationship marketing strategy. Making use of correlation – survey research method, the present study investigated the impact of relationship marketing on the performance and mediating role of satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage variables. The population includes active pharmacies in Ardabil City within March 2017 – March 2018. To achieve the research objectives, 480 questionnaires were distributed among the customers referring to these pharmacies. Structural equations modeling and Amos 23 software were used for analyzing the data. Results obtained from data processing showed that relationship marketing affects significantly the performance of pharmacies in Ardabil. The positive effect of relationship marketing variable on satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage, impact of customer’s satisfaction on loyalty and performance, effect of loyalty on performance and also impact of competitive advantage on the loyalty were confirmed. The positive effect of competitive advantage variable on performance was also confirmed. Implementation of relationship marketing in pharmacies can increase the customers’ satisfaction and make them loyal, and also can increase the competitive advantage of these organizations. Performance of these pharmacies is enhanced under the impact of such relationships.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Pharmacies Performance, Satisfaction, Loyalty, Competitive Advantage.

Introduction

Transition from traditional economy to a modern and competitive economy introduces the customer as a person that through dominating their behaviors, organizations are willing to explore new values as the main and central element of their activities. Therefore, organizational survival is subject to competition in identifying and attracting the new customers and keeping the existing ones ^[1]. Hence, organizations and companies expect to increase their customers’ satisfaction and

attract more loyal customers to their companies. Understanding what makes the customers to have more satisfaction and loyalty is from among the critical factors in organization ^[2]. The customer’s decision-making process for service products, especially services related to health, is structurally complicated affecting their behavioral intention directly or indirectly. Such reasoning has been approved in the field of services offered by pharmacies in related studies ^[2, 3]. On the other hand, while facing the development of health-based industries and from social point of view, pharmacies’ owners should enjoy a special competitive advantage for survival. Based on this, inappropriate services can damage their financial and commercial performance and leave the customers to other organizations ^[3]. Expansion and development of pharmacies presence in health market have necessitated these organizations’ needs to special competitive advantage to enhance the profitability, performance and survival. Because when the customers refer to pharmacies, they are trying to take advantage of its personnel expertise and knowledge in the field of medicines and prescriptions written by physicians ^[4].

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Therefore, the relationship between the employees and customers and knowledge and expertise transfer can positively affect the customers' intention to repurchase them from the pharmacies^[5]. On the other hand, patients are not solely exposed to the physical risk, but psychological risks are also seen as a part of disease. For this reason and to reduce such risks, patients consider factors such as reputation, level of professionalism, and high-tech tools in medical centers. From this point of view, the relationship between the pharmacies' employees and customers can decrease their perceived risk and enhance the satisfaction^[6]. Relationship between the salespersons and customers to enhance the satisfaction and as a result making these customers to a special source for attracting the loyal customers and transforming such main asset to a competitive advantage have been the subject of most marketing studies and various concepts like relationship marketing have dealt with it^[7]. Some researchers have stated that relationship marketing has become the integral part of industries, particularly the service sector^[8].

Relationship marketing is a concept appeared due to the paradigm shift in transactional marketing and despite its key role in corporates' success, no much attention in health field is paid to it. Relationship marketing is defined as a type of marketing which tries to attract the customers and develops and promotes the relationship with them. In defining the relationship marketing, the relationship term means the best state in which one customer and one company are connected to each other^[9]. Relationship marketing is increasingly studied in marketing scientific environments and attracted much interest in the executive field of marketing. Based on this, the relationship marketing is defined as the marketing states of creation, development and keeping of terms of trade. In the past decade, the existing theoretical fundamentals have approved this theory that relationship marketing increases the trust, commitment and satisfaction of customer and affect the results of sales performance by a mediating role^[10].

In service industries where offering services entails the relationship establishment and interaction with customer, general satisfaction of customers relies on how they face and experience the organization. Therefore, no wonder that companies use considerable resources to measure and manage the customer's satisfaction. To improve the customer satisfaction and loyalty, enterprises should conduct researches on factors affecting the customer satisfaction and their returning and achieve their loyalty via providing their satisfaction^[11]. Many studies have investigated the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty of customers. Results of these studies indicate the positively significant effect of satisfaction on the customers' loyalty^[12, 13].

Unlike the classic marketing focusing on the transaction, the relationship marketing emphasizes the importance of establishing, keeping and enhancing the relationship between the seller and buyer^[14, 15]. The relationship marketing means keeping the customers, developing the relationships and making such relationship more attractive^[11]. Successful relationship marketing helps to attract loyal customers,

creating word-of-mouth advertising and reducing the costs spent for gaining the customers^[16]. The relationship marketing focuses on keeping the long-term and mutual relationship between the seller and the buyer^[17]. Within this framework, "mutual profit" term means that both parties of a transaction (customer and organization) achieve their goals^[18].

Existing theoretical fundamentals in the field of relationship marketing have widely approved this issue that loyalty is an integral part of long-term business relationship. Based on this, some scholars have described the relationship marketing as a constant intention to keep and create a kind of long-term relationship. However, in other researches, satisfaction and loyalty have been mentioned as the results of relationship marketing adoption by the organizations^[19]. Previous studies have revealed that attracting one customer needs a cost 5 times than keeping the existing customer. Therefore, to improve the loyalty and reduce the customers' escape, it is necessary to establish, develop and keep the appropriate relationship. This state of business activities leads to long-term relationships with special customers contributing to the maintenance of competitive advantage. This relationship becomes particularly important when companies rely on the information presented by them to improve the customers' satisfaction via effective communications^[20].

This issue has been discussed in numerous studies that many successful companies have enjoyed the competitive advantage by implementing the relationship marketing strategy. On the other hand, permanent success and advance in information and communication technology have provided the companies with possibility of collecting the mass data about their customers. Consequently, this issue has resulted in this general belief among the marketers that profitability by relationship marketing is possible^[21]. Therefore, companies should always supervise and monitor their interaction with customers and offer them valuable goods and services by proper recognition and perception of needs and values for customers so that loyalty is created in them through attracting their satisfaction and so prevent them shifting towards other companies; relationship marketing is from among the most successful approaches in this regard^[11]. Previous studies have mostly approved this assumption that relationship marketing has created a strong relationship with customer and help to enhance the results of sales performance including sales growth, increased market share and profit^[22].

Based on what said above, it can be stated that existence of connection between the relationship marketing concept and companies' performance has been emphasized and approved in marketing researches and this relationship and its direct and indirect effects have been generalized to other relevant concepts like satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage. Relying on the existing rich theoretical fundamentals, it can be expressed that while affecting each other, variables of satisfaction, loyalty and competitive advantage can play the mediating role in the connection between the relationship marketing and companies' performance. Based on this, the

present research hypotheses and conceptual model are in accordance with table 2 and figure 1, respectively.

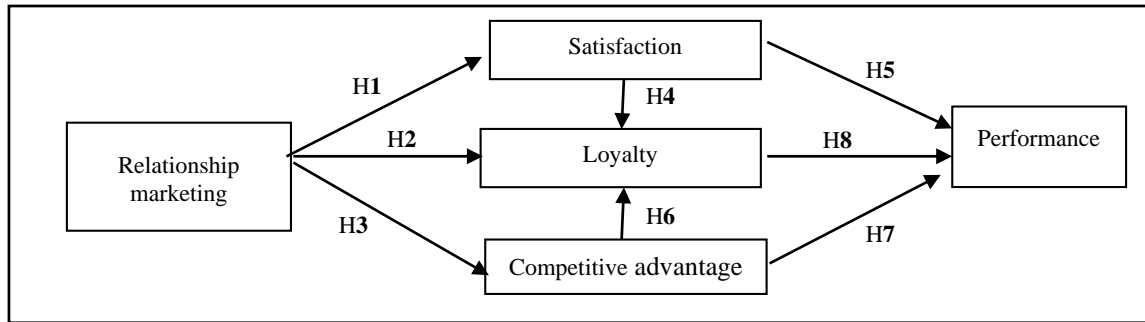


Figure 1. The conceptual model

Methods

The present study is classified as the descriptive research of survey type. In terms of objective, it has an applied nature. The population consists of customers of Ardabil City pharmacies. To collect the data, 50 pharmacies were selected initially by random method and then by systematic approach from the list of Ardabil City pharmacies. Then, questionnaire was distributed among 550 customers of selected pharmacies and finally 469 fully-filled questionnaires were collected. The measurement tool of study is a standard questionnaire consisting of 57 main questions as it is designed based on the 5-point Likert scale. To examine the measurement tool's validity, expert and specialists of this field were requested to help in designing and drawing up the questions and then Cronbach's alpha coefficient and convergent validity and reliability were used. Results indicated that Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all variables was higher than 0.8 which is beyond its standard coefficient; i.e. 0.7. On the section of convergent validity and composite reliability section, average variance extracted (AVE) for all variables was larger than 0.5 (AVE > 0.5) and the composite reliability for all variables was larger than 0.7 (CR > 0.7) and AVE (CR > AVE). Based on this, validity of research tool was approved in all conducted tests. Table 1 shows variables, references, Cronbach Alpha, and composite reliability of questioner.

Table 1. Variables, references, Cronbach Alpha, and composite reliability of questioner.

variable	reference	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	composite reliability
Relationship marketing	Ndubisi and Wah (2005)	21	0.918	0.914
Customer satisfaction	Berley et al (20004), Lee et all (2010)	8	0.870	0.817
performance	Hers et all (2008)	6	0.806	0.862
Loyalty	Amalie (2000)	7	0.859	0.724
Competitive advantage	Hill and Jones (2007)	14	0.888	0.810

In this study, descriptive analysis was applied. Initially, data were collected and then, SPSS 24 and Amos 23 software were used to test the hypotheses and responding to the questions posed in this study on inferential statistics section. SPSS 24 and Amos 23 were used for reporting the descriptive statistics and performing the structural equations and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), respectively. In such kind of factor analysis, researcher expect to test a special design of hidden factors beyond the variables. It is also expected that variables are particularly arranged. Researcher tests the hypotheses related to a special factor structure. In this study, researcher has designed a model which describes, explains or justifies the experimental data based on relatively few parameters.

Findings

On section of findings analysis in SPSS 24 software, KMO criterion was used to determine whether the number of samples is enough for implementation of factor analysis. This criterion was 0.945. Since this value was larger than 0.9, hence sufficiency of data number for factor analysis was seen in excellent level. On the other hand, since the significance level of Bartlett's sphericity test was zero and lower than 0.05, the sphericity assumption was rejected in 95%. In other words, correlation matrix was not the same as identity matrix and consequently, data were properly connected to each other which were suitable for factor analysis. In what follows, structural equations and confirmatory factor analysis were used in Amos 23 to specify whether the questions have been correctly measured. In Amos 23 software, five variables of relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, loyalty, competitive advantage and performance were examined as the first to fifth factors. Output of this software for model's goodness of fit is given in table 2 in which, values of chi-square and degree of freedom are 4131.6 and 1476, respectively. Then, ratio of chi-square to degree of freedom is 2.799; i.e. less than 3. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.062, i.e. close to zero. Goodness-of-fit index (GFI) is 0.908 which is larger than 0.9. Adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI) IS 0.904, i.e. larger than 0.9. Non-normed fit index (NNFI) is 0.909 which is larger than 0.9. Parsimony fit index

(PGFI) is 0.915, i.e. larger than 0.9. Comparative fit index (CFI) was 0.921, i.e. $CFI > 0.9$. Hoelter statistic value for 0.05 and 0.01 are 208 and 227, respectively, which are larger than 200. Therefore, the structural model of study has an appropriate goodness-of-fit.

Table 2. The result of hypothesis test

Hypothesis	The result of hypothesis test at a 1% error rate.
H1. Relationship marketing has an effect on customer satisfaction	Not rejected
H2. Relationship marketing has an effect on customer loyalty.	Not rejected
H3. Relationship marketing has an effect on competitive advantage.	Not rejected
H4. Customer satisfaction has an effect on customer loyalty.	Not rejected
H5. Customer satisfaction has an effect on pharmacies' performance.	Not rejected
H6. Competitive advantage has an effect on customer loyalty.	Not rejected
H6. Competitive advantage has an effect on pharmacies' performance.	Not rejected
H6. Customer loyalty has an effect on pharmacies' performance.	Not rejected

On the basis of results, the relationship marketing had a significant impact on the customer's satisfaction in level of 0.0001, because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.15. This coefficient means that one change in relationship marketing leads to 15% increase of changes in customer's satisfaction. The relationship marketing had also significant effect on loyalty in level of 0.0001, because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.51. This coefficient means that one change in relationship marketing leads to 51% increase of changes in customer's loyalty.

Then, it became clear that relationship marketing had a significant effect on competitive advantage in level of 0.0001; because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.76. This coefficient means that one change in relationship marketing leads to 76% increase of changes in competitive advantage.

The customer's satisfaction had also significant impact on loyalty in level of 0.001, because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.39. This coefficient means that one change in customer's satisfaction leads to 39% increase of changes in customer's loyalty.

The customer's satisfaction had also significant impact on performance in level of 0.001, because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.64. This coefficient means that one change in customer's satisfaction leads to 64% increase of changes in performance.

Testing the research hypotheses showed that the competitive advantage has a significant effect on loyalty in level of 0.001; because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the

standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.59. This coefficient means that one change in competitive advantage leads to 59% increase of changes in customer's loyalty. Although the competitive advantage has no significant impact on performance in level of 0.001 or 0.01, since its significance was 0.039, i.e. less than 0.001 and 0.01, but first type error was taken as 0.05 and we conducted the test in level of 0.05, because its significance was 0.039, i.e. less than 0.05. So, the competitive advantage affected significantly the performance. The standardized coefficient of this impact was low, equal to 0.08. This coefficient shows that one change in competitive advantage leads to 8% increase of changes in performance. At the end, loyalty affected significantly the performance at level of 0.001; because its significance was lower than 0.001 and the standardized coefficient of such impact was 0.36. This coefficient means that one change in customer's loyalty leads to 36% increase of changes in performance. Final results on approval and rejection of hypotheses are given in table 2.

Discussion

In most organizations all over the world, managers are always seeking promotion and improvement of their organisations' performance [23]. In other words, if organizations want to keep their position and act in such a way that their development and success are realized, they have to review their performance and meet their commitments over the customer properly [24]. In this regard, events such as competition expansion, information technology advancement and comprehensive effort of organizations and economic units to achieve better position have doubled the necessity of paying attention to continuous improvement of organization performance [25]. In such conditions, organizations are inevitably looking for new methods to improve their performance [26]. Based on the findings of most scholars, relationship marketing is from among the best methods in this area. Therefore, companies should always supervise and monitor their interaction with customers and offer valuable goods and services by proper recognition and understanding of needs and values taken into account by the customers so that they can attract the customers' satisfaction and create loyalty in them. By doing so, companies prevent their shift to other companies and relationship marketing is one of the most successful approaches to this issue [9].

The positive impact of relationship marketing on the customers' satisfaction has been the subject of many studies in the field of marketing [e.g. 27-30]. Based on this, the impact of relationship marketing on customers' satisfaction was investigated as the first research hypothesis and approved. This result is consistent with findings of previous studies based on which and also the experimental knowledge, it can be said that pharmacies can influence positively the customers' satisfaction via relationship marketing.

On the other hand, since keeping the customers is economical from economic point of view than attracting new customers, keeping and establishing effective connection with existing customers were taken into consideration by companies.

Relationship marketing includes all step companies take to recognize and offer better services to their valuable customers. Therefore, relationship marketing can take steps to keep the customers by developing the market share, increasing the market attractions and more loyalty shown by customers^[31]. Positive impact and connection between relationship marketing and customers' satisfaction were also investigated by the marketing scholars of which the results indicate the effective connection between the relationship marketing and customers' satisfaction^[8, 9, 13, 32, 33]. Hence, the impact of relationship marketing on customers' satisfaction was investigated within the second hypothesis and approved. This result is consistent with the findings of aforementioned studies and so it can be said that relationship marketing in pharmacies can help to attract and keep the loyal customers.

In current situations and concerning the competitive market, products and services should be designed in commensurate with the customer needs and tendencies aiming at increasing the value of product or service. All these changes reveal the need to new methods in this era. Furthermore, such environment have made the new approaches are presented in marketing researches. One approach is to achieve the competitive advantage through customer relationship management (CRM) or relationship marketing attracting the marketing academicians and specialists^[34]. Based on this, some researchers have investigated and studied the impact of relationship marketing on competitive advantage^[e.g. 34-37]. In accordance with these studies and the obtained theoretical knowledge, effect of relationship marketing on competitive advantage was investigated within the third hypothesis of which the results are consistent with the aforementioned researches and this hypothesis was also approved. In fact, it can be stated that relationship marketing in pharmacies can affect positively their competitive advantage. Those pharmacies which implement the relationship marketing strategies or pay close attention to this concept, can enjoy its results; i.e. more competitive advantage. Due to excessive expansion of pharmacies and more competitive space for attracting the customers, this issue has gained great importance.

In today's competitive market, organizations are willing to keep their customers in accordance with the loyalty plans. The final goals are to succeed in obtaining and keeping the repurchase intention of customers^[38]. This requires more attention from the organizations to customers' satisfaction and basically no customer can be loyal without gaining satisfaction. Based on this, the relationship between the increased satisfaction and increased loyalty of customers has been from among the most repeated issues in marketing research^[e.g. 12, 39, 40]. In their studies, these researchers have studied and approved the impact of customers' satisfaction on their loyalty. Therefore, the impact of customers' satisfaction on their loyalty was investigated and approved in the fourth hypothesis. In fact, like other business units, it can be said that customers' satisfaction has affected their loyalty in pharmacies and more satisfied customers are very likely becoming the loyal customers of pharmacies. This satisfaction is not only limited to

the pharmacies' customers and can be expanded within their interpersonal relationships. In such state, effective advertising assets like word-of-mouth advertising are from achievements of enhanced satisfaction of customers followed by increased loyalty for pharmacies.

As already mentioned in introduction, due to physical and psychological risk^[6], pharmacies' customers pay more attention to information and atmosphere inside the pharmacies. Existence of such psychological risk causes the tendency of future customers to word-of-mouth advertisements likely increases. In such conditions, loyal customers are one of the main sources of word-of-mouth advertisements. So, in current competitive area among the pharmacies, increased satisfaction of customers and its positive impact on their loyalty and also using word-of-mouth advertising are of special importance.

Unlike other variables, impact of customers' satisfaction on the companies' performance has been always a contradictory issue among the scholars of commercial and organizational management^[41]. On the other hand, some other studies have investigated this relationship differently; i.e. the mediating role of customers' satisfaction in connection to the companies' performance^[e.g. 42]. In marketing researches, impact of customers' satisfaction on the companies' performance has been also studied of which the results have confirmed this positive impact^[e.g. 41, 43-46]. Relying on these results, impact of customers' satisfaction on the companies' performance was investigated in fifth hypothesis. Therefore, it can be said that the satisfaction of pharmacies' customers can improve their performance. In fact, as the customers' satisfaction increases, other variables like loyalty, word-of-mouth advertising and competitive advantage of pharmacies are increased and consequently their performance is improved.

Nowadays, organizations have found out that the customers' loyalty is a very important factor for keeping the competitive situation in market and they have to make attempts to attract newer customers and this is while the competitors are offering services at the same or higher level^[47]. Therefore, service companies such as pharmacy are trying to achieve more competitive advantage considering the customers' loyalty. In the existing theoretical literature, impact of customers' loyalty on competitive advantage has been always investigated^[e.g. 48, 49]. However, the effect of competitive advantage on the customer's loyalty has not been taken into account. In view of this, the sixth hypothesis investigated and approved the effect of competitive advantage on the customers' loyalty. Hence, it can be stated that the competitive advantage in pharmacies can enhance the customers' loyalty. Since the increased performance is the final goal for most companies, the factors affecting this concept have been on the focus of studies and marketing initiatives. In numerous studies, the impact of competitive advantage on companies' performance has been considered^[e.g. 50-52]. Based on this, in the seventh hypothesis of research, impact of competitive advantage on pharmacies' performance was investigated and confirmed. Hence, it can be stated that achieving the competitive advantage by using other variables such as relationship marketing, costumers' loyalty and

satisfaction can influence the increased and improved performance of pharmacies.

In fact, existence of competitive advantage provides the possibility of overtaking the commercial and service departments over their competitors and companies' performance is enhanced via attracting the customers and more sales. Studying the factors affecting the increased and improved performance of companies is from among the most repeated concepts in investigating the companies' performance, customers' loyalty concept and its impact on the companies' performance. Therefore, numerous studies has investigated the impact of loyalty on companies' performance [e.g. 53-55]. By using this theoretical and experimental knowledge, impact of customers' loyalty on the pharmacies' performance was investigated and confirmed within the eighth hypothesis of which the results are consistent to the aforementioned studies. Therefore, it can be said that increased loyalty of customers can help to enhance the pharmacies' performance.

On the basis of results obtained from the research hypotheses, the following suggestions can be presented which affect the increased and improved relationship marketing, customers' satisfaction, loyalty, competitive advantage and pharmacies' performance.

Based on the research findings, there is a significant relationship among the variables of relationship marketing, satisfaction, loyalty, competitive advantage and pharmacies' performance. Hence it is suggested that managers of such units should take the interaction between the managers and employees into consideration to improve what said above and they have to consider that their promises to the customers should be realized in any situation and give promise that they can do. In case of supporting the pharmacy in special situations by the customers, managers and employee are obliged to respond the customers' kindness. To improve the satisfaction, loyalty, competitive advantage and pharmacies' performance, it is suggested that managers and employees should use their customers' information for identifying their strengths and weaknesses and have constant interaction with their customers. Customers also should keep the pharmacies informed of their dissatisfaction, if required, and manager and employees should pave the way for dealing with and responding appropriately to their customers.

To increase the competitive advantage of pharmacies, it is suggested that in their interaction with loyal customers, managers should identify the properties which discriminate their pharmacy from others and then empower them. Based on this, using the information and communication technology foundations as well as forming groups and clubs for loyal customers provide the facilities for using the customers' suggestions and establish the communication.

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Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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