Marketing as promise management: regaining customer management for marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – In today's competitive markets where market offerings are far more complicated and customer interfaces are far broader than conventional marketing models assume, marketing has become increasingly tactical and lost control of the customer management process. The purpose of this paper is to develop a promise management-based approach to marketing with the goal of regaining customer management for marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach takes the form of a conceptual analysis

Findings – According to the promise management approach marketing is viewed as a process of enabling and making promises as well as keeping promises in order to meet expectations created by promises made. Value creation in customer processes is considered the goal for marketing. It is claimed that by taking this view marketing can once again take full responsibility for customer management.

Research limitations/implications – The paper establishes a foundation for studying marketing as a process in situations where market offerings are multi-faceted and include inputs from a range of company functions and processes. This is the case in business-to-business and service markets.

Practical implications – By adopting a promise management approach to marketing firms can broaden their understanding of marketing and make use of all aspects of customer management as part of an integrated marketing process.

Originality/value – The paper develops previous discussions in relationship marketing and service marketing of the promise concept and its role in marketing research into a comprehensive marketing framework.

Keywords Marketing theory, Business-to-business marketing, Relationship marketing

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Marketing is about customer management. Marketing should relate the firm to its customers' everyday processes and practices so that value-in-use can be created in those processes. If this is done successfully, in return the firm should be able to capture value out of its customer relationships. Customer management is about making customers buy as well as making sure that they are satisfied with their purchases and that the likelihood is sufficiently high that they are kept and eventually grown into loyal customers. In other words, promises about what a product can do for customers in terms of value creation should be made successfully, and furthermore, the expectation created by these promises should be fulfilled. In the case of standardized consumer products conventional approaches to marketing, such as the marketing mix management approach with its given set of marketing variables, can persuade customers to buy and also make them satisfied with the value created in their practices by what they have bought. The product variable, well managed and geared towards customer processes, may be enough to keep promises made.

In a business-to-business environment as well as in service contexts this is not the case in such a straightforward manner. The market offering does not only include standardized products, but rather a host of various resources and processes that interacts with the customers' resources and processes. A product may be a major part of an extended offering, but today it is seldom enough to fulfill all customer expectations.

Ultimately, such an extended offering provides successful support to the customer's business process. A given everyday customer process (e.g. a production process) is supported by the core of the supplier's extended market offering (e.g. a production machine), whereas the customer's business process is supported by the entire extended offering. Because instead of consisting of more or less a core product only such an extended offering is a process geared towards supporting the customer's business process, it fulfils the characteristics of a service offering (Grönroos, 2000). The physical goods elements of the offering are part of an on-going process of supporting the customer also including a host of other activities and sub-processes, i.e. a process of providing service to the customer. A firm providing an extended offering like this is a service business (Grönroos, 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Even in consumer goods the products often have to be accompanied with other activities such as call centers, FAQs on the internet and other types of services. Conventional marketing approaches and models are developed for situations where the market offering is a more or less standardized product. As the offerings have become more complex marketing's role in and responsibility for total customer management have decreased.

To regain the total customer management process for marketing a new approach is needed. Promise management which goes beyond the set of variables used in conventional marketing and is based on a process view is such an approach. The management of promises has been included in relationship marketing (see, for example, Grönroos, 1999) and also in service marketing (see, for example, Bitner, 1995), but the underpinning logic and scope of it has not been

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developed further. The purpose of the present article is to discuss customer management from the point of view of promise management and explore how marketing can be understood as a process of enabling, making, and keeping promises. Although the present article focuses on business-to-business and service contexts, the promise management approach is not valid for those contexts only, but is of importance for marketing in general.

Marketing – a discipline and business function in crisis

The highly structural approach of conventional marketing with its focus on marketing mix management and the 4 P model (McCarthy, 1960) consisting of a narrow set of decision making variables becomes increasingly a straitjacket for the development of marketing theory and practice alike. Almost regardless of industry and of whether the core of an offering is a service or a physical product or something else the content of customer relationships and the variety of customer contacts have grown far beyond the simplistic customer interfaces which conventional marketing are based on. Research in relationship marketing and service marketing has not only shown that marketing has to renew itself to be able to handle growing and multi-faceted customer interfaces, but also that it has to be developed so that when appropriate it can allow for long-term relationships with customers to develop and to be managed.

It has been claimed that marketing has become overly tactical and that this tactical orientation has removed innovativeness from marketing and prevents marketing from being adaptive to change in the environment (Day and Montgomery, 1999, p. 3). Marketing seems to be losing credibility and hence the marketing function is in decline (see, for example, Webster *et al.*, 2005). A stream of reports from the USA as well as from Europe shows that CEOs have negative impressions of marketing (for example, Chief Executive, 2004; Welch, 2004; Cassidy *et al.*, 2005). According to a large study in the USA reported by McGovern *et al.* (2004), less than 10 per cent of the board's time is spent discussing marketing and customer-related issues.

In a lead section on the need for a "marketing renaissance" in a 2005 issue of the *Journal of Marketing*, distinguished marketing professors voice their concerns regarding the status of marketing theory (*Journal of Marketing*, 2005). In one essay Stephen Brown describes how prominent top management team members representing large firms discussed the importance of the customer to the firm. When discussing how to handle the relation between the firms and their customers, they do not mention marketing at all. In their view marketing does not have an important role in customer management (Brown, 2005). Brown reports: "Notably, none of the executives mentioned marketing as being responsible for the customer" (Brown, 2005, p. 3). He also observes that marketing and sales seem to have a major role in "making promises to customers and generating new business", whereas "the keeping of promises and building customer loyalty is typically considered the responsibility of others in the enterprise" (Brown, 2005, p. 3). These observations that customer management is considered an issue for other organizational functions than marketing and that marketers are given responsibility only for the tactical tasks of persuading customers to buy should be a serious warning signal for marketers, academics and practitioners alike. If marketing is to regain control of the total customer management process, new approaches are truly needed.

The promise concept in relationship marketing

In his ten years old analysis of relationship marketing definitions Harker (1999) found that the one definition that included most common elements of what then could be found in the scholarly literature was the following (Grönroos, 1999, p. 328, slightly modified):

> Relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers (and other parties) so that the objectives regarding economic and other variables of all parties are met. This is achieved through a mutual making and fulfilment of promises

During the decade that has passed since Harker's analysis research does not seem to have changed the fact that this definition is the one that best covers the field (compare Harker and Egan, 2006).

The definition includes two notable aspects, namely it takes a process approach to marketing and it indicates by what means this process proceeds. The process moves from identifying relationships over establishing and maintaining them to enhancing and possibly dissolving them. The means of pursuing this process is making promises and keeping promises that have been made. This part of the definition draws on Henrik Calonius's (1983, 1986, 2006) suggestion of the promise concept as a key construct in marketing. However, as all relationship marketing definitions this definition does not specify in any detail how the marketing process proceeds beyond the notion of establishing, maintaining and enhancing relationships. In the present article the progress of this process will be analysed in detail. Owing to the comprehensive nature of Grönroos's definition quoted above, which already includes the promise concept, it seems only natural to build on it and expand it.

Value creation for customers as the focus of marketing: who creates value and who co-creates?

Sheth and Uslay (2007) have suggested that marketing should take the creation of value for customers as its goal. This is not a new view expressed in the marketing literature. However, until now it has been silenced by marketing's transaction-oriented traditions and models and marketing scholars' preoccupation with exchange. In the 1990s Holbrook (1994, p. 22) stated that the value concept is "... the fundamental basis for all marketing activity" and Rust and Oliver (1994, p. 7) claimed that "... ultimately it is perceived value that attracts a customer or lures away a customer from a competitor". In a relationship marketing context Grönroos (1997, p. 407) observes that "marketing in a relational context is seen as a process that should support the creation of perceived value for customers over time", and Eggert *et al.* (2006, p. 20) state that "offering superior value to customers is essential for creating and maintaining long-term customer-supplier relationships".

In general terms, the goal for marketing can be formulated in the following way:

> The goal for marketing is to engage the firm with the customers' processes with an aim to support value creation in those processes, in a mutually beneficial way.

This formulation corresponds well with the definition of relationship marketing mentioned in the previous section and its notion of marketing as a process of making and keeping promises.

How should value for customers be understood? Who creates value for customers, and who has opportunities to co-create such value? The current research into customer value shows a clear trend away from a value-in-exchange view towards a notion of value being produced not by the supplier, but by the customer when using goods and services and when interacting with the suppliers. According to this research, there is no value for customers until they can make use of a good or a service. Wroe Alderson (1957), whose arguments for a functionalist theory of marketing were geared towards a value-in-use concept (Dixon, 1990, pp. 337-338; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 5), 50 years ago pointed out the superior role of value-in-use: "Goods do not really have utility from the consumer viewpoint until they come into the possession of the ultimate user and form a part of his assortment" (Alderson, 1957, p. 70). The notion that only customers can assess value to goods and services was also expressed by Levitt (1986) in the 1980s. However, this thought was largely ignored by the academic and business communities alike. As Vandermerwe (1996) observed, value is not what goes into goods and services, it is what customer get out of them. From the beginning of the 1990s onward this value-in-use notion (see Woodruff and Gardial, 1996), as opposed to a value-in-exchange view, has been put forward in the marketing and management literature (see, for example, Normann, 2001; Storbacka and Lehtinen, 2001; Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 2002; Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Wikström, 1996; Vandermerwe, 1996; Woodruff and Gardial, 1996; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995, Holbrook, 1994; Jüttner and Wehrli, 1994; Normann and Ramirez, 1993; Monroe, 1991; to mention a few references).

In 1979 in a service marketing context Grönroos concluded that "it is … reasonable to consider both goods and services to be bought by consumers in order to give some service or value satisfaction" and continued "a good represents potential value (or utility) for the consumer. He purchases the good and subsequently he has to initiate and implement the activities required to transform this potential value into real value for him. … A service is in itself an activity … with in-built ability to transform the potential value (or utility) for the consumer into real value for him" (Grönroos, 1979, p. 86).

The value-in-use notion indicates that value is created in the customers' processes, and moreover that the customers are in charge of their value creation. Hence, the customers are the value creators[1]. They do not receive ready-made value embedded in products, but the value they perceive is dependant on how well they can make use of these products (Grönroos, 2008). This is the fundamental idea of value-in-use. Hence, from a value point of view the goal of marketing is not only to persuade customers to buy but also to assist customers' use of what they have bought so that value-in-use is created for them in their processes. However, what is the role of firms in customers' value creation. Obviously, if value for customers is not readily produced by firms and embedded in products, firms are not value creators. Their task is, first of all, to develop and provide such products that can be used by customers in their everyday processes and practices in a value-creating way. This can be labeled "value facilitation". In addition to this, firms can also take another more active role in customers' value creation. Research into service marketing points out the importance to marketing of the interactions between the firm and its customers (interactive marketing; see Grönroos, 2000). These interactions enable the firm not only to facilitate customers' value creation but also, in a direct and active way, to influence the customers' perception of quality and therefore also the customers' creation of value-in-use. Hence, here during such interactions the firm and the customers together influence the value that is created in the customers' processes. Consequently, although the customers are the ultimate creator of value for themselves, during the interactions the firm gets an opportunity to co-create value with its customers (see Grönroos, 2008). To understand this it is important to realize that "… contrary to the views expressed in the conventional literature on value creation and value-in-use, it is not the customers who get opportunities to engage themselves in the supplier's processes, but rather the supplier can create opportunities to engage itself with its customers' value-generating processes" (Grönroos, 2008, p. 307). This is a truly outside-in customer-centric view.

The supplier's process and the customer's corresponding process proceed partly simultaneously as parallel processes, but from a value creation perspective they merge into one joint value co-creation process where both parties are active as a resource inside each other's processes. The customer can directly influence the supplier's actions, and by its actions the supplier can influence the customer directly as part of the customer's value creation. From a marketing point of view it is essential to observe that during the joint value co-creation process the supplier is part of the customers' processes and thus also part of their value fulfilment. This provides marketing with a new possibility. A supplier providing goods only without engaging itself with its customers' processes can make value propositions only or only suggest what value the customers should be able to create out of the resources they buy. However, a supplier that has developed an extended market offering including the management of interactions with its customers and hence joint value co-creation opportunities with them is not restricted to making value propositions only. Owing to these joint value co-creation opportunities it can engage itself with the customers' value fulfilment as well and directly support such value fulfilment (Grönroos, 2008)[2].

In Figure 1, as a summary of the discussion in this section, the relationships between production and value creation on one hand and between production, co-production and value co-creation on the other hand are illustrated.

Making value propositions and supporting value creation

Taking value creation as the focus for marketing requires the firm to make customers aware of the value potential of its offering. Value proposition is a concept used in marketing. However, a value proposition is a suggested value that has not been realized yet, whereas customer value is real value. Suggested value must be followed up by value fulfillment. As Gummesson (2008) notes, value propositions belong to the firm's sphere, whereas value actualization or value fulfillment,

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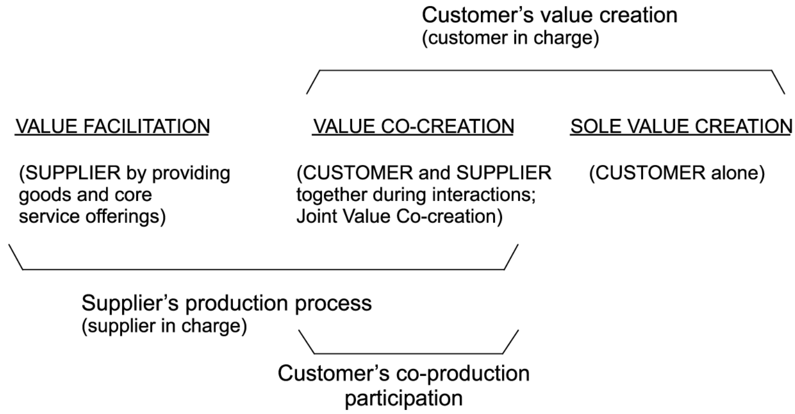
Figure 1 Value creation from a value-in-use perspective: value creation, value facilitation, and value co-creation as well as production and co-production



where the promise of the value proposition is fulfilled, takes place in the customers' sphere. Hence, customer management is more than making value propositions. It also includes the process of supporting customers' value creation, where in the best case the suggested value is transformed into real value. Frequently the term "delivering value to customers" is used, but this is not an accurate description of reality. If value for customers does not exist before products are used, value cannot be delivered. Instead customers' value creation can be assisted or supported by a firm.

Hence, marketing includes, on one hand, creating and making value propositions and, on the other hand, supporting customers' value creation to achieve value fulfillment. First of all, the firm supports customers' value creation by facilitating it with products that fit their processes in a value-creating way, i.e. with products that indeed function well in the customers' processes. This is a rather passive way of supporting the customers. The firm is not engaged with the customers' processes. By building on existing firm-customer interactions or by creating such interactions, the firm can strive to create opportunities to engage itself with the customers' processes. By creating interactions with its customers the firm can actively and directly take part in and influence their value creation. Such interactions occur in a range of service processes, but also, for example, through the provision of information and advice, in complaints handling and service recovery processes, in invoicing and order handling routines and in *ad hoc* interactions with customer representatives. Because the latter type of activities normally are not seen, nor managed as services for the customers and therefore most often are perceived by them as nuisances rather than as support to their processes, these kinds of services are labeled "hidden services" (Grönroos, 2000, p. 2).

On consumer markets value for customers is often a perception and is difficult to measure in monetary terms. As business is always conducted by human beings, also on business-to-business markets value takes the form of a perception, for example in the form of trust in and commitment to a supplier, but only partly. In addition, what a supplier is doing for a customer will always have some effect on the economic result of the customer's operations, i.e. on how profitable the business process is. The profitability of a business is dependant of how well various processes in the firm (order making, storing, producing, maintaining, paying, having mistakes corrected, etc.) function not only in terms of operational efficiency and effectiveness but also of how they support either the firm's growth- and revenue-generating capacity (growth opportunities, premium pricing) or cost level (operating and administrative costs), or both. And how well such processes function and have positive effects on revenues and costs is dependant of how well they are supported by the firm's suppliers. Hence, the roots of a firm's economic result can be traced back to how well the firm's various business processes are supported by its suppliers, in terms of the revenue and cost effects created by this support.

In summary, through value facilitation and value co-creation jointly with its customers the firm supports its customers' value creation and enables their value fulfilment. If this value fulfilment is not handled successfully the customer management process has failed and, thus, marketing has failed as well.

The *locus* of customer management and marketing

Traditionally, responsibility for marketing is given to one organizational unit and marketing is considered one function among other organizational functions. In the marketing literature the terms marketing, marketing function and marketing department are also most frequently used interchangeably almost as synonyms. This approach to understanding marketing has been successful for standardized consumer goods. However, already in consumer durables where delivering, installing and repairing equipment as well as customer advice may be important to success the marketing department and a separate marketing function will find it difficult to handle and influence the total customer interface. In services and business-to-business often with enduring customer relationships this is even more evident. Alone a marketing function and marketing department cannot support the customers' value-creating processes and take total responsibility for the fulfillment of value propositions (compare Brown, 2005). Other processes, such as service interactions, repair and maintenance, logistics, call centers, service recovery and complaints handling, have an often critical responsibility for supporting customers' value creation. Few of these processes, often none of them are part of the marketing function and the responsibility of the marketing department, and the marketing department/ marketing function has limited or no means of influencing how they are planned and implemented.

Both relationship marketing (e.g. Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Grönroos, 1999; Gummesson, 2002) and service marketing (e.g. Booms and Bitner, 1982; Gummesson, 1991; Grönroos, 2000; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1988; Brown and Bitner, 2006) as well as the IMP approach to business-to-business marketing in networks (e.g. Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) show that marketing cannot be separated into one function and be the responsibility of one department only. In service marketing the links between marketing, operations and human resources has for a long time already been recognized (Gummesson, 1991; Booms and Bitner, 1982; Eiglier and Langeard, 1975; Langeard and Eiglier, 1987; Grönroos, 2000; Lovelock, 2000). Relationship marketing and the IMP approach have come to similar conclusions (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Grönroos, 1999; Gummesson, 2002). In addition, in his studies Webster has pointed out the need for dispersing a marketing competence outside the marketing department and across the organization (Webster, 1992 and Webster *et al.*, 2005). Value propositions may be communicated by a separate function, but the firm's engagement with the fulfillment of these propositions cannot. A number of other organizational functions get involved, and if those other functions do not take a customer focus, value will not emerge in the customers' processes and marketing will probably fail.

Hence, for value to emerge in the customers' processes, everyone who is involved in both developing and communicating value propositions and providing value support to customers' processes in various customer interfaces are part of customer management and have to take a customer focus in planning and implementing what they are doing. For people in the marketing department, including sales, focus on the customer is a full-time duty and comes naturally. For people in other departments and processes, such as operations, logistics, repair and maintenance, service recovery and complaints handling, product and service development, human resource management, investment, IT and others, other duties are in focus, either equally important or more important and most often perceived as more important than a customer focus. However, irrespective of whether taking a customer focus is of major or marginal importance for them, it should always be part of their duties, not on a full-time scale but as Gummesson (1991) puts it as "part-time marketers".

Hence, it can be concluded that a customer focus is part of not only what in the conventional marketing literature and vocabulary is called the marketing function, but of many other organizational functions as well (compare Piercy, 1985; Gummesson, 1991; Grönroos, 1999; Brown, 2005; Brown and Bitner, 2006). Defining marketing as a duty for one organizational function will only work in cases where the value support to customers' processes is embedded in standardized goods. In other situations marketing cannot solely be the responsibility of one separate function and handled by full-time marketers only.

Marketing as making, keeping and enabling promises

The promise concept introduced in the early 1980s in the marketing literature by Calonius is partly founded on an observation by Levitt (1981, p. 96):

> When prospective customers can't experience the product in advance, they are asked to buy what are essentially promises – promises of satisfaction. Even tangible, testable, feelable, smellable products are, before they are bought, largely just promises.

Berry (1995) claims that the fulfilment of promises made to customers is the foundation for retaining customers and maintaining relationships with them. Calonius (1986, p. 518, 2006, p. 422) defines promises as:

> . . .a more or less explicitly expressed conditional declaration or assurance made to another party, or to oneself, with respect to the future, stating that one will do or refrain from some specific act, or that one will give or bestow some specific thing.

Some of the marketing activities and processes, such as communicating and pricing, aim at making promises. Promises are kept by other activities and processes such as order taking, deliveries, repair and maintenance, recovery of problems and mistakes and call center advice, to mention only a few. Moreover, promises cannot be expected to be successfully kept by the firm unless its employees are willing and motivated to do so. Internal marketing, a concept originating in service marketing research (e.g. Eiglier and Langeard, 1976; Berry, 1981; Grönroos, 1999) and later also used in relationship marketing (e.g. Dunne and Barnes, 2000; Ballantyne, 2003), becomes important for marketing success. Employees involved in the fulfillment of promises, regardless of their position in the organization, have to take a customer focus. Bitner (1995) called this enabling promises. However, enabling promises also means that other resources than employees, such as goods, IT and other systems, physical resources and information, and also including as a resource external people such as the customer himself or herself and network partner employees, have to be developed in ways that support the fulfillment of promises (Grönroos, 2000). Enabling promises becomes an integral part of the process of making and keeping promises.

The role of expectations

Keeping promises may not be a straightforward issue. Promises made may be perceived differently by the marketer and the customer. Moreover, a value proposition may be perceived differently by different customers. Hence, expectations that vary from person to person and even from situation to situation may be created. As Ojasalo (2001) has pointed out in a study of professional services relationships, customers have implicit expectations among explicit ones, and customers easily expect that these should be fulfilled as well. In addition, there may be fuzzy expectations that customers have and which do not transform into explicit ones until customers experience the product. Moreover, some expectations are unrealistic and if such expectations are not made realistic customers are bound become disappointed (Ojasalo, 2001).

Hence, managing expectations cannot be neglected. It is not the promises made as such that should be kept, but the individual expectations created by these promises.

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Marketing as promise management defined

Based on the discussion of the role of promises in customer management and of value creation as the goal for marketing in the previous sections, the following promise management definition of marketing can be formulated (Grönroos, 2006, p. 407):

> Marketing is a customer focus that permeates organizational functions and processes and is geared towards making promises through value proposition, enabling the fulfilment of individual expectations created by such promises and fulfilling such expectations through assistance to customers' value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation in the firm's a well as its customers' and other stakeholders' processes[3].

In this definition value creation is the goal for marketing. Moreover, it revolves around the promise concept, including promise making and promise keeping and as a prerequisite the enabling of promises. Developing, pricing and communicating value propositions are examples of what promise making may include. Promises are enabled by, for example, internal marketing and the development of customer-focused goods and other tangible items, service processes, technologies, IT and other systems as well as by appropriate leadership and by helping customers to use goods and services that have been delivered as well as to take part in the customer-firm interactions in a way that supports value creation in the customers' processes. In that way a favorable marketing impact can be achieved. Expectations created by promises are kept by providing assistance to customers' value creation. This is done by providing resources and processes – goods, services, information and people, systems, infrastructures, physical resources – and interactions between the customer and these resources and processes as well as by mobilizing customers as a resource in the purchasing and usage processes. The customers must be able to use goods and services and information as well as to handle systems and infrastructures in value-creating way. Otherwise value is not created in their everyday processes and value fulfillment does not take place.

Unlike marketing mix management the promise management approach does not include a list of variables that are the decision making areas of marketing. Any list such as the 4 Ps become obsolete and easily turn into a law-like guideline and a hindrance for innovation and renewal (Kent, 1986). Hence, promise management approaches what should be planned and implemented as marketing as any resource, system or activity that support value formation in customers' processes by making promises, enabling these processes, and fulfilling expectations created by them. If a service technician, through his way of doing a repair or maintenance task, increases the customer's interest in continuing doing business with him or his employer, he is a marketing resource performing a marketing activity. Or if a call center functions in way that makes users trust the assistance they get and like the way they get it from this call center, the system guiding the call center's work and the people working there are marketing resources performing marketing activities. Or a secretary taking care of a potential customer's representatives attending a sales meeting, who through her way of caring for them during the meeting makes this potential customer choose her employer's offering over competing offerings of a similar quality, performs a marketing activity and is thus a marketing resource. All these examples are empirically documented, and there is an abundance of similar examples. What happens is that a customer's or potential customer's some everyday process is supported in a way that creates a favorable value experience, and as a consequence the likelihood of a positive purchasing decision grows.

Consequently, anything can be a marketing resource and marketing activity, as long as it influences the customers' willingness to buy and their perception of how value is created in their processes. If such value fulfillment takes place, the likelihood that customers will continue patronizing the same supplier grows and this is a positive marketing impact. What it takes to do this efficiently and effectively will vary from industry to industry and context to context, and even from customer to customer, and it can change over time.

Furthermore, as soon as the offerings provided to customers are more complicated and include more content than standardized goods, one single organizational function cannot take responsibility for total marketing. Making promises can probably be handled by one single function and, for example, by one marketing department. However, keeping promises is the responsibility of several functions. Therefore, several organizational functions have to take a customer focus and take a responsibility for marketing. What traditionally is called the marketing function, including for example market research, advertising and other means of marketing communication, as well as sales will be to one hundred percent focused on the customer, whereas other functions such as product and service development, manufacturing and service operations, logistics, repair and maintenance, call center activities, service recovery and complaints handling, where ever they are located in the organization, will have to be part-time focused on customers. Hence, marketing as a customer focus is a dimension among others of the planning and implementing of the tasks of these functions.

Finally, enabling promises, including internal marketing and other development processes, is explicitly included in the definition. If this internal support is missing or not taken care of in an adequate manner, it will be difficult to support customers' value-generating processes in a proper way and marketing will fail.

Implications for marketing research and practice

The promise management view of marketing has several advantages for marketing research (see Grönroos, 2006). First of all, it gears marketing towards the value-in-use notion and places marketing at the center of supporting customers' value-creating processes and value fulfillment. By including the support of value fulfillment as a key task for marketing it pinpoints the opportunity for the firm to not only serve as value facilitator by providing ready-made products but also to directly co-create customer value with its customers.

Second, marketing as promise management is based on the very nature of marketing as a process. It helps shifting the interest from structure to process. Traditionally, marketing has been overly preoccupied with structural elements and neglected the importance of process. If the process has been recognized at all, it has been done so in an implicit manner only. Of course, structural elements from conventional marketing definitions such as price and marketing communication are still important to study, but they need to be put into a process perspective.

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Third, promise management integrates marketing with consumption and usage. Traditionally, marketing ends with the purchase decision and what takes place after that is seen as a black box. However, the joint value co-creation with customers that takes place during interactions enables the firm to penetrate this black box. This direct involvement with the customers' usage processes makes it possible to extend the marketing impact into these processes. The customer may, for example, interact with service processes, a call center, an ATM or a vending machine, an internet web site, a telecommunication infrastructure, a delivery, installation, repair and maintenance service, a service recovery or complaints handling process, and with people, technologies, systems, information and tangible goods involved in such interactions. In many of these interactions the firm can react to the customers' expectations and even, if needed and possible, adjust such expectations, thereby providing better support to the customers' value creation. This has an impact on the customers' future purchasing behavior and on customer retention. Consequently, it has a marketing impact. Hence, the management of these interactions is part of the marketing process.

Moreover, recognizing the importance of the interactions and the firm's opportunities to perform as value co-creators jointly with their customers points out that also other business functions than the conventional marketing function have a role in marketing. From a promise management perspective marketing becomes a customer focus that should permeate organizational functions and processes. Today the content of customer interfaces has grown far beyond what a one-function marketing approach can take responsibility for.

Finally, the promise management approach recognizes the fact that everyone involved in interactions with customers are not automatically customer focused. According to conventional approaches marketing activities are supposed to be performed by marketing professionals, the full-time marketers only. Hence, preparing marketers for their duties has not been a central issue for marketing and for marketing research. By definition full-time marketers are supposed to be customer oriented. Part-time marketers are not expected to exist and, therefore, conventional marketing approaches neither include ways of coping with them, nor create any interest in studying and managing them from a marketing perspective. Enabling promises explicitly points out the need to prepare employees who are not trained as marketers and whose main task is not marketing for their customer-related duties.

From a marketing practice point of view conventional marketing approaches with their focus on one function, exchange of pre-produced value and a structure, a set of marketing variables, rather than process have become a hindrance for developing marketing in accordance with changes in the business environment, at least for other types of products than standardized goods. As a consequence, marketing has lost its control of total customer management and its credibility has eroded. Promise management helps marketing to break free from the one-function, marketing department based view where only full-time marketers are recognized. Its process nature helps locate the firm's true marketing resources and activities and guides planning and budgeting procedures to include all these resources and activities and not only what the marketing department is doing.

Hence, because developing and managing marketing according to the promise management approach can make the management and execution of all customer contacts customer focused, and not those managed by the marketing department only, marketing becomes more relevant for the customers of a firm. In order to become loyal to a firm, promise making and the creation of brand awareness is not enough for its customers. However, if both making value propositions and managing value fulfillment are part of one integrated marketing process, the likelihood grows that customer loyalty is created. If this is the case, marketing also becomes more relevant for top management, and in the final analysis for the firm's shareholders as well.

Using a structural approach to marketing, such as marketing mix management, it has been comparatively uncomplicated to organize marketing, and to plan and execute marketing programs. It has been possible to treat marketing as one function separated from other business functions. The downside of this is that these other business functions easily are viewed as non-marketing. The process-based promise management approach is far less uncomplicated to understand and to use. It will be less straightforward to define which the marketing resources and activities to use are in any given situation. Moreover, what is included among the marketing resources and activities will vary from situation to situation. For example, with changes in the customer base, in customer preferences and purchasing and usage behavior, in the competitive situations and actions by competitors, and in the business environment the resources and activities that should be included in the marketing process will change. Such changes may take place slowly or they may occur almost instantly.

The promise management approach is intellectually more demanding, less straightforward to teach in classrooms and to use in practice, and planning and executing marketing according to it will take more time and efforts, and sometimes perhaps more resources. Corporate cultures and firm's governance systems as well as university curricula may have to be changed. Substantial barriers for change may exist. On the other hand, when critical strategic changes has been called for, such barriers have never been unmanageable hindrances for organizations.

As a final remark, adopting a promise management approach to customer management may help spreading an active interest in a firm's customers and in supporting the customers' everyday practices and processes outside the sphere of marketing and sales professionals and throughout the organization. In this way marketing could regain its lost responsibility for customer management and once again become relevant for the firm's customers, top management and shareholders.

Notes

1 In the discussion of a service-dominant logic invariably the customer is said to be a co-creator of value (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The reason for this may be that the concepts of production and co-production on one hand and value creation and value co-creation on the other hand have been mixed up. In their 2004 article Vargo and Lusch (2004, pp. 10-11) state that customers are always co-producers, which is correct. Because the firm is in charge of the production process, customers are allowed

to engage themselves with this process and thus become co-producers. However, as the customers are in charge of their value creation, they are the value creators and the firm may be allowed to engage itself with the customers' value creation during customer-firm interactions, and become co-creators of value with the customers. (Grönroos, 2008)

2 In the discussion of a service-dominant logic it is claimed that the firm can only make value propositions (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 11; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). This conclusion must be based on a view that during customer-firm interactions the firm's and the customer's processes flow in parallel without being integrated, and hence the firm's actions during such interactions are only additional signals that may influence the customer's value creation and thus only extended value propositions. However, the two parties' processes do not only run in parallel but are integrated into one joint value co-creation process. Therefore, the firm's actions have a much more profound effect and form an integrated element of the customer's value creation. Hence, the firm can be directly engaged with its customers' value fulfillment.

3 This marketing definition based on a promise management approach is originally developed in Grönroos (2006).

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