

# Relationship marketing with the supply chain a prerequisite for business sustainability

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*The supply chain is a network of suppliers, production capacities, warehouses, wholesale and retail centres through which the raw materials are purchased, transformed and delivered to consumers and users. In order to integrate the commercial and economic activities at the supply chain level there is a need of developing tight relationships between the customer and the supplier. Therefore, it is justified to approach the supply chain from a relationship perspective and the relationship marketing tools are perfectly applicable on the business to business market. A relationship oriented approach of the supply chain can create value for all stakeholders; therefore bring a substantial contribution to the sustainability of the business, through objectives such as social equity, economic efficiency and environmental performance. This paper emphasizes the results of a research regarding the manner in which Romanian companies from the business to business*

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*market are using relationship marketing to build and develop the relationship with their suppliers.*

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### **Introduction**

The context of the development of the marketing theory has undergone significant changes both at international and global market levels and in different national economies. The emergence of the relationship marketing concept was due to the various features existing in different economic sectors, towards which the customers are manifesting specific buying behaviours, thus influencing the nature of the business relationships (Onete et al., 2008).

Relationship marketing has been defined by many authors, but one of the definitions describing the overall market approach was given by Ch. Grönroos (1994). According to him, the goals of relationship marketing are to “identify and establish, maintain and develop relationships with customers and other parties involved in the smooth running of the organization, resulting in a profit and in meeting the objectives of all parties involved.”

In essence, relationship marketing has three major advantages: it ensures customer loyalty for a longer period of time (thus reducing marketing costs); it consolidates the company reliability and stability; it contributes to improve the efficiency of the market economy, which is beneficial to both companies and population.

Relationship marketing can be focused on the organization’s relationship with the final consumer (in the case of the consumer goods market) or on its relationship with other client-organizations (in the case of business to business market). Therefore, the role of

relationship marketing differs for each approach, as the characteristics of trade are different (Möller, 2000).

In the business to consumer approach (B2C) there is a large number of consumers, the interdependence between the two sides is reduced (because resources are easily interchangeable), the seller is an active part in this relationship, and the emphasis is on a few relational episodes, very rarely on long term relationships.

In addressing the business to business (B2B) there is a small number of key players in the relationship and a strong interdependence between them (due to the difficulty in changing business partners in a short period of time), both buyer and seller are active in this relationship, that very often is a long term one (Filip, 2011, p.31).

Of course, the differences emphasized above must not be upheld as absolute. Both approaches have a common basis represented by the role of marketing in developing the relationship with the customer, but it is still imperative to know what instruments are to be used for different customer segments.

A relationship oriented approach of the supply chain can create value for all stakeholders; therefore bring a substantial contribution to the sustainability of the business, through objectives such as social equity, economic efficiency and environmental performance (Labuschagne *et al*, 2005, p.373).

Although, in most theoretical papers, the term of business sustainability is limited to encompass environmental management or social equity, sustainability is often perceived to be at odds with fiduciary responsibility and unlinked to business strategy. A broader view of the concept is necessary, considering the fact that “a sustainable organization is one whose characteristics and actions are designed to lead to a desirable future state for all stakeholders” (Funk, 2003, p.65). According to the author, intangible indicators that gauge sustainability also can be indicators of efficacy (that is, of how well a company is run) and companies that actively manage and respond to a

wide range of such indicators are better able to create value for all stakeholders over the long term.

### **Theoretical framework**

The supply chain is a network of suppliers, production capacities, warehouses, wholesale and retail centres through which the raw materials are purchased, transformed, and delivered to the consumers and users.

The supply chain management is the strategic tool by which operational decisions are taken leading to optimising the performance of the entire supply chain (as it can be observed in Table 1). The strategic level defines the network of the supply chain that covers the selection of suppliers, transport routes, production facilities, warehousing, etc. The tactical level deals with planning and programming of the supply chain so as to meet the actual demand, and the operational level refers to the actual enforcement of the planning performed at tactical level. The decisions taken at tactical and operational level are distributed back and forth along the supply-delivery chain.

To optimize the performance of the supply chain, its functions must be used in a coordinated manner, but the dynamics of the socio-economic environment in which the company is acting make the coordination very difficult. Thus, the supply chain system must constantly coordinate the revising of the activities that are taking place. The ability to efficiently lead and plan the tactical and operational levels on the supply chain determines the achievement of company goals (Taylor, 2003).

Table 1.

**The Levels of Strategic Planning In The Supply Chain**

Level	Activity
Strategic	Supplier selection Transport route selection Production facility selection Warehousing selection
Tactical	Planning and programming the activities at supply chain level
Operational	Actual enforcement of the planning performed at the tactical level

*Source:* Bowersox JD, Closs JD, Cooper MB (2002), *Supply chain logistics management*, McGrawHill PH, New York: 67-68

In order to integrate the economic and commercial activities in the supply chain, there is a need for close partnership relations to be developed between the customers and the suppliers. The development of the supply chain implies that all firms involved in the process to share information about customers, actual level of demand, transactions level at the point of sale and corporate strategic plans. The supply chain involves a large amount of joint planning and communication, companies often create joint staff teams to facilitate and coordinate the circulation of the products on the market. In other words, supply-chain development requires not only the integration in the various departments of organizations but also between departments of partner companies (Bălan, 2006). Traditionally, not-integrating information between partner companies in the supply-chain is more costly and time consuming. Such an approach often involves much higher costs of transport and handling, a larger sales force, more involvement from the purchasing departments and other components of the organization (Ketchen et al., 2007).

All these justify approaching the supply-chain from a relational perspective, thus the relationship marketing techniques and instruments can be fully applicable on the business to business market. One of the main purposes of the supply chain is to create an interconnection between the various participants in the functional departments and thus laying the foundation for partnerships. Such an approach not only makes the participants partners, but also facilitates the transmission of information between partners. The information on consumer needs and desires are more easily transmitted upstream along the supply chain, allowing a more prompt reaction from suppliers. More and more managers are willing to allocate higher percentages of their turnover to communication with their stakeholders, which, once more, demonstrates the higher importance given by companies to promotional activities (Popescu *et al*, 2009, p. 255)

The supply chain can represent a very powerful source of competitive advantage, as being demonstrated by market leaders such as Dell or Hewlett-Packard, that have obtained impressive results by developing strong supply chains. As a starting interface point with the consumer, the supply chain may offer value by ensuring superior product availability and also added value by offering quality services according to the customer requirements.

Starting from the importance of relationship marketing within the supply chain one can classify the relationships between seller and buyer on the business to business market, considering the life-time of the relationship. These relationships are evolving from simple transactions to inter-dependent seller and buyer relations, and eventually to strategic alliances (Webster, 1991), as it may be observed in Figure 1.

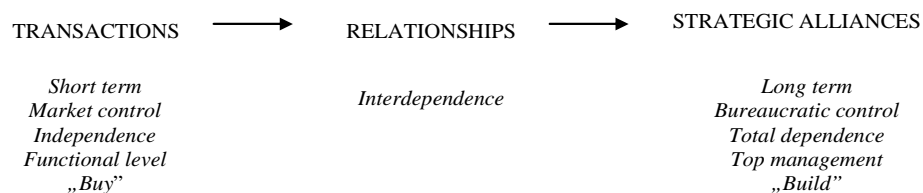
At one extreme, in the case of *pure transactions*, the purchase is strictly a business of the moment. It can be seen in the case of repeated purchases of fungible goods that are substitutable for each other. In

this case, the risk is very low for the buyer in terms of product performance or quality and there is usually no investment needed or extra cost when switching to a different supplier. The price is almost always the only variable and as it is very likely for the buyer to look for the lowest price, there are auctions organized between the potential suppliers when repeated purchases are to be considered. The relationship between the buyer and the seller is a purely adversary one in the sense that one wants the lowest price possible and the other the highest one. Within the concept of relationship marketing, the situation above is defined by the lack of relationship between the parties.

The theory has demonstrated a significant influence of the price correctness on perceived value and purchase intentions; therefore a sustainable marketing orientation is necessary in order to obtain long-term profitability (Catoiu et al, 2010, p.117).

**Figure 1.**

**The relationships between buyer and seller on the business to business market**



*Source:* Adapted from Webster FE (1991), *Industrial Marketing Strategy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, John Wiley & Sons Inc, New York: 76-80

Moving over to a second situation one can find a wide range of relationships, more or less long-term ones, between the buyer and the seller. Within the relational purchase, each party is aware of its dependence on the other and wants to maximize the long term benefits as quality, delivery

terms or lower total costs. Relationship marketing is clearly the most common form met on the business markets. It is generally found on the markets where there are a series of competitors and substantial rivalry with regards to the price and the other attributes of the offer. The buyer can count on different suppliers and can switch the quantity allocated to each supplier based on their performance and prices. The sole-supply situations are the extreme long term relationships where the buyer agrees to purchase its entire demand of products from a single source, for a certain amount of time.

*The last type of situation* is that of *strategic alliances* that are the most complex form of relationship between buyer and seller, comprising full dependence of the buyer on the seller in order to purchase a certain good. In this case there may be the need to create an independent entity, seldom in the form of a joint-venture. A sole-supply situation may transform into a strategic alliance if both parties are involved at a managerial level and establish long term contractual agreements. Among the characteristics of these long term relationships there is the early involvement of both parties in designing the product, exchange of strategic information and the direct inter-correlation of production facilities through just in time production systems, automated ordering systems, “electronic data interchange” (EDI), and development of relationships at different levels within the organization, including involvement of the top management.

The theoretical elements above should find their applicability on any economic developed market, as most often the theory is referring to what is already found on the market. Considering that at Romania’s level relationship marketing is a relatively new concept, it is more than necessary to research and identify the need to develop this concept on the business to business market.

This subject, although very new at our country’s level, has been before discussed in the specific literature, either by total market approach or



by applying the relationship marketing concept to a certain market (for a product, for a country, etc.)

In the first category one can find papers that refer to the evolution of the relationship between the company and its suppliers (Hansen, 2009; Schurr, 2007), the importance of applying relationship marketing on the business to business market (Gummesson, 2004; Brito and Roseira, 2007) or the importance of information and resources trade along the supply chain (Pressey et al., 2007; Myhr and Spekman, 2005; Kim et al., 2005).

In the second category we can include papers focusing on certain national markets, as the German one (Wagner and Lindemann, 2008) or on certain industrial areas, as the textile industry (Lau and Moon, 2008), shoes industry (Soroor et al., 2009) or stationeries (Fink et al., 2007).

There are also articles referring to papers that approach both relationship marketing and the supply chain management (Parente et al., 2008).

Although both the papers mentioned above and this article addresses the supply chain from the perspective of the producer, the approach from the point of view of the supplier is equally important. This topic can be found in the work of Fink et al. (2008) that shows the relationship marketing strategies used by suppliers in order to achieve customer loyalty and even more, the increase in the quantities purchased by the respective customers.

### **Research methodology**

In Romania, the use of relationship marketing as a key element in the relationship with suppliers by the companies active on the business to business market is still at its early stages, sometimes even on a “subconscious” level. In order to develop the practice, there is a need for the well proven theory to be also adapted to the current market requirements. Thus, it is necessary to have the required information

about the current state of implementation of the relationship marketing by the companies that are active on the business to business market in Romania, and especially to identify the ways in which organizations use these techniques and instruments to develop the relationships with their suppliers.

*The goal of the research.* Starting from the problem described above, this article presents the results of a research that was aimed at analyzing how the organizations that are active on the business to business market in Romania are using relationship marketing to build and develop their relationships with suppliers.

Among the *objectives of the research* one can mention: the identification and selection methods used in assessing a supplier; analysis of the criteria considered in evaluating suppliers; identification of the type of relationship between the company on the B2B market and their main supplier; analysis of the way the relationship is conducted.

*The method of gathering the information.* A qualitative research was used to conduct this study, namely the in-depth interview. The reasons for choosing this method are based on the subject of study (and its novelty on the Romanian market), but also the type of researched participants. The study involved participants from 60 companies active on the Romanian business to business market, individuals that have as professional duties also decision making with regards to the supply chain (general manager, marketing manager, or logistics manager).

The discussion was conducted using a conversational guide built based on the main objectives of the research. Thus, there were two major sections of the discussions developed: the first, referring to the methods of supplier evaluation, and the second, referring to the relationship between the company and its main supplier.

### **Research results**

I. The first part of the discussion was focused on *the method of evaluation of potential suppliers*, and the participants were asked to mainly aim at the

*criteria* that they consider during such an evaluation process. To begin with, it was targeted to obtain a spontaneous mentioning of these criteria and the participants were asked to mention these freely, while after this the moderator brought into discussion also criteria that were not mentioned spontaneously by the participants (assisted evaluation). The criteria mentioned spontaneously by the managers, thus the one carrying the most importance in the evaluation of suppliers are: quality of the supplied products, price of the products, payment facilities and potential discounts. These results are proving that, although the most important criteria to be regarded is quality, all the other are based on price. This means that, although Romanian companies are seeking for good quality products, they cannot afford them and want to purchase as low as possible and on credit terms. Although internationally the most important attribute for the companies on the B2B market is the product availability (from the point of view of the purchasing centre), the research revealed that for the Romanian companies this attribute is situated on the fifth place, with regards to its importance. This fact proves that the supply chain is not built properly, as the companies are using large raw material stocks, not just in time supply systems (JIT) that would allow them to efficiently solve the other cash flow problems (large raw material stocks -> financial assets - > low cash flow position - > focus on price advantageous conditions, discounts, payment methods). This shows that the implementation of marketing strategies is still reduced (Zaharia *et al*, 2009,p.61).

In Table 2 there are the criteria that the managers spontaneously mentioned and their order is relevant for the importance the companies are giving to them when evaluating potential suppliers.

Table 2.

**Supplier evaluation criteria  
(spontaneously mentioned by the managers)**

1	Quality of the supplied product
2	The price of the product
3	Payment facilities offered by the supplier
4	Discounts offered by the supplier
5	Product availability
6	Long term relationship with the supplier
7	Services offered by the supplier
8	Novelty degree of the supplied product

The low importance given to the additional services offered by the supplier reveals the willingness of the companies to waive certain extra services for the sole purpose of obtaining a lower price for the basic product. However, this statement reflects a simplistic thinking from the companies on the business to business market in Romania that are looking at supply cost only from the point of view of basic price and not through the aspect of the integrated logistic cost that contains also the services offered and can generate economies of scale to the company. It should also be noted that the novelty degree of the product was considered of lower importance and this can be understood considering that generally a newer product is associated with a higher price and sometimes with a questionable quality and reliability.

Regarding the application of relationship marketing, the majority of participants have mentioned among the criteria considered in evaluating suppliers also the long term relationships with them, but with a much lower frequency than all the above criteria, although some of the above criteria could be easily met by building lasting relationships with business partners (payment facilities or discounts offered by the supplier). Given the current market context, the

financial crisis clearly affects the profitability of the firms, if not its survival and it is understandable that organizations place a greater emphasis on quantitative evaluation criteria (criteria that are linked most often with lower costs). It should be noted however that this approach can only bring short term gain, as on medium to long term only building and maintaining relationships with business partners can bring material, financial and company image benefits.

In addition to the criteria mentioned spontaneously by the participants, the moderator brought into question a number of qualitative criteria that can be the basis for the evaluation and selection of suppliers. Managers were asked to submit their views on the importance of these criteria that are presented in Table 3.

It may be noted that the supplier reliability ranks first, that reveals that the company desires to have sustainable long term partnerships with their suppliers. However, the importance of correlating this feature with the importance of long term relationships in evaluating suppliers, the received only a mediocre score in the first section of the questionnaire, we can state that the inclination to evaluate suppliers based primarily on their reliability rather denotes a certain commodity on behalf of the purchaser.

It is also noted that the company's production facilities are proving less important in selecting suppliers, which demonstrates that, although quality is considered to be the most important attribute in supplier evaluation, however it is not assessed on the basis of objective criteria.

Further analyzing the results of this section, we note that organizations do not put too much emphasis on human resources of the supplier, due to the low scores and importance given to the technical and managerial personnel of the supplier. The only department given a higher level of importance is represented by the sales department, when considering the direct relationship between the company and the

supplier sales team, hence the need for a closer collaboration between the two parties.

**Table 3.**

**Supplier evaluation criteria  
(assisted evaluation)**

1	Supplier reliability
2	Sales personnel attitude
3	Supplier experience
4	Supplier stability
5	Technical staff of the supplier
6	Production equipment quality
7	Management staff of the supplier

II. The second section of the discussion was focused on the *relationship between the company and its main supplier*. To begin with, the free word association technique was used, when the managers were asked to describe their main supplier. In table 4 there are the most often ideas mentioned in association with the main supplier.

**Table 4**

**. Elements to describe the main supplier**

1	Tries to fulfil all obligations
2	Is a serious company
3	Keeps promises
4	Can be negotiated with
5	Negotiates fairly with our company
6	Are telling the truth, not trying to deceive us

In general, companies believe that their main suppliers are serious, are trying to carry out their obligations, in most cases negotiate fairly, are telling the truth, are a real partner for discussion and not trying to deceive. It should be noted however that although the responses in

this section indicate a strong relationship of partnership, the companies on the B2B market in Romania do not consider very important the possibility of developing partnerships with their main suppliers. The perception on the negotiation is the same from both points of view, the companies are saying that they negotiate fairly and consider their main suppliers do the same. Yet surprisingly enough, in many cases the supplier has been described as a company that „tries to have the last word”, when considering the statement as being about their main supplier, the control of the negotiation should be in the customers' side.

In addition from assessing their opinion on their main supplier, it is equally important to evaluate the attitude of the company towards that supplier. A long term relationship is built and maintained on mutual advantages offered by the business partners, meaning that also the producer must have a favourable and constructive attitude towards its suppliers.

In order to assess the attitude of companies, a number of statements were used in relation to which, the research participants presented their agreement or disagreement. In Table 5 these statements are presented in two categories: elements agreed upon and elements disagreed with.

Analyzing the opinion of the managers against these statements, once can notice the majority of participants agree to the statement that show the partnership relation between the two companies, namely that there is a direct exchange of information and assistance between the two parties. However, it should be noted further that although there is some openness to the exchange of information between the parties, this does not apply when it comes to confidential information or access to patents and inventions, although they could be useful to the supply-chain. Regarding the assessment of suppliers, this section repeats what was presented in the first part, that quality is very important and there is a need for the supplier to be quality-certified.

Also, the performance of the supplier is not evaluated only through production costs, but also through using several evaluation criteria. It should be noted that there is collaboration between the two parties when production cost reduction is concerned. Although there is a partnership and trust relation between the two parties, there is also a form of contract that takes the form of a general framework agreement to coordinate the relationship between the two parties involved in the supply chain.

As it can be seen from Table 5, the companies on the Romanian market are relatively reluctant to provide information of confidential nature, so that we can say that although the B2B industry companies tend to develop long term relationships with their main suppliers, they are however unwilling to provide confidential information.

**Table 5.**

**The attitude of the company towards their main supplier**

<i>Statements agreed upon by the managers</i>	<i>Statements disagreed with by the managers</i>
We support the supplier when there is a need for consultancy	We evaluate the relationship with the supplier based solely on production costs
Our contract with the supplier is in great detail, so that all risks are covered	We seek the supplier's advice with regards to our company's performance
Our supplier must be quality-certified	The contract with our supplier is simply a document
We encourage the supplier to improve the quality of the products delivered for our orders	We allow our supplier to have access to confidential information
We try to establish a long term relationship with the supplier	We avoid to help our supplier when quality issues occur
We collaborate with the supplier to reduce costs	
The supplier is involved in the development of our own products	
We evaluate the relationship with the supplier based on jointly-decided criteria	



Comparing the elements considered in the early relationship with the supplier (product quality and costs), we can say these are found also in the attitude the companies have during the relationship, as the participants agreed to the statements 3 (“Our supplier must be quality-certified”) and 6 (“We collaborate with the supplier to reduce costs”).

#### **4. Conclusions**

In conclusion, based on their importance, the criteria used by the companies on the Romanian B2B market to assess their suppliers is: product quality, product price, payment facilities obtained, discounts offered by the supplier, availability of the supplied product, long term relationships and services offered by the supplier. Comparing with the theory that places product availability first, then quality, price, additional services and possibility to develop long term relationships, one can say on the Romanian market the decision of purchase is mainly based on quality and price. It is surprising that, although price and the other characteristics derived from it are very important, the companies do not consider product availability important that generally is the equivalent of cash generation.

Regarding the elements taken into account when selecting suppliers, a higher importance is held by the reliability of the supplier, then the attitude of the sales staff, supplier experience and its economic stability. Generally, the respondents opted for criteria related to safety of the relationship, which highlights the interest in developing partnerships.

When referring to the opinion of the companies on the B2B market on their leading supplier, and their attitude towards him one can notice a relationship of duality in the sense that that the supplier is believed to be serious in the business relationship, this being also the attitude of the company towards the supplier. Also there is some scepticism in the relation with the supplier, as the contract is considered very important, the exchange of confidential information is

almost nonexistent and generally the supplier is not helped in quality issues, although this may affect the company.

With regards to product policy, the emphasis is on product quality and less on its novelty, as the companies prefer the safety of the already-known product. The supplier is moreover involved in developing new products. When the pricing policy is concerned one can notice that the emphasis is on its importance, the discounts offered and payment facilities obtained. It is also noted that the negotiation process is very important, although it is felt that the main supplier is pressurising, trying to “have the last word”.

Given the research results we can state that the relationship between the Romanian companies and their suppliers are at their early stages in terms of relationship marketing application and the price is on the basis of many decisions taken along the supply chain.

#### *Research Limits and Future Researches*

Given the relative novelty of the study in Romania, the research was an exploratory type, so that we cannot say that the participants to the research represent a perfect mirror of the structure of the entire population research, but rather an aid in identifying key coordinates of a national research.

Thus, future researches should consider using random sampling methods, such as stratified sampling, by taking into consideration the most important elements of identification for our national companies (turnover, number of employees, activity field, etc.).

Moreover, the present research also sought to present an overview on the applicability of relationship marketing at supply chain level. So in future researches one can evaluate in greater detail the stages of building and maintain a relationship with the supplier and relationship marketing tools implemented by company managers active in both business to business sector and on business to consumer sector.

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