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# Customer Engagement as a New Perspective in Customer Management

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## Abstract

Since 2000, customer management (CM) research has evolved and has had a significant impact on the marketing discipline. In an increasingly networked society where customers can interact easily with other customers and firms through social networks and other new media, the authors propose that customer engagement is an important new development in CM. Customer engagement is considered as a behavioral manifestation toward the brand or firm that goes beyond transactions. The authors propose a conceptual model of the antecedents, impediments, and firm consequences of customer engagement and relate this model to seven articles appearing in the special issue on customer engagement.

## Keywords

customer relationship management, customer lifetime value, word-of-mouth, customer loyalty

## Introduction

A Thought Leadership Conference with the title “Managing the Interface between Firms and Customers” was held in Montabaur, Germany from September 10–12, 2009. It was jointly hosted by the University of Cologne (Werner Reinartz), the University of Groningen (Peter Verhoef), and the University of Münster (Manfred Krafft). Like the previous Thought Leadership Conferences at Boston College and at the University of Connecticut, it brought together a diverse set of scholars and managers from around the world to discuss and debate the advancement of the customer management (CM) field. This article attempts to create an introduction both to the overall conference theme as well as to the set of articles that came out of the conference group discussions.

The conceptual shift from a product-centric to a customer-centric organization has been a topic for discussion for more than a decade (Day 1999; Webster 1992). Despite the rhetoric and its conceptual appeal, the change to customer-centric organizations has, in reality, been slow (Webster, Malter, and Ganesan 2005). Yet, in recent years, significant activities, in both managerial practice and academia, have emerged around the concept of CM (Boulding et al. 2005), representing a step closer to creating a stronger customer centricity. In fact, the management of customer relationships has become a top priority for many companies. In many competitive markets, businesses invest heavily in CM implementation (Bohling et al. 2006).

In managerial practice, these activities seemed to revolve for a long time around IT-related questions and practices (CSO Insights 2006). At times, the notion of CRM even had a certain negative connotation in a number of firms because of failed IT-based efforts (CSO Insights 2006; Zablah, Bellenger, and

Johnston 2004). Still at the same, CRM practices have gained firm ground in most sectors and businesses due to the ability to cater to customers on a more granular or even individual level. In fact, in spite of the many teething problems, it is hard to imagine a world without CM in most organizations.

In academia, the investigations in the realm of CM have primarily focused on two large streams. Behind the first stream is the idea that customers represent an asset to organizations. However, before firms start to manage those assets, they must document and measure those assets. Thus, the goal in this first stream is to measure and assess various forms of customer value to the organization and to relate it to its respective drivers and outcomes (Reinartz and Kumar 2000, 2003). Related to this aspect of measurement is the idea of allocating resources to individual customers (Rust and Verhoef 2005; Venkatesan and Kumar 2004). Today, as a result of these efforts, we have a much better understanding about the various metrics of the customer's value to the organization, how those measures relate to each other, and how they can be used for resource allocation decisions.

In the second major stream, researchers have been preoccupied with the idea of how to embed the process of CM

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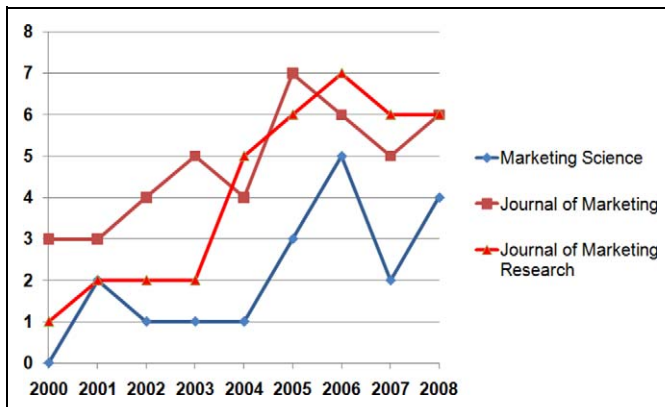
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**Figure 1.** Number of articles dedicated to CM published in three major journals (2000–2008).

effectively in the organization and how to conceptualize the associated mechanisms and drivers (Becker, Greve, and Albers 2009; Ernst et al. 2010; Jayachandran et al. 2005; Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer 2004). As a result of this avenue of investigation, we know, for example, that technology-driven CM initiatives (which de facto most initiatives are in practice) are only likely to succeed when underpinned by significant alignment of the organizational routines and structures.

Looking at CM research another way is to analyze the research productivity around the topic. For example, in the period 2000–2007, 5 of the 10 most cited articles in the *Journal of Marketing* were dedicated to CM-related topics. Moreover, from 2005 to 2007, even two of the three most cited articles were dealing with CM issues. The importance of the topic is also reflected in the increasing number of articles in three major marketing journals (see Figure 1). The trend in these major journals (*Journal of Marketing*, *Marketing Science* and *Journal of Marketing Research*) on CM-related articles is substantially positive. This observation lends further support to the hypothesis that the subject has become both an established and still important aspect of the discipline. Moreover, CM still generates new topics due to its inherent innovative nature, as new developments in IT, channels, media, and society constantly affect customer-to-firm interactions.

Nevertheless, researchers who are working within this subtopic as well as practitioners are asking for and are watching out for the next frontier. How is the practice of CM developing and what are the associated research questions? The objective of the 2009 Thought Leadership Conference on Customer Management (September 10–12) zoomed in on exactly this question. Researchers from around the world assembled in Montabaur, Germany, to discuss this very next frontier. The results of this conference discussion are presented in this issue of the *Journal of Service Research*. As such, this issue presents some of the latest thinking with respect to the evolving CM research stream.

This issue follows up on two previously published, very successful, issues of *JSR*. The first one on the subject of “Customer Equity Management: Charting New Directions for the

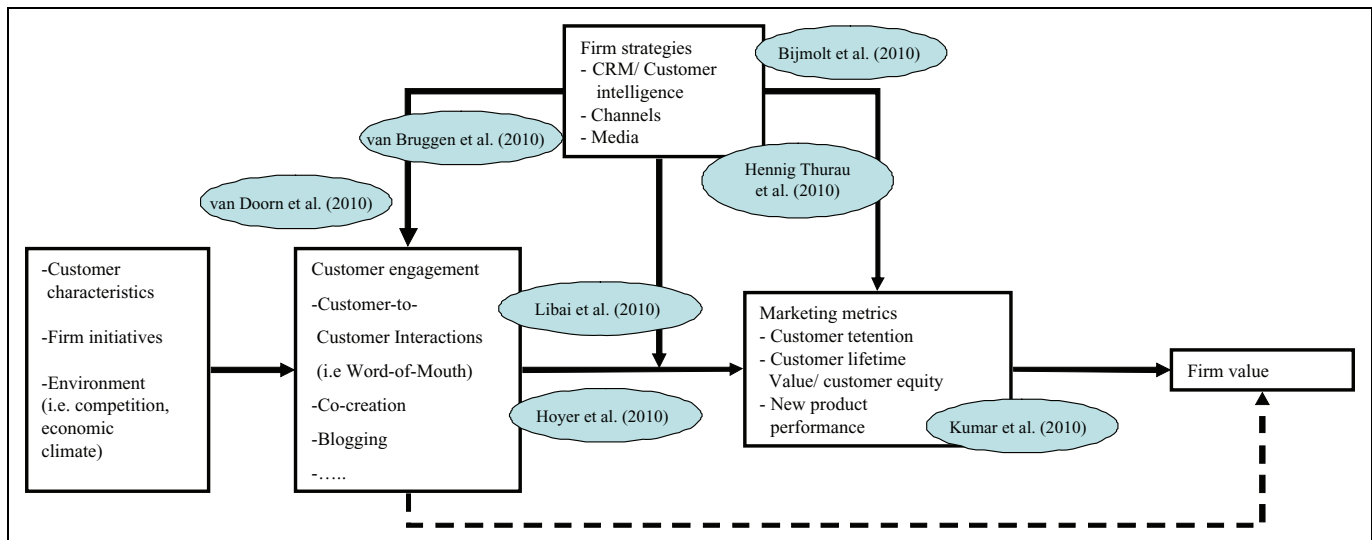
Future of Marketing” was published in 2002 (Hogan, Lemon, and Rust 2002). The second one on the subject of “Managing Customers for Value” was published in 2006 (Kumar, Lemon, and Parasuraman 2006). Both issues have had significant impact on the discipline at large. As of mid-April 2010, the average Google scholar citation count across all articles in the 2002 special issue is 80 (highest count 123) and the average Google scholar citation count across all articles in the 2006 special issue is 37.3 (highest count 64). This attests to the substantial interest the entirety of articles has stirred within the community.

A key focus of this 3rd conference was the notion of “customer engagement.” Therefore, we first develop the notion of customer engagement within the context of CM. Followed by that, we present a framework that aligns the contributions of the various individual articles as the outcome of the conference’s seven working groups.

### Customer Engagement as a NEW Perspective

In an increasingly networked society where customers can interact easily with other customers and firms through social networks and other new media, non-transactional customer behavior is likely to become more important in the near future. Moreover, we observe that firms are increasingly pursuing strategies steering non-transactional behavior. For example, leisure firms proactively ask recent customers to provide ratings on independent comparison websites. Recently, Lays’ chips asked customers to develop a new chips flavor in a contest. The winner will receive 1% of the turnover of the resulting new product. Firms also understand potential strong negative consequences of non-transactional behavior, if not managed properly. In this issue, we focus on customer engagements as an overarching construct capturing non-transactional customer behavior. In their article in this issue, van Doorn et al. (2010) explicitly state that *customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions, and may be specifically defined as a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers.*

So far, CM research has mainly focused on the transactional side of the relationship. Multiple researchers have investigated the antecedents of customer behavior (i.e., retention and cross-buying) and have developed methods to predict this behavior (e.g., Fader and Hardie 2007; Reinartz and Kumar 2000; Verhoef 2003), while others have focused on customer lifetime value (CLV) and customer equity as important overarching customer metrics (Gupta, Lehmann, and Stuart 2004; Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml 2004; Venkatesan and Kumar 2004; see Gupta and Zeithaml 2006 and Verhoef, van Doorn and Dorotic 2007, for overviews). Despite the strong focus on the transactional side on the relationship, especially word of mouth (WOM) as a form of non-transactional behavior has gained sufficient attention in the existing literature (e.g., Luo 2009; Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002; Villanueva and Hanssens 2008). Although for firms the transactional side of the



**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of customer engagement.

relationship is fairly important, as it usually creates immediate cash flows for the firm, ignoring non-transactional behavior may create lost opportunities (i.e., pursuing growth through WOM; joint development of new products/services through cocreation) or may have detrimental effects when it is ignored (i.e., negative ratings on websites). Moreover, customers may be valued wrongly when customer engagement is not taken into account (Kumar et al. 2010). This wrong valuation may potentially create a misallocation of resources across customers. Moreover, one may calculate wrong returns on marketing actions (Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml 2004). We thus posit that CM research requires an additional perspective and that customer engagement is a very important new research stream within CM. Importantly, The Marketing Science Institute considers research on customer engagement as one of the top priorities in the coming years (Marketing Science Institute [MSI] 2010).

## A Conceptual Model of Customer Engagement

In Figure 2, we present our conceptual model on customer engagement, which is based on the articles published in this special issue. In this conceptual model, we also show how each article in the special issue fits in this model. Customer engagement consists of multiple behaviors such as WOM, blogging, providing customer ratings, and so on. van Doorn et al. (2010) specifically discuss multiple dimensions of customer engagement, which include valence, form and modality, scope, impact, and customers' purpose. They also propose that customer characteristics, firm initiatives, and the environment (or as they state context factor) affect customer engagement behaviors. Subsequently, customer engagement may affect marketing metrics, which subsequently should affect firm value (e.g., Lehmann 2004). Importantly, van Doorn et al. (2010) also discuss consequences of customer engagement for individual customers (i.e., improved financial decision making)

and societal consequences (i.e., consumer welfare and economic surplus). We do not include these consequences in this model, as we follow the CM tradition in which the focus is on customer behavior and CLV and their impact on firm value (Bolton, Lemon, and Verhoef 2004). In the model, we also allow customer engagement to have a direct impact on firm value, which is based on existing research showing effects of WOM on the stock market (e.g., Luo 2009).

Customer engagement can take different forms. Within this special issue, two articles specifically focus on two specific forms. Libai and coauthors (2010) discuss the extant knowledge on customer-to-customer interactions, which has become even more important due to the rise of new (social) media. They describe different dimensions of customer-to-customer interactions, including observational learning (i.e., imitation) versus verbal communication, online versus offline, dyadic versus group flows, and organic versus amplified interactions. They also discuss the specific roles of networks and structures and how different contexts influence customer-to-customer interactions. Hence, likewise with van Doorn et al. (2010), they clearly acknowledge the important role of contextual factors in shaping customer engagement. Hoyer et al. (2010) extensively discuss effects of customer cocreation in new product development (NPD). They define cocreation in this context as “*a collaborative new product development (NPD) activity in which consumers actively contribute and select various elements of a new product offering.*” Although, multiple studies have investigated customer adoptions as a value-creating customer behavior (e.g., Hogan, Lemon, and Libai 2003; Prins and Verhoef 2007; Prins, Verhoef, and Franses 2009), CM research has usually ignored the potential important role of customers in NPD (for an exception, see Ernst et al. 2010). Interestingly, Hoyer et al. (2010) discuss the specific roles of customer cocreation throughout the whole NPD process.

As shown in Figure 2, customer engagement has an impact on important marketing metrics. Moreover, Hoyer et al. (2010)

discuss the consequences of customer cocreation for NPD performance. One of the largest contributions of CM research has been the introduction of CLV as an important additional new marketing metric, which is relevant for firm valuation, marketing strategy decisions and resource allocation across customers (e.g., Gupta, Lehmann, and Stuart 2004; Hogan, Lemon, and Rust 2002; Rust, Lemon and Zeithaml 2004; Venkatesan and Kumar 2004). Kumar et al. (2010) strongly emphasize that ignoring customer engagement may lead to an undervaluation or overvaluation of customers. They introduce customer engagement value (CEV) as an overarching new customer value metric that includes both value from transactions (CLV) and value from non-transactional behavior. Importantly, they distinguish three non-transactional values: customer referral value (CRV), customer influence value (CIV) and customer knowledge value (CKV). In their conceptualization of CEV, they disagree with van Doorn et al. (2010) that customer engagement only involves behavior that goes beyond transactions. Following the conceptualization of van Doorn et al. (2010), CLV would remain the overarching customer value metric to which the value resulting from customer engagement (i.e., CRV, CIV, and CKV) should be added. Apparently, there is thus some level of disagreement between academics on what Customer Engagement and the resulting CEV involve. We follow the line of arguments by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI 2010) and van Doorn et al. (2010) that customer engagement involves behavior that goes beyond transactions. It is an interesting issue for further academic debate on how to conceptualize customer engagement and CEV.

In the proposed conceptual model, we also consider some impediments of customer engagement: CRM and customer intelligence strategies, channel strategies, and media strategies, which have an effect in our model in different ways. On the one side, they may directly influence customer engagement. For example, the use of rating systems on websites may induce customers to provide more feedback to firms. On the other side, they may also moderate the effects of antecedents of customer engagement. For example, providing certain incentives to customers to be involved in customer engagement activities may cause that the effects of customer characteristics (i.e., customer identity) on customer engagement behavior become less strong. We also assume direct effects on marketing performance. For example, using resource allocation strategies based on CLV models may increase the value of the customer base (Venkatesan and Kumar 2004), and stimulating customers to use multiple channels may increase customer profitability (e.g., Kumar and Venkatesan 2005).

In this special issue, three articles discuss each of the proposed inhibitors of customer engagement. In these articles, not only strategic firm initiatives are discussed but also some general external developments (e.g., developments in social media), which in itself influence customer relationships and customer engagement. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) have specifically pursued this idea and discuss the impact of new media on customer relationships. They argue that new media, such as Facebook, YouTube, Google and Twitter, will threaten long-

established business models and corporate strategies. They provide a managerial and theoretically interesting discussion of key characteristics of new media and subsequently discuss how these new media affect several facets of customer-to-firm interactions and customer relationships. In their article on channels, Van Bruggen et al. (2010) take a stronger strategic perspective. The increasing number of available channels (e.g., Neslin et al. 2006) leading to marketing channel multiplicity forces firms to develop explicit channel strategies. Van Bruggen and coauthors also put forward a conceptual discussion on how this channel multiplicity affects marketing channels theory. One of the interesting discussed issues concern the broadening nature of channels of distribution due to the transformation of products to digital representations of (customer) experiences. They also provide an in-depth discussion of channel leadership, which have implications for the ownership of the customer. Finally, Bijmolt et al. (2010) discuss past accomplishments in modeling customer transactional behavior (i.e., customer selection, customer retention, and cross-buying) within marketing science. They argue that there is a lack of modeling approaches applicable for customer engagement behavior. There have been some developments in WOM modeling, where they specifically mention the use of agent-based models (see also Libai et al. 2010). Furthermore, they provide an interesting and practical relevant discussion on barriers for using customer data effectively within the firm.

## Conclusion

Customer engagement promises to become a fruitful new research area within CM. We hope that this special issue on this topic will create a strong research interest in customer engagement. The articles published in this special issue all have come up with relevant and interesting avenues for future research in each of the relevant topics central and related to customer engagement. Given its current relevance, the important underlying theoretical constructs, its important implications for firm performance, and the enduring interest in CM research, we believe that this special issue will be able to inspire multiple new research projects.

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