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## MANIFESTATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN THE PROCESS OF ONLINE GROCERY SHOPPING

**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to identify the course of the process of online grocery shopping in Poland in the context of relationship marketing. The very nature of relationship marketing in the Internet is presented along with the role of relationship between a grocery business and its individual customer. In this context, this paper presents the results of a direct survey based on the Internet participant observation technique. Comparative analyses were conducted referring to the online shopping process in pre-selected online grocers that operate in Poland.

**Keywords:** relationship marketing, online shopping, groceries, e-grocery

### INTRODUCTION

In a time of growing market competition which also affects e-markets, marketing is among the key factors to be taken into account when building long-term success in any business. Relationship marketing, also referred to as partnership marketing, is a modern system targeted at individual consumers. Its primary objective is to establish long-lasting customer relationships.

Ongoing changes in the Polish grocery market have made businesses introduce some significant modifications to their marketing activities. Increasing levels of market saturation, new tendencies in consumer behavior and turbulent development of information technologies are the forces that drive the shift from the transaction paradigm towards relationship marketing. Additionally, relationship marketing is more and more frequently

adopted by online businesses. The partnership approach generates a new value (benefit) for both e-stores and their customers, thus allowing businesses to stand out of the crowd and gain a competitive edge.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the role of relationship marketing in activities undertaken by businesses active in the online grocery market. The essence of partnership marketing implemented in the Internet is presented along with the importance of relationships between online businesses and their individual e-customers. In this context, this paper presents the results of a direct survey based on the Internet participant observation technique. The research sample consists of selected e-groceries active in Poland.

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## NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN ONLINE BUSINESSES

The relationship marketing concept is a response to the latest marketing trends including digitalization, individualization, presumption or virtualization. Other reasons why online businesses opt for that concept are the increased competition in the Internet and the growing number of more and more demanding and knowledgeable consumers.

The relevant literature fails to provide a single definition that would be commonly accepted and would specify the very nature of the concept concerned. Different authors who deal with relationship marketing attribute slightly different meanings to the term in question. L. L. Berry sees the essence of that concept as the creation of process-based customer relationships, thus highlighting the long-term nature of the relationship. J. J. Jackson uses this term as some contrast to traditional marketing and stresses the need to choose the adequate (transaction- or relationship-oriented) strategy that depends on market or customer particularities. Ch. Grönroos defines relationship marketing in more detail, identifying the following features of marketing activities: trust-building; mutual benefits; and engaging and developing relationships with different stakeholder groups. However, in their definition of marketing, M. Rydel and C. Rankowski highlight the need for businesses to establish partnerships with market participants in order to achieve market success. On the other hand, K. Rogoziński pays attention to the importance of interactions, co-creation of value and loyalty in external and internal marketing activities of businesses (Otto, 2001, pp. 46–49). Another definition was presented by T. Cram who believes that relationship marketing means consistently using updated knowledge about individual customers in order to design products/services interactively communicated to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relations (Cram, 1994, p. 19).

In a more general way, according to M. Mitreęa, relationship marketing is a process of cooperation between a business and its employees, on the one side, and other groups of stakeholders, on the other. The objective of their cooperation is to develop profitable, satisfying and engaging relationships with customers (Mitreęa, 2005, p. 35). Relationship marketing aims at getting to know and understand the customers to provide them with

products or services that thoroughly match their needs (Doligowski and Dobiegała-Korona, 2010, p. 14).

Therefore, relationship marketing focuses on building long-lasting relationships between a business and consumers, and – unlike traditional marketing<sup>1</sup> – does not rely solely on transactions. It places focus on direct and “soft” personal relationships between producers and consumers, and methods of building consumer relationships while respecting the consumers’ right to make choices at their discretion (Sagan, 2003, p. 7). Relationship marketing employs more subtle methods of forming B2C relationships. It is well described by the 5I concept (identification, individualization, interaction, integration and integrity) developed and launched by D. Peppers and M. Rogers as opposed to J. McCarthy’s 4P concept (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) and R. Lauterborn’s 4C concept (Customer, Cost, Communication and Convenience) (Peppers and Rogers, 1997). This marketing concept is about getting to know individual customers, providing them with a customized offer, initiating and maintaining permanent dialogue-based contacts with them, and building a strong, long-lasting cooperation based on trust and customer satisfaction.

At present, entrepreneurs who run their businesses in the Internet also realize they need to take care of their customers. In order to do so in a professional and customized way, online businesses often use relationship marketing tools. The tools to be used when building relationships between businesses and e-customers may include<sup>2</sup>:

- internal marketing (training employees on how to take greater care of relationships with customers and provide them with professional service),
- marketing communication based on a B2C dialogue (readiness and ability to listen, and a direct, easy, personal and interactive contact),
- customized offer (prepared upon identifying customer preferences and involvement),
- loyalty programs (that provide an additional source of benefits to both customers and businesses).

However, in reality, the use of relationship marketing tools in online businesses is limited to the integration of the following components: quality, customer service and marketing. The above components facilitate many activities, including bilateral communication (as a result of

<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of relationship marketing and traditional marketing, see (Dziedzic and Szymańska, 2011, pp. 205–215).

<sup>2</sup> More: Otto, 2001, pp. 134–248.

adequately selected communication contents), development of commercial offers (based on available customer knowledge) or establishing closer relations with individual customers. Relationship marketing used in the Internet enables real-time customer support and communication to implement solutions that match customer requirements in the best possible way<sup>3</sup>.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The grocery shopping process in Polish online stores could be analyzed in the context of relationship marketing as a result of a direct survey carried out in June 2018 based on the Internet participant observation technique.

The Internet participant observation involved objective, purpose-oriented and intended acquisition of information through a predefined observation sheet<sup>4</sup>. The research method selected enabled accessing information on real (rather than declared) activities of the operators surveyed (web stores). The research was not intended to compile customer feedback on satisfaction levels and evaluation of online stores. Instead, it included analyzing the way customers were approached by store employees, and placed focus on the range of relationship marketing tools used. The research involved only businesses that delivered groceries in Katowice, among the group of 11 most popular online grocers in Poland<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, only *e-piotripawel.pl*, *bdsklep.pl*, *dodomku.pl*, *e-leclerc.pl*, *auchandirect.pl*, *ezakupy.tesco.pl* and *polskikoszyk.pl* were selected.

Another assumption of this research was to select one category of groceries. Eventually, it was decided to pick perishable groceries frequently bought by customers. Online shopping for such goods is slightly more demanding since they may be easily damaged or they may spoil (i.e. sausages and related products, meat, fish, cheese in bulk, fresh fruit and vegetables, butter, eggs and

jams in jars). Because of financial constraints, the following 15 grocery products were selected: Kaiser bread roll, boneless loins, traditional ham (sliced), bananas, tomatoes, fresh cod, free-range eggs (M size), gouda cheese in bulk, 'łowickie' milk (carton, 3.2%), 'extra' block of butter (82%), 'poznańska' wheat flour (500 type), white long-grained rice in bags ('Kupiec'), 'Łowicz' jam (100% of fruit content), frozen chopped spinach ('Hortex'), and a 1.5-liter bottle of still mineral water ('Żywiec Zdrój').

Shopping for the selected items usually took 27 minutes (on average) at online stores surveyed. This included searching for the 15 products (without reading any product descriptions or contents), registering for the first time, providing address information for the delivery, paying and finalizing the transaction. In the case of subsequent shopping at the same e-store, the time required would probably be shorter because there are features that enable using previously created shopping lists and customer information stored in the system. Unfortunately, it was not possible to buy the same groceries in each e-store observed (*bdsklep* offers a limited range of bulk products; *dodomku* does not offer fresh products, they only sell hermetically sealed ones; and *polskikoszyk* delivers fresh local products only in the Mazowieckie voivodeship). The widest range of products offered can be found in the following e-stores: *e-piotripawel*, *e-leclerc* and *ezakupy.tesco*. The lowest prices of the same products can be found at *ezakupy.tesco* and the highest ones at *dodomku* (however, when considering delivery costs of small shopping worth up to PLN 80, *ezakupy.tesco* and *e-piotripawel* are the cheapest e-stores). In turn, *e-piotripawel* and *e-leclerc* provide the fastest deliveries (on the same business day provided shopping is done in the morning). They do not have any problems with available delivery dates, like in the case of *ezakupy.tesco*. The widest and the narrowest range of different payment options is offered by *e-piotripawel* and *polskikoszyk*, respectively (see Table 1).

All e-grocers present their offering in a similar way (i.e. detailed product descriptions and product pictures are available). However, as far as visual aesthetics is concerned, *e-piotripawel* and *polskikoszyk* seem to take the lead. The e-stores surveyed feature intuitive and user-friendly product searching and filtering tools at their websites (e.g. the following search criteria are available: organic, gluten-free, sugar-free, vegan or Polish products). In the authors' opinion, *e-piotripawel* offers the best customer experience while *bdsklep* offers the worst.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the role of relationship marketing in contacts established between businesses and their customers see: Gordon, 2001, pp. 124–125.

<sup>4</sup> The learn more about the observation method, see Jaciow and Maciejewski, 2013, pp. 74–84; Kędzior, 2005, pp. 98–102; Maison, 2010, pp. 97–98; Kolny et al., 2011, pp. 44–48.

<sup>5</sup> The most popular e-stores that offer groceries in Poland are: *auchandirect.pl*, *drive.intermarche.pl*, *eCarrefour.pl*, *e-leclerc.pl*, *e-piotripawel.pl*, *ezakupy.tesco.pl*, *a.pl*, *bdsklep.pl*, *dodomku.pl*, *frisco.pl* (Mobile Institute and Frisco.pl, 2017; Gemius, 2017; Sklepy24, b.d; Dlahandlu.pl, 2018).

**Table 1.** Direct research procedure

Aspects	E-grocers surveyed					
	e-piotripawet	bdsklep	dodomku	e-leclerc	ezakupy.tesco	polskikoszyk
Time to place an order*	29 minutes	26 minutes	25 minutes	26 minutes	28 minutes	29 minutes
Product availability**	15	5	13	15	15	8
Value of the shopping cart***	PLN 17.74	PLN 16.71	PLN 20.58	PLN 16.46	PLN 13.55	PLN 19.51
Delivery time (working days)	The same day	5 days	1 day	The same day	2 days	3 days
Delivery cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• free &gt; PLN 80</li> <li>• PLN 5 (courier service; if the customer spends PLN 50 or more)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• free &gt; PLN 300</li> <li>• PLN 16.99 (courier service)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLN 6 (courier service)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLN 8.5 (courier service)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLN 7–11 (depending on selected delivery day and time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• free &gt; PLN 150 (up to 25 kilograms)</li> <li>• PLN 13.99 (courier service+ PLN 20.96 for cooling bags)</li> </ul>
Payment options	Online payment (e.g. credit card, PayU, eCard)					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vouchers</li> <li>• upon delivery (cash or card)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• traditional transfer</li> <li>• upon delivery (+ PLN 3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• upon delivery (cash or card)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• upon delivery (cash)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• upon delivery (card)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• upon delivery (cash or card)</li> </ul>

\*Including: looking for the 15 products selected; registering; selecting the payment and delivery options; and placing the order.

\*\*Availability of the 15 products selected for this research in each e-grocery.

\*\*\*Value of the shopping cart composed of five products of the same brand and weight, as available in all grocers surveyed.

## RELATIONSHIP MARKETING TOOLS USED BY E-GROCERS: FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

The goal of this research is to identify different methods and tools used by Polish e-grocers to establish relationships with new customers. The study predominantly focuses on customer service and communication during online shopping (at all stages of the ordering process). Some attention is also paid to instruments that enable maintaining relationships with customers after they finalize their transactions.

It may be concluded that e-grocers rely on the following tools in developing relationships with their e-customers: e-store staff; interactive and personalized communication (via phone and e-mail); intuitive and clear websites; vouchers and loyalty programs. The vast majority of the e-grocers surveyed make efforts

to ensure their employees are duly qualified (competent and courteous), the content provided is tailored to their customers and the right information is available at their websites (including delivery costs or payment options). Employees of all the e-stores concerned inform customers of transaction progress prior to and during the process. They all demonstrate willingness to solve problems and to provide assistance if a product is unavailable (suggesting alternative goods) or if the delivery time must be changed. Only two e-stores, *bdsklep* and *dodomku*, try to maintain some relationships with their customers after the orders are finalized (by asking the customers to evaluate their shopping experience, and sending up-to-date offerings and promotional information, see Table 2).

The stores also monitor the quality of groceries delivered after they have been purchased online. E-grocers

**Table 2.** Tools used by e-stores surveyed to establish customer relationships

Aspects	E-grocers surveyed					
	e-piotripawel	bdsklep	dodomku	e-leclerc	ezakupy.tesco	polskikoszyk
Customer service	• Professional, courteous staff					
Customer communication channels	• content tailored to customers • convenient contact (e-mail, phone)					
Customer communications	Prior to the transaction	• e-mail with information on the registration ordering process				
	During the transaction	• order status information • information about delays, if any, in order delivery resulting from product shortages (only in <i>bdsklep</i> and <i>polskikoszyk</i> )				
	After the transaction	–	• evaluation of the shopping experience	–	delivery monitoring	
		• current promotions (newsletter)	• information about potential guarantee claims • delivery monitoring			
Website information	• Terms and Conditions of the e-store, • delivery costs, payment options, • guarantee claims, returns and refunds, • assistance: Frequently Asked Questions with answers provided					
Discount and gift vouchers	• promotional codes • referrals • large family card	• PLN 25 voucher to be spent on first shopping	• short expiry date (2–3 days) products (50% discount)	–	–	–
Loyalty programs	–	–	–	–	–	Earning credits for shopping
Personal satisfaction with the shopping experience*	5	3	3	2	4	4

\*Assessed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 as the lowest grade possible and 5 as the highest grade possible.  
Source: own research.

who deliver orders using their own vehicles (*e-piotripawel*, *e-leclerc*, *ezakupy.tesco*) use different packaging than e-stores who outsource their deliveries to courier companies (*bdsklep*, *dodomku*, *polski koszyk*). The former pack their products in plastic bags (products are grouped in separate categories, e.g. fruit, dairy or meat). However, in the case of courier services, products are placed in cardboard boxes and wrapped securely to prevent damage (e.g. jars are wrapped with bubble wrap or cardboard, flour is wrapped with cling film). Additionally, cardboard boxes are filled with bubble wrap, mineral wool or airbags to provide extra protection. Frozen

products are placed in additional plastic bags stored in vehicle coolers (if the goods are delivered using own vehicles). Cooling bags are used in the case of courier deliveries. All products delivered are fresh (they are not off, spoiled or rotten) and damage-free. The way they are wrapped and packed depends on the product category (e.g. fragile or frozen products, see Figure 1).

The use of the abovementioned customer relationship tools has a remarkable impact on satisfaction levels of customers who do their shopping at the e-stores surveyed. In this category, *e-piotripawel* is the leader while *e-leclerc* is ranked at the bottom.



**Fig. 1.** Goods delivered by e-grocers covered by this research  
Source: own research.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research found that the e-grocers surveyed try to establish good relationships with their customers. It is observed that most of them employ the following relationship marketing tools: advisory or consultancy for e-customers; quick order delivery; professional customer service; courteous staff; good contact and communication with the store; delivery monitoring; secure wrapping of products delivered; and a wide range of products offered. Additionally, the study found that website layouts and intuitiveness are believed to be extra benefits

for e-grocery customers because these features translate into a convenient shopping experience (see Table 3).

Nevertheless, e-grocers covered by this research should be more individual customer-oriented if they want to follow their commitment to relationship marketing. They can do it through a more extensive use of tools that might help them create and foster long-term customer relationships (e.g. after-sales communication: newsletters, attractive promotions for loyal customers or convenient delivery terms and low delivery costs).

To conclude, factors that are believed to be extremely important in influencing satisfaction levels of e-grocery

**Table 3.** Pros and cons of e-grocers covered by this research

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• good communication and contact with the e-store (sending the most important information prior to and during order delivery)</li> <li>• courteous, competent staff</li> <li>• products delivered as requested by customers</li> <li>• promotions and discounts</li> <li>• short delivery times (only from: <i>e-piotripawet</i>, <i>e-leclerc</i>, <i>ezakupy.tesco</i>)</li> <li>• secure wrapping of products delivered (only in: <i>dodomku</i>, <i>bdsklep</i>, <i>polskikoszyk.pl</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• insufficient product availability (<i>dodomku</i>, <i>bdsklep</i>, <i>polskikoszyk.pl</i>)</li> <li>• long delivery times (<i>dodomku</i>, <i>bdsklep</i>, <i>polskikoszyk.pl</i>)</li> <li>• no information about order delivery status (<i>e-leclerc</i>, <i>ezakupy.tesco</i>)</li> <li>• no contact after the transaction is completed (<i>except for bdsklep</i>)</li> </ul>

Source: own research.

customers more and more frequently include (apart from low prices and attractive promotions) the development of relationships between the parties to a transaction. It is extremely important for the retail grocery sector to create and maintain relationships with e-customers. The quality and long-lasting nature of the relationships result from a personalized approach to each e-customer. The way e-customers are treated at each stage of the transaction, the way they are communicated with, and a comfortable shopping experience are aspects that remarkably influence e-customer satisfaction levels and result in repetitive purchases.

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## PRZEJAWY MARKETINGU RELACJI W PROCESIE ZAKUPU ŻYWNOCI PRZEZ INTERNET

**Abstrakt.** Celem artykułu jest rozpoznanie sposobu kształtowania relacji internetowych sklepów spożywczych z klientami indywidualnymi oraz narzędzi do tego wykorzystywanych. Wskazano w nim na istotę marketingu partnerskiego w internecie oraz znaczenie relacji pomiędzy przedsiębiorstwem działającym online a jego klientem. W tym kontekście zaprezentowano wyniki badań bezpośrednich zrealizowanych techniką obserwacji uczestniczącej w internecie w celowo wybranych e-sklepach spożywczych działających w Polsce. Przedstawione rozważania prowadzą do wniosku, że budowanie, podtrzymanie i umacnianie relacji z e-konsumentem w handlu detalicznym online jest bardzo ważne w branży spożywczej. Zastosowane narzędzia marketingu relacji mające na celu uzyskanie lojalności e-klientów przynoszą korzyści każdej z zaangażowanych stron.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing relacji, e-konsument, zakupy online, żywność, e-sklepy spożywcze

