

STRENGTHENING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS AND THE DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF SERVICE ENTERPRISES

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Purpose: The aim is to indicate how strengthening customer relationships affects the development potential of enterprises.

Design/methodology/approach: The reasoning is based on the results of a study on a group of 184 service enterprises employing more than 10 employees. The research was carried out in 2022. The research tool was an original survey questionnaire, which was assessed for reliability. After formal evaluation, the collected data were subjected to statistical analysis, including the use of descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistics.

Findings: Research has shown that most of the activities of service enterprises in the area of strengthening relationships with customers have a positive impact on the development potential of enterprises, including enterprise revenues, market share, the level of employment and investments in the company, and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions.

Research limitations/implications: The research conducted has its limitations in the form of a small research group from the Silesian Voivodeship. In the future, it is planned to expand the research on a representative group, which will enable a broader exploration of the problem and the identification of the determinants of the competitiveness of service enterprises in the era of a difficult business environment.

Practical implications: The results of the study on a group of service enterprises allow management practitioners to indicate which activities in the area of strengthening customer relationships positively determine the enterprise's potential, which determines its market competitiveness.

Originality/value: The novelty of the study is the analysis of the impact of activities in the area of strengthening customer relationships on the company's results, called development potential, which determines the market competitiveness of service enterprises. The research results can be a guide in managing customer relations in service enterprises.

Keywords: customer orientation, customer relations, enterprise development potential, organizational flexibility, management.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The operating conditions of the organization currently require it to be flexible. A flexible organization is one in which both the organizational culture and the structure itself enable adaptation to environmental conditions. However, this adaptation must be rapid, responding to customer needs and competitive requirements (Brilman, 2002, p. 391). These are not easy conditions for the operation of enterprises; they can even be called extreme. A flexible approach to market behavior results from both external and internal conditions (Pakulska, 2020, pp. 9-10). In a competitive environment, both groups of conditions determine organizational behavior. Therefore, organizational behavior fits into organizational flexibility and its definition to various extents. The need for organizational activities aimed at adapting to ongoing market and organizational changes requires flexibility to varying degrees (Reeves, Deimler, 2011). In the case of service enterprises, organizational activities are indicated to strengthen enterprise-customer relations, which serve to constantly verify and adapt functionalities. These are necessary capabilities in the case of this group of enterprises, which are strategic in nature and generally include the organization's capabilities in the area of dynamic relationships to respond to ongoing changes. These capabilities constitute the essence of organizational flexibility. The basis for building relationships with the client is, among others: the ability to establish contact, which is the starting point of long-term cooperation, a partnership approach, respect, openness, active listening and, above all, the ability to discover the client's needs and respond to them.

The aim is to indicate how strengthening customer relationships affects the development potential of enterprises. The conclusions are based on the results of own research on a group of service enterprises operating in the Silesian Voivodeship. The analysis process used descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistics appropriate to the purpose of the study.

2. Strengthening customer relationships - creating relationship capital

The concept of organizational flexibility is very often used to describe an enterprise's response to changing environmental conditions. Due to the fact that the environment is highly or even extremely turbulent, the adaptive activities of enterprises focus on various aspects of activity (Suder, Okręglicka, 2023). In the case of service enterprises, activities that strengthen enterprise-customer relations turn out to be important. The origins of customer relationship management therefore come from changes taking place on the market as well as changes in the conditions of cooperation with customers. These include, among others: a significant increase in market competition, an increase in the role of information, including access to information,

an increase in the risk of running a business, an increase in production flexibility, an increase in the number of distribution channels, an increase in the turnover of sales department employees, a decrease in the effectiveness of promotion, a decrease in customer loyalty, an increase in the costs of acquiring new customers and an increase in customer requirements (Wolak-Tuzimek, 2023).

A review of international literature does not allow us to clearly define the concept of "relationships". Initially, the organization's relational capital was identified only with the area of customer relations (de Castro et al., 2004). Currently, this concept is perceived much more broadly and includes relationships with all enterprise stakeholders, i.e. the organization's relationships with external partners and within the organization (Cucculelli, Peruzzi, Zazzaro, 2019). Therefore, relational capital can be defined as all the connections between an enterprise and its stakeholders which are based on mutual influence, trust and interdependence. Activities that strengthen the relationship lead to an increase in commitment, a reduction (or reduction) of uncertainty and risk, and an increase in trust (Daspit, 2014; Danielak, 2012, pp. 356-369). The skills of building and strengthening relationships combined with professional knowledge, professional experience and flexible action create relational competences (Ecclestone, Hayes, 2009). Competencies, as defined by Niewiadomski (2009), include knowledge, skills, personality traits, experience, as well as behaviors and attitudes aimed at effective and efficient organizational activities in a constantly changing, turbulent environment and various professional situations of organizational participants. Creating relational capital is an inherent feature of every organization that is an open system and therefore exchanges resources with the environment. It turns out that nowadays, the advantage is gained by the company that configures relationships with partners so that they are stronger than those of competing organizations (Stańczyk-Hugiet, 2012). Appropriate relationship management leads to the development of appropriate relational capital. It involves, among others, balancing activities but also the integration of some activities, because it should be remembered that the goals of individual partners or stakeholders of the company are different (Freeman, Mc Vea, 2001; Roba, Maric, 2023, pp. 469-487).

Focusing on external relationships, i.e. relationships with customers, it can be concluded that they are most often perceived through the prism of, among others, how to formalize cooperation. Therefore, the effect in the form of the result of the activity or the method of management influencing the content of the relationship, the number of customers, the level of their satisfaction and trust in the organization, as well as the power relationship in the cooperation process (Wasiluk, 2020, p. 26). Creating or strengthening relationships with customers of an enterprise, not only a service one, requires skilful planning, organizing, motivating and controlling, as well as developing a strategy for customer activities (Chang, Huang, 2016). Competences and abilities necessary to shape relationships play a particular importance in this process. These competencies, called relational competencies, are based on the use of knowledge and skills related to sharing knowledge, but also on the competencies,

abilities and attitudes of organization members that determine the building of relationships. Professional knowledge, professional experience and readiness to act flexibly are necessary. Creating and strengthening the resources of relational capital comes down, first of all, to creating conditions that enable the initiation, shaping, development and consolidation of relationships between members of a given organization and between the organization and external stakeholders, in this case customers (Gach, 2009, p. 179).

The process of creating customer relationships is systematized, i.e., it takes place in specific stages. The stages include the stage of attracting the customer with an attractive offer or service, the initial stage, the stage of development, and the stage of decay and termination of the relationship. Individual stages in strengthening relationships moderate the creation, formalization activities, development strategy, building trust, evaluation, and continuous improvement of relationships (Chomiak-Orsa, 2013, p. 162; Ioannou, Zolkiewski, 2019). There is no doubt that the way an enterprise initiates, maintains, develops and finalizes relationships affects its management. It is also worth noting that employees also influence the efficiency of activities related to building and strengthening relationships with customers. The personality traits of employees directly related to customer service have a strong impact on relationships, including their competences in the field of service, but also professional motivation and commitment to the organization's activities (Robak, 2013). The emotional relationship between the client and the company becomes a purposeful pursuit of common values and norms, willingness to cooperate, joint commitment and support of the parties in the implementation of tasks. Trust is identified with intangible capital, which has a significant impact on creating organizational value and developing a competitive advantage. Customer loyalty results from experience, belief in honesty and the certainty that relationships are ethical and built on appropriate values (Nowotarska-Romaniak, 2020). Orientation on long-term relationships or strengthening relationships based on trust favors the company's achievement of good business results and is often a determinant of the organization's survival (Łęgowski, 2017). In turn, the literature indicates that the main goal of customer relationship management (CRM), treated as a set of organizational activities, is to increase its value by increasing sales and its profitability over time (Deszczyński, Deszczyński, 2004; Nilashi et al., 2023). Therefore, involvement in relationships with partners, including customers, is often considered the most sustainable advantage due to the resulting barriers to competition (Roba, Maric, 2023, pp. 469-487).

3. Methods

The aim is to indicate how strengthening customer relationships affects the development potential of enterprises. The study was conducted on a group of service enterprises operating in the Silesian Voivodeship. The study was carried out in several stages. First of all, a review of the literature was carried out, which allowed for the formulation of research questions. Then, pilot research was carried out using the author's survey questionnaire. Ultimately, the actual research was conducted in 2022. After rejecting incomplete questionnaires, 184 economic entities ultimately participated in the study. The research tool was composed of data characterizing the entities being studied and appropriate questions that allowed for collecting the necessary data to answer the research questions. The original research tool, which allowed for the collection of quantitative data, used a 5-point Likert scale, which is the most frequently used in social research (Babbie, 2004, pp. 191-192). The results obtained from the Likert scale are aggregated and analyzed for individual respondents in a managerial approach (Sheng, Zhou, Li, 2011).

The survey questionnaire was subjected to reliability testing (Hair et al., 2020). Its reliability was tested using Crombach's alpha index (Taber 2018), the value of which was above 0.75 for the distinguished variables. Therefore, it can be assumed that this level is at least satisfactory, the research scales constructed in the questionnaire meet the criteria, and their use in quantitative research is justified (George, Mallery, 2016, p. 240). During the statistical analysis of the obtained empirical data, statistical methods adequate to the adopted research aim were used.

Among the respondents, the largest group were companies running their service activities for over 20 years (29.35% of responses), followed by companies declaring experience between 11 and 20 years (26.63% of responses). Enterprises that had been running their service activities for up to 5 years accounted for ¼ of all respondents. Among the surveyed Silesian service enterprises, there were 133 small entities (72.3% of responses) employing up to 49 employees, 22 medium-sized entities employing from 50 to 249 employees (11.9% of responses) and 29 large entities employing more than 249 employees (15.8% of responses).

4. Results and discussion

The research conducted among service enterprises showed that strengthening relationships with customers takes place through various levels of activities analyzed in the area of the studied variables. It turns out that the activities of service companies are most focused on anticipating the needs of regular customers and proposing new services, as well as identifying

and emphasizing benefits for customers. These activities that strengthen relationships with customers were rated by respondents at a level of 4.22 on a 5-point scale. The surveyed companies placed equally strong emphasis on close contact with leading customers and recognizing customer needs earlier than the competition, which, in their opinion, strengthens customer relationships. These activities, in turn, were rated at 4.20 on a 5-point scale (Figure 1).

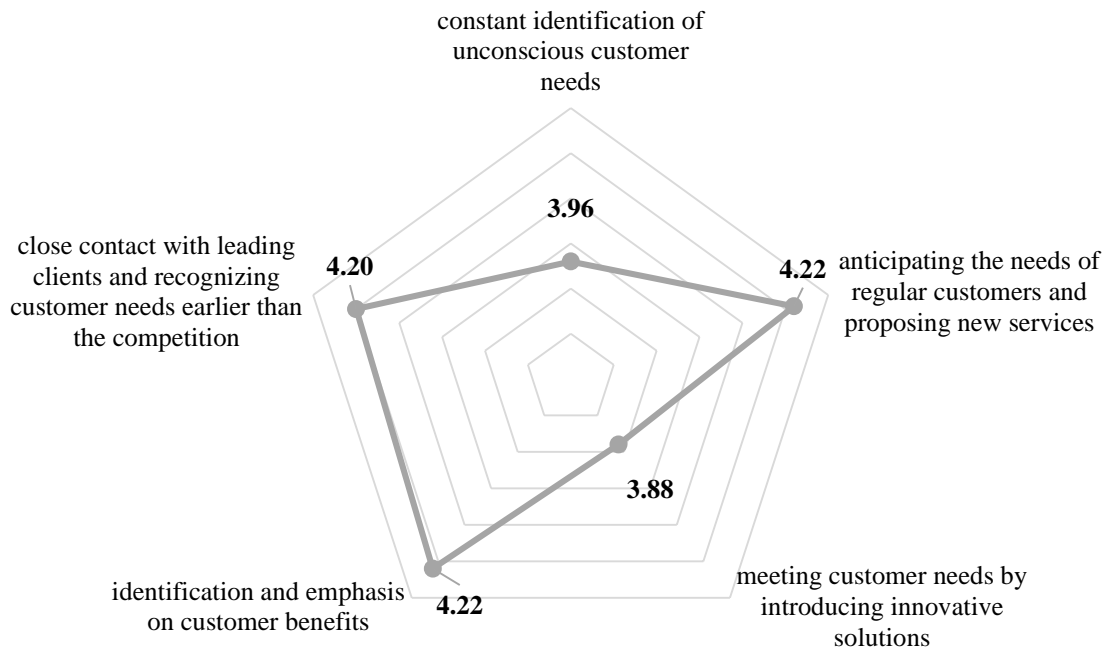


Figure 1. Activities in the area of strengthening relationships with customers of service enterprises.

As a result, further analysis allowed us to indicate the relationship between the activities of Polish service enterprises to strengthen relationships with customers and the basic indicators determining the development potential of enterprises. The activities that strengthen customer relationships (ASCR) include:

- ASCR_1 (constant identification of unconscious customer needs),
- ASCR_2 (anticipating the needs of regular customers and proposing new services),
- ASCR_3 (meeting customer needs by introducing innovative solutions),
- ASCR_4 (identification and emphasis on customer benefits),
- ASCR_5 (close contact with leading clients and recognizing customer needs earlier than the competition).

The development potential of the enterprises was identified by enterprise revenues, enterprise's market share, employment level, level of investment in the enterprise and use of new technologies and information solutions.

It turns out that only in the case of activities related to the constant identification of unconscious customer needs and the company's revenues, there is a moderate, statistically significant (p -value < 0.05) positive relationship. Other activities indicated by entrepreneurs did not indicate a statistically significant relationship (Table 1).

Table 1.

Relationships between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the revenues of a service enterprise (n = 184)

Variables	Enterprise revenues
	*Spearman rank correlation (p-value < 0.05)
ASCR_1	0.526*
ASCR_2	0.312
ASCR_3	0.201
ASCR_4	0.337
ASCR_5	-0.040

Source: Own research.

When analyzing the relationship between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the service company's market share, three out of five distinguished activities indicate a statistically significant relationship (p-value < 0.05). The constant identification of the unconscious needs of customers of service enterprises, the anticipation of the needs of regular customers, and the proposal of new services, as well as the identification and emphasis on benefits for customers, show a moderately positive relationship with the company's market share (Table 2).

Table 2.

Relationships between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the market share of a service enterprise (n = 184)

Variables	Enterprise's market share
	*Spearman rank correlation (p-value < 0.05)
ASCR_1	0.592*
ASCR_2	0.411*
ASCR_3	0.319
ASCR_4	0.439*
ASCR_5	-0.024

Source: Own research.

The analysis of the relationship between activities that strengthen customer relations and the level of employment in the company shows that three out of five distinguished activities indicate a statistically significant relationship (p-value < 0.05). The constant identification of the unconscious needs of customers of service enterprises, the anticipation of the needs of regular customers and the proposal of new services, as well as the identification and emphasis on benefits for customers show a moderate and or weak positive relationship with the level of employment in the enterprise (Table 3).

Table 3.

Relationships between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the level of employment in a service enterprise (n = 184)

Variables	Employment level in the enterprise
	*Spearman rank correlation (p-value<0.05)
ASCR_1	0.451*
ASCR_2	0.379*
ASCR_3	0.329
ASCR_4	0.396*
ASCR_5	-0.007

Source: Own research.

The analysis of the relationship between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the level of investment in a service enterprise shows that as many as four out of five distinguished activities indicate a statistically significant relationship (p -value < 0.05). Constant identification of the unconscious needs of customers of service enterprises, anticipating the needs of regular customers and proposing new services, satisfying customer needs by introducing innovative solutions, and identifying and focusing on benefits for customers show a moderately positive relationship with the level of investment in the enterprise (Table 4).

Table 4.

Relationships between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the level of investment in a service enterprise ($n = 184$)

Variables	The level of investment in the enterprise
	*Spearman rank correlation (p -value <0.05)
ASCR_1	0.497*
ASCR_2	0.502*
ASCR_3	0.417*
ASCR_4	0.500*
ASCR_5	0.051

Source: Own research.

Also, the analysis of the relationship between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the use of new technologies and information solutions in a service enterprise shows that as many as four out of five distinguished activities indicate a statistically significant relationship (p -value <0.05). Constant identification of unconscious needs of customers of service enterprises, anticipating the needs of regular customers and proposing new services, satisfying customer needs by introducing innovative solutions and identifying and focusing on benefits for customers show a moderate or strong positive relationship with the use of new technologies and information solutions in the enterprise (Table 5).

Table 5.

Relationships between activities that strengthen customer relationships and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions in a service enterprise ($n = 184$)

Variables	Using new technologies and information solutions in the enterprise
	*Spearman rank correlation (p -value <0.05)
ASCR_1	0.561*
ASCR_2	0.688*
ASCR_3	0.432*
ASCR_4	0.615*
ASCR_5	0.148

Source: Own research.

To sum up, the research has shown that the more activities a service company performs in the area of constant identification of unconscious customer needs, the higher the company's revenues, the company's market share increases, the level of employment and investments in the company increases, and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions in the surveyed company increases. These results are confirmed by the research of Nilashi et al.

(2023), who conclude that actions to improve customer satisfaction lead to better customer relations, increased profitability, and an increase in enterprise value. The more intensively an enterprise anticipates customer needs and more often proposes new services, the more the enterprise's market share increases, the level of employment and investments in the enterprise increases, and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions in the service enterprise increases. As Chang and Huang (2016) point out, knowing the impressions after using the service is of fundamental importance for preparing future strategies and further strengthening the relationship with the customer. It turns out that research by Chuang and Lin (2013) confirms the conclusion that activities that strengthen customer relationships allow companies to gain a deeper understanding of the moods, inclinations, and perspectives of their customers. Moreover, meeting customer needs by introducing innovative solutions has a positive impact on the level of investment in the surveyed enterprises and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions. Moreover, the greater the identification efforts and the emphasis on customer benefits, the greater the service company's market share, employment, and investment levels, as well as the greater the use of new technologies and information solutions. Extensive research presented in the literature confirms that the impact of customer relationship management consisting of strengthening these relationships provides a competitive advantage (Mithas et al., 2005; Zhang, et al., 2006) and material and intangible benefits (Wang et al., 2004). Relationship-building activities create emotionally stable environments based on the customer-enterprise relationship (Ladhari, 2007), consequently leading to customer satisfaction (García-Pascual et al., 2023).

Interestingly, research has shown that activities involving close contact with leading customers of service enterprises and identifying customer needs earlier than the competition do not show any correlation with the level of revenue, market share, employment level, or investment and the level of use of new technologies and information solutions.

5. Conclusions

Research conducted on a group of service enterprises operating in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2022, the aim of which was to indicate how strengthening customer relations affects the development potential of enterprises, allowed for the formulation of conclusions. It turns out that not all activities in the area of strengthening customer relations in service enterprises are determined by indicators assessing the development potential, including the enterprise's revenues, the company's market share, the level of employment and investments in the enterprise, or the level of use of new technologies and information solutions. Most often, the company's results are positively influenced by the constant identification of unconscious customer needs, the anticipation of the needs of regular customers, the proposal of new services,

and the identification and emphasis on benefits for customers. However, no relationship was found between close contact with leading customers and recognizing customer needs earlier than the competition in relation to the factors influencing the development potential of service enterprises.

The conducted research expands the scope of research in the field of building and strengthening relationships with customers, which undoubtedly contributes to increasing knowledge in the area of the organization's market competitiveness. This is particularly important now, when the operating conditions of enterprises are difficult and demanding. Therefore, operational flexibility by responding to customer needs and strengthening customer-enterprise relationships may be an important determinant of achieving competitiveness.

The study conducted on a group of Silesian service enterprises has its limitations, which result from the small research group coming only from a selected region of Poland. In the future, however, it is planned to expand the research on a representative group, which will enable a broader exploration of the problem and the identification of the conditions for the competitiveness of service enterprises in the era of a difficult business environment. Nevertheless, the conclusions from the study on a group of service enterprises allow management practitioners to indicate which activities in the area of strengthening customer relations positively determine the enterprise's potential and its market competitiveness.

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