CLIENT RELATIONSHIP MARKETING PRACTICES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) BETWEEN ICHITAN GROUP PCL AND DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL ON MODERN TRADE

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, one of the most important strategies in marketing field is likely be client relationship management. The importance is to maintain and remain the relationship effectively. This relationship management process is dividing by 4 stages. The 1st stage is called pre-relationship stage, the 2nd stage is called exploratory, the 3rd stage is called expansion and the last one is called stable stage. The challenge of the study is to find out on how they maintain the relationship in term of business-to-business, especially in Thai business which is quite difficult, sophisticated and have a lot of things to concern such as culture, organizational hierarchy and family-oriented.

The purpose of this study is to find out on how importance of client relationship management between business to business (B2B). The case study of the company, Ichitan group PCL, and its distribution channels which is focus on modern trade and to find out on how to build or maintain relationship with client.

KEY WORDS: Client Relationship Management / Business to Business (B2B) / Buyer and Seller Relationship

35 pages

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In the business world, *“Pareto principle”* seems to be one of the most important principles for marketing. According to Azad (2014), Lavinsky (2014), Pareto is otherwise called the 80–20 rule, meaning that 80 percent of the impacts are originated from 20 percent of the reasons which is also a typical dependable guideline in business. The most significant importance from the 20 percent of Pareto principle is about to manage all of them well and effectively. The tool always used for those 20 percent is called *relationship management* (Sobel, 2015). As mentioned by Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), relationship marketing practice is particularly crucial for the professional services industry due to its distinct nature. Referring to Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), it is not at all like substantial products and business-to-business management, it all about customers are likely be the most important part of experience issues assessing and generate benefits unhesitatingly, it is not just preceding making a buy but it taking after buy and utilization.

When we consider about Thailand’s business, the highly popular and interesting one is beverage industry. Especially, if we specifically look into the beverage market as Thongtep (2015) says, green tea is a leader in the market, followed by carbonated soft drinks, plain water and fruit juices respectively. As published in Positioning Magazine (2013), due to large size and high growth of Thailand’s market, ready-to-drink tea (RTD tea) was significantly popular among Thai people. Numerous big brands were targeting at penetrating RTD tea market such as Coca-Cola, Suntory, Itoen, Lipton, Puriku, Oishi and Ichitan. As in Positioning Magazine (2014), total market size of RTD tea market in 2014 was about 15,400 million baht and grew by 10-15 percent compared with the year before. The market was led by Ichitan with 44 percent of market share, and then followed by Oishi at 38 percent, Puriku at 8 percent, Lipton at 4 percent and other RTD tea brand at 6 percent.

As the leader in green tea market, Ichitan group, owned by Mr. Tan Passakornnatee, needed to concern on how to maintain its position as the leader in the market, as well as finding new strategies to overcome its competitors in long term. Ichitan's marketing strategies are making a difference and positioning its products as excellent beverages. Its products are made from carefully selected pure ingredients, passed through a hi-tech safety controlled processing and bottling in order to meet standard of product safety while maintaining freshness of ingredients. Ichitan began trading on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) on April 21st, 2014. Within very short period of time, Ichitan has produced various beverages including Ichitan green tea, Ichitan dragon black tea, Ichitan Selected and Yen Yen herbal drink and Bireley's as in fruit juice market.

In past 5 years, RTD tea market had been driven by healthier trend of green tea and its benefits. However, nowadays, the situation has been changed. Marketing communication of green tea product has been driven by sales and corporate promotion. There were several campaigns within a year in order to increase sales and engagement among their target consumer. Not only does Ichitan Group PCL increase engagement with its end customer, the company also has a lot of strategies for creating a good relationship with their clients such as distribution channels, both modern and traditional trade. This is an important key that will reflect to the end result of Ichitan brand. The distribution channel of Ichitan Group PCL consists of two types. One is modern trade (such as convenience store, supermarket and hypermarket) with contribution more than 51 percent, distributed by DKSH (Thailand) Co., Ltd. as the main distributor. The other is traditional trade (such as wholesale, retail and other channels) distributed by DKSH (Thailand) Co., Ltd., I Am Green Tea Co., Ltd. and Boonrawd Asia Co., Ltd. Once we focus on the importance of clients and distribution channel for Ichitan, we will realise that their importance is one of the keys that the company need to concern and make it as a duty, to maintain and increase the relationship quality, to fulfill customers' needs, to create work standard, and to trust each other. This will help creating long-term relationship and mutual benefits in the future.

This paper aims to identify client relationship marketing practices: an exploratory study in business-to-business (B2B) between Ichitan Group PCL and distribution channel on modern trade for the purpose of indicating a successful strategy of Ichitan for its client, coupled with area of improvement and enhancement of mutual benefit in the final stage.

1.2 Problem Statement

When we look into Thailand's competitive market, one of the most competitive ones seems to be a beverage market, especially, green tea. As a leader, Ichitan needs to do several things to maintain its position and huge contribution in this challenging market. From mass marketing communication to niche communication, one of the most interesting issues is clearly a client relationship management.

This article consists of four sections. The first section is the literature regarding the importance of client relationship marketing is reviewed, so are conceptual models proposed by previous scholars pertaining to the relationship development process, an exploratory study in B2B relationship management between Ichitan group PCL and its distribution channel on modern trade. The second is the research methods used for this study are discussed. The third section is the findings presented and discussed within the context of the literature with reference to the conceptual framework proposed. The last section concludes with a conclusion of the implications and limitations of the findings and directions for future. Knowing your clients better will empower you to serve them better and keep them steadfast for eternity.

1.3 Research Objective

From the previous study by Ford (1980), Leminen (2001), Theng & Goh (2005), Lavinsky (2014), Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), relationship management between buyer and seller is undoubtedly significant and fascinating for every company to concern. Most of them usually focus on the relationship between servicing company and B2C business by describing on the relationship development process and time-phased buyer evaluation. This study would like to make a difference by investigating on B2B business. Especially, for Thailand, when comparing with the USA and European countries, the result would be totally different. In my opinion, it is exciting to dig down to the process of relationship management of a company in Thailand such as Ichitan, who is in fast moving consumer goods market and very successful within short period of time. This paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. How important client relationship marketing is in FMCGs business?
2. How to build and maintain the client relationship management focusing on the relationship between company and distribution channel on modern trade?

I am determined to focus on this case intensively, and would like to pass forward the result to Ichitan for its improvement and better management.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to study on previous research selected from the variety of sources in order to review the investigation into the client relationship marketing practice: an exploratory study in B2B between Ichitan group PCL and distribution channel through modern trade. This chapter begins with the definition of relevant variables and background of the topic, then further discuss on conceptual framework related to the study.

2.1 Relationship Management

2.1.1 Customer Relationship Management and Client Relationship Management (CRM)

CRM is considered a fulfillment of clients' needs. It is seen as "chain response" created by new activities which require correspondence with the client. "CRM Guru", clarifies the meaning of CRM in huge business as regardless of the possibility that it is contain of just a few persons like to "suitable individuals" "at right time" (Thompson, 2001).

Nowadays, there are an increasing number of organizations understanding that clients are their greater part imperative assets. Furthermore, prospective client connections are commonly useful for exchanges and changes that have with be figured out how (Gronroos, 1994). According to Gronroos (1996), Morgan and Hunt (1994), those substance from claiming relationship management will be in light to help customers (organizations alternately singular people) Also supplier's (industrial associations alternately administration organizations) association dependent upon trust, cooperation, control distribution, communication, commitment, reliance and other features and in addition improvements for customers need.

Today, the focus of marketing has progressed from a simplistic idea of giving the customers what they want, to be building and maintaining mutually satisfying long-term relationships with clients and developing long-term strategies for client retention. This new paradigm asserts that buyer and seller are engaged in a mutual exchange situation in which both parties benefit from the relationship (Gronroos, 1994).

Challenge of CRM is about competition, commoditization, client sophistication and transparent markets mean that few services can be truly differentiated in their own right. Strong and enduring client relationships are the lifeblood of most organizations. Long-term relationships serve another key function in today's tumultuous markets: they reduce risk for both clients and service providers (Sobel, 2015). This fickleness has fostered a growing sense of awareness of the long-term financial benefits relationship marketing can convey. Relationship marketing is based on two economic arguments: It is more expensive to win a new customer than it is to retain an existing customer. The longer the client relationship marketing association between a company and a customer is, the more profitable the relationship for the firm become (Gronroos, 1994).

2.1.2 Developing Buyer-Seller Relationship

The overall objective of relationship marketing is to build, maintain, and enhance a long-term buyer–seller relationship. Enduring relationships with customers can provide firms with a unique and sustainable competitive advantage because they are not easily duplicated by competitors (Buttle, 1996; Perrien & Richard, 1995). Without any sense of relationship, unfaithful customers can be fickle and switch easily to competitors by taking advantage of the low prices or other deals offered by other suppliers (Holmlund & Kock, 1996). This is further supported by Gronroos (2001), who introduced a three-phased customer relationship life cycle: initial phase, purchasing phase, and consumption or usage phase. He argued that it is always cheaper to make a satisfied customer purchase again than to take a new customer through the customer relationship life cycle to the end of the purchase stage. In other words, it is more fruitful to have as many profitable long-term customer relationships as possible. Reichheld and Sasser (1990) observed a cross-industry trend and discovered that sales and profits per account rise the longer a relationship lasts.

Figure 2.1 Three Phases of Customer Relationship Life Cycle by Gronroos by 2001

Referring to Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), relationship management, which sees the essentialness of relationship building and organization in cooperating, has ascended as a current new model. Various specialists have studied relationship marketing in an industrial marketing context, and in a services industry context. A paradigm shift from the marketing mix approach towards relationship marketing has been observed.

2.2 Business-to-Business (B2B) Relationship Management

2.2.1 Business-to-Business (B2B) Relationship

According to Service 360 partners (2014), in case of healthy outline of B2B client relationship, B2B relationship offer will go between the shopper appropriation chains instead of straightforwardly to an unfamiliar customer. B2B organizations need fewer clients with a little result offering over extensive B2C associations. The sort of relationship comes from trust. If client does not trust you, they will be unwilling to provide your company responsibilities or share insights that will help your company to add value beyond the transaction. Secondly, trust is called out due to systematically built trust by the capability of supplier. There would be a significant number of practices that prompt trust. However, a handful of practices stand separated for their impact. The details are as follows:

1. Consistently delivering against promises
2. Doing what it takes to resolve problems
3. Looking out for the best interests of the customer
4. Demonstrating fairness and integrity in all dealings
5. Openly sharing information about objectives and problems

2.3 The Relationship Development Process Review

Structural models of relationships that several authors have proposed models describe the stages or phases in the development of a relationship. We will present a brief overview of three such models as the detail below.

2.3.1 Relationship between buyer and seller by Dwyer, Schurr and Oh

From Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), relationship between buyer and seller is developed by awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution. The more disintegration inside about in the investigation phase, they further conceptualize five steps. The processes are attraction, communication and bargaining, development and exercise of power, norm development, and expectation development. This model will be rather nonexclusive as it. Key variables are identifier for examination. Propose of five-stage model of relationship development will be as detailed below:

1. *Awareness:* Party A recognizes that Party B is a feasible exchange partner, although there is no actual interaction.

2. *Exploration:* the two parties begin to consider obligation, burdens and benefits associated with the possibility of exchange. This second phase is conceptualized by the authors to contain five sub-processes: attraction, communication and bargaining, power and justice, norm development, expectations development

3. *Expansion:* the costs of withdrawing from the relationship increase, so does the level of trust and joint satisfaction. The third phase is characterized by a continual increase in benefits obtained by exchange partners and to their increasing interdependence

4. *Commitment:* the relationship is characterized by a greater range of resources that are considered fungible (e.g., material resources, status, emotional expression, services), durable (remains functional over a period of time and environmental uncertainty), and consistent (e.g., expectation of similar responses over time and context).

5. *Dissolution:* one (or both) party evaluates the dissatisfaction with the other party, concluding that the costs of continuation or modification outweigh benefits.

2.3.2 Relationship Process by Ford

According to Ford (1980), need inspects those ways for such connections. Over mechanical purchasing toward treating their advancement concerning, illustration and procedure is about whether. He asserts that not everyone dealings between streamlined. Purchasing and offering organizations occur inside close connections. Same time as that result, it also advances transform for the two organizations. Necessary assistance is the paramount figuring out the nature about buyer-seller. The accessibility about elective purchasers and more dealers need to be. Organizations longing with creating close relationship must design their assets to fulfill a particular. Purchaser alternately vender such as supplier's customization to the purchaser or buyer's change of a processing procedure should suit of shield on supplier's result. Also, they present five stages in this time-phased buyer-seller relationship evolution: pre-relationship, early stage, development, long-term, and the final stage.

2.3.3 Relationship Process by Dion

According to Dion et al. (1995), all relationship management process needs to investigate the effect of identity qualities and types of alongside with trust around buyer-seller relationship. For their model, five key variables would examine, namely, those salesperson's personality, purchasers and dealers for comparable customized types, recognition for buyer-seller, customized similarity, trust and association between buyer's recognition of buyer-seller similitude and real buyer-seller comparability. That model incorporates the magic in interactional segments to effective buyer-seller.

2.3.4 Relationship Development Process

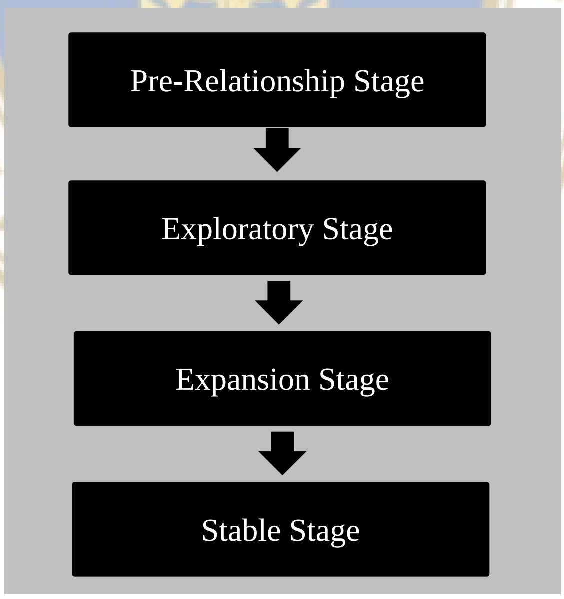
Pre-relationship is the beginning period of the relationship progression process. At this stage, there are various unusual and less trusts between the buyer and seller. An imperative of two-way correspondence is required to survey the upsides of confining a relationship and to assess the hypothesis and alteration required to make the relationship work. (Dwyer, 1987).

Exploratory stage is a movement of counsel and haggling of purchasing a business administration or a bit of capital gear. At this stage, there is a high open door that trial purchase will happen. This is the stage in which imminent of purchasing may happen later on (Dwyer, 1987). The exchange results at this stage will demonstrate the limit and status of the dealer to pass on satisfaction to the buyer. In addition, the connection with nature of the buyer will augment when the buyer fulfills the clear exchange responsibility commendably (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959)

A typical consideration and collaboration are basic parts to move the relationship into the development stage, as quick experience is subject to be the imperative reason for judging the relationship's temperament (Dwyer, 1987). A relationship is in the extension stage when the two's capriciousness associations around each other's abilities and craving have been lessened and the business is creating in volume or changing in positive sort.

Stable stage will be in charged when the procedure of item exchange and administration has ended up of course. The relationship at this stage can make trust, working procedure standards and association's substitution standards.

Responsibility implies the stage in which exchange cooperators have completed an abnormal state of satisfaction from the exchange process, which in this manner motivates both side to stay in the relationship and to dismiss other vital exchange cooperators who could give similar focal points.



Base on Deyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) and Ford et (1988)’ s al.
Relationship development process models

Figure 2.2 Client Relationship Marketing Practices at Different Stages of the Relationship Development Process Toward Achieving the Desired Outcome of Firm

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Scope

A triangulation method is used in this research by applying multi methods across methodology paradigm (both qualitative and quantitative) for understanding the motivation factor under the difference of marketing approaches, as well as comparing and contrasting the similarity of result by using the following 3 methods (Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Love, Holt and Li, 2002).

The first method that use for answer the research question, in-depth interview techniques is adopted as the data collection for the purpose of collecting "facts" or gaining insights into or understanding opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviors, or predictions from the interviewee. This research is based on individual interview by choosing the appropriately selected interviewees who may give the potential information for generating a range of insights, understanding that might be useful, who are key positions who understand a situation and know deep detail and insight on the matter related. The interviewees' criteria for this project will be specified by their basic profile including job role, qualifications, experience, and gender, which is significantly important for the study. Silverman (2010) describes this as "purposive sampling" in which respondents are selected on the basis of the groups that your research addresses. The next consideration is access to potential interviewees. In simple terms this depends on two key factors, their willingness and availability. This is how I indicate who are proper for the research and why you are conducting this research (Jennifer, 2012). The number of interviewees will be based on the people who are willing to have a project interview.

Another technique used in this study is the observational method by observing those managers during you interview, meeting and office hour. The purpose of this method is to identify the commonalties across cases in several instances; similar challenges and the manner with which they were dealt with were noticed. Participant observation also allows spontaneous, informal interviewing to happen, opening up those insights and perspectives from groups that may not yet be readily reached, during the experience of sport product consumption in particular. One of the limitations of observational research, in spite of the competence to see what is happening, is the inability to comprehend why it is happening. (Stavros & Westberg, 2009**)**.

The last method is analyzing secondary data collected from the previous study, newspaper, website and other online sources. The objective of this technique is to gather information from the organization or external sources, and to prove a critical component of this study in order to support the result from those above-mentioned methods (Stavros & Westberg, 2009)**.**

In this case I choose people who are involve with Ichitan company and distribution channel such as sales team, marketing team and distributor team in order understand their situation and context, in order to find out a good opportunity for identifying unanticipated outcome, exist in natural, unstructured, flexible setting, ability to experience the affective, as well as cognitive aspects of responses and explore it into the suitable way. This interview uses the open-ended questions to help us find out the detail more deeply. Reflective note taking is also used to record observed data because it will help us note important word and to remind the key point of what to do. The study conducts a qualitative research approach by one on one interview; face to face and phone interview. The criteria of selecting the respondent for this project will be as detailed below:

1. People who are involved and work related to client relationship management from Ichitan and DKSH such as sales and marketing department
2. People who are the key contacts between company and client such as key account
3. People who are in manager level and upper
4. People who have an experience in this field for more than 2 years

3.2 Research Question

A list of open-ended question is developed as it allows an unlimited number of possible answers. The respondents can answer in detail, qualify and clarify their responses, as well as unanticipated findings, adequate answers to complex issues, creativity, self-expression, and richness of the details, with their personal logic, thinking process, and frame of reference.

For the research questions, I divide them into 3 parts; the first part is introduction. The second part is to explore individual perceptions of client relationship marketing. The last past is to understand client relationship marketing practices.

This time, I have a chance to interview 8 people who are the key person for client relationship management such as trade marketing and marketing team from Ichitan and marketing and client service team from DKSH. As detail in table below

Table 3.1 List of Interviewee from Ichitan and DKSH

No.	Position	Department	Company
1	Trade Marketing Manager	Sales	Ichitan Group PCL
2	Assistant Trade Marketing Manager: **Responsible for distribution channel in Super and Hyper Market (S/H) format	Sales	Ichitan Group PCL
3	Assistant Trade Marketing Manager : **Responsible for distribution channel in convenience store (CVS) format	Sales	Ichitan Group PCL
4.	Group Product Manager	Marketing	Ichitan Group PCL
5.	Product Manager	Marketing	Ichitan Group PCL
6.	Marketing Manager	Marketing	DKSH (thailand) Limited
7.	Client Service Manager	Marketing	DKSH (thailand) Limited
8.	Associate customer Account manager	Sales	DKSH (thailand) Limited

CHAPTER IV
FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I summarize the finding into 6 practices based on the activities that Ichitan has done for relationship management with their clients in modern trade including 7-Eleven, Tesco Lotus, Big C, Family Mart, Lawson 108, and Tops Super Market. In order to summarize the finding from the collected data, we provide only an overview of the key issue. In addition, to avoid excessive quotation, this article presents the phenomena under investigation in order to facilitate the data analysis.

Based on data collection, 6 clients' relationship marketing practices were identified. A previous study of client relationship marketing practice: An exploratory study in legal industry by Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014) outlines two similar practices. Four out of six practices identified in this particular study are personal relationship in Thai context or Thai culture, win-win strategy, priority management and dealing with strategic level.

In this chapter, I aim to compare and contrast between client relationship management process from literature review in Chapter 2 and process-by-process research result, as well as to find out the similarity and different from this finding with previous study as the detail below:

4.1 Finding

4.1.1 Create trust and constancy on each other

"The most important things on doing business are trust and constancy," said six of eight interviewees from Ichitan and DKSH. Even for the existing or new clients, trust is one of the keys that will keep relationship continue as in the long term. Trust from Ichitan and DKSH implies that they are ready to assist and provide everything to their clients. In any international company, trust is likely task-oriented or win-win strategy. However, for Thai company, trust implies how good of relationship between company and clients is. “We can create trust with our clients by demonstrating sincerity and help each other. For example, we are ready to tell them all information we have such as market trend, market situation and market analysis, both our and competitor’s sides. We would like to show them the market fact and suggest what should be concerned. It will help them understand market situation better. We are trying our best to help them achieve their targets, increase sales and gain market share without hesitation” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 28, 2015).

Comparing with the literature in Chapter 2, what Ichitan has done is quite aligned with relationship management in terms of the relationship between buyer and seller that will be dependent upon trust, cooperation, control distribution, communication, commitment, reliance and other features and in improvement and fulfills consumer need (Gronroos, 1996 & Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

The other way to maintain good relationship with trust is keeping the promise you gave to your clients, which will consequently improve their confidence in you. In reality, it is quite difficult for Ichitan since there would be some unexpected problem that interrupts the original plan. This is one of the most important issues that company need to concern. Once the problem occurs, the company should be able explain to its clients properly (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 28, 2015 and Interviewee 6, personal communication, November 3, 2015). This is similar to Gronroos, 1996 & Morgan and Hunt, 1994 regarding how to maintain the relationship with clients, commitment seems to be the key that needed to be concerned and improved for fulfilling customers’ needs.

The most interesting finding from research result is that, sometimes, the company needs pretend that clients gain more benefit than the company does. For example, clients get 11 points while company earns only 10 points. This strategy sometimes helps us in difficult situation. When some clients want to gain benefit from us as much as possible, we will use this strategy to prevent the conflict with them. The detail above will be the strategy that satisfies clients and helps maintaining good relationship with them in the long term (Interviewee 7, personal communication, November 4, 2015 and Interviewee 5, personal communication, November 4, 2015).

When we compare to the literature review in Chapter 2, it is quite new and different from most researches as it is tricky and requires professional experience to operate.

As for trust and constancy in client relationship process, it can be defined that both will be in every stage of the process, from pre-relationship stage to stable stage. This is because they are ones of the most important keys in client relationship management that every company applies to satisfy their clients' needs. We should keep our word and maintain as said by Groonroos (1994).

"Trust in this finding does not only identify a certain stage, it also indicates weight and frequency of trust in each other. When comparing with client relationship development process (Dwyer, 1987), the most important stage is the pre-relationship as clients do not have sufficient information and confidence in the company. What we should do is gaining confidence from clients as much as possible by sharing available information, trying to understand them, and showing them how ready we are to help them," said four of eight interviewees. After, we should keep maintain their trust and relationship.

Most employees of Ichitan and DKSH said we would not see many new comers enter into this market since it is very competitive and need a large sum of money to invest, meaning there would be only few clients to contact with in the pre-relationship stage. Despite the few clients, pre-relationship stage can be considered as the most difficult stage for Ichitan and DKSH in building trust from the people that they never know before. This stage undoubtedly needs hard effort.

On the other hand, one of the most important stages for the company is expansion and stable stage. In this market, the business is not a one-off action; it requires the relationship for continuing the business endlessly. What Ichitan and DKSH need to do is to continue their relationship and secure the trust with their clients as seriously as possible. The expectation from Ichitan and DKSH from these activities is to develop trust from clients in order to facilitate the business together, increase their own bargaining power, and gain more benefits together in the final stage.

Comparing with the activities as mentioned by Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), we can notice the similarity of communication management or interaction process, which requires trust as a part of building good relationship with clients.

4.1.2 Get to know, understand and listen to each other

CRM is a chain of relationship between buyer and seller. If we have good product, good factory and good communication, but our distribution is not good enough. We cannot get any return as we desire, similar to what Thompson (2001) said. “What we need to know and understand is client hidden agenda” (Interviewee 6, personal communication, November 3, 2015). “The most important thing as we are Thai, the things that we need to know is about the working style both of the company style and client personal style” five of eight interviewees said.

The distribution style means the style that each distribution channel is or influenced by organization culture, mission and vision from a company. An example of distribution channel formed by a company is Tesco Lotus, influenced by international working culture. The relationship management needed for working with Tesco Lotus is data, research, logical, and reason-oriented style. Comparing to 7-Eleven, it looks slightly different. 7-Eleven has Thai business management style, meaning that personal relationship is very important. Sometimes, we need to do something beyond our work. This includes preparing some gift for a special occasion, or taking care of some people as if they were our family member by asking them so often about personal issue, and expressing like you really care them, three of eight interviewees said.

“The most importance is understanding client as much as you can. It will help company increase bargaining power, gross profit agreement and others” (Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 5, 2015). After knowing each other enough, bargaining power of the company would be better and this will be the factor that reflects long-term benefit for Ichitan and their clients in the better way.

These activities are involved with every stage in client relationship process since they are the tools that encourage company and client in helping each other and understand what they should do together in the next stage. The objective of get to know, understand and listen to each other is to increase mutual benefit together, which is similar to Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014) in the topic of truly understanding client business and industries. This helps us understand clients better and effectively meet mutual demands of the two parties.

4.1.3 Personal Relationship in Thai Context or Thai Culture

From eight of eight respondents, the important things are learning and dealing with Thai style. “Even though the company is international, the one who deals or contact person is still Thai people. What we need do is to manage them in Thai way” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, November 4, 2015). “The culture is very important” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 28, 2015 and Interviewee 6, personal communication, November 3, 2015).

The relationship with Thai can be considered personal relationship management. In terms of Ichitan, Thai management style is to understand the client in deep with constancy, creating trust, and pay attention. These are the keys that a company should concern. For example, when we talk about other issues not related to work such as how are you, where did you go last weekend, or how about your family. This would be amiable between company and its suppliers. Talking about personal issue unrelated to their work makes them feel you care them a lot. This is totally different from American style as it is not necessary; Americans usually focus on the result. The activities that Ichitan and DKSH normally do for securing personal relationship with clients includes taking caring of them whenever they can, giving them a special give on the special occasion, and some dinner for informal meeting with relaxing atmosphere.

If we talk about these activities and literature review found in Chapter 2, the result is quite new and different from the paper. These activities are specific for Thai culture. As we are Thai, we live as the big family, different for western people who rather live in a nuclear family. Thai people believe in helping each other and love to work together. This is the reason why personal relationship is important for Thai business. If the relationship is strongly good, it can help negotiating some important issue. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 30, 2015).

If we compare with relationship management process, these activities will be in every stage. However, the difference learned from this case is that, under this Thai culture, the more we serve out client in Thai style, the better relationship between the two parties will become. Assistance in small matters such as buying a stuff, escorting, or off-work conversation could be an important matter in Thai society that helps facilitating the business or solving some issues. Therefore, trust in every stage is significantly important. The best understanding and cooperation between the company and clients is based on trust and respect given to one another.

4.1.4 Win-Win Strategy: Giving and Taking

Similar to the literature review from Gronroos (1994), Buttle (1996), Perrien & Richard (1995), everything they do to help client relationship management is not only for the purpose of gaining benefit for company, but also of mutual benefit, profit, performance (both sales or margin) for both companies and their client, for example, their distribution channel and modern trade, at the same time. Ichitan's goal is to support and help the client as much as they can. The mutual benefit that Ichitan do is for maintaining the relationship with their clients and make it as the long-term contact. For instance, Ichitan sets the goal every year for creating the marketing plan and implementing it, sharing the important market data, customizing promotion for each channel properly, applying marketing communication as the assisting tools for both of us in order to increase sales and mutually gain better benefit. "Sometimes we have the TVC with promotion message to support the promotion in CVS. It is a strategy that helps both of us gain benefit together" (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 30, 2015). "When client from CVS asks for promotion in their channel, sometimes this is the thing that we should do for them. If the result is right for us" (Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 5, 2015). "We often use bargaining power by giving the exclusive SKUs to some channel in order to help the sales that Ichitan may not wish to subsidize additionally" (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 30, 2015). "Sometimes, it is about the performance support" (Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 5, 2015), the example is the performance support that Ichitan uses such as launching a promotion plan or TVC in order to stimulate sales in some certain channel. Occasionally, if we compare to traditional trade (T/T), they do not use the reason-orientated method as MT do. Instead, they use relationship-orientated method and choose only what they like the most.

If we talk about the key channel of Ichitan, it is 7-Eleven. 7-Eleven can generate a huge number of sales with more than 8,000 branches nationwide. The personal relationship with 7-Eleven includes mini seminar between Ichitan and 7-Eleven for brainstorming a plan, strategy and new innovation for the next years plan together. Ichitan would like to call the plan from this seminar as “our plan,” not your or my plan.

The relationship management process and win-win strategy will be linked in the exploratory stage, expansion stage and stable stage, in order to make an exchange and relationship in long term, as well as continuing the benefit together. This stage requires collaboration and cooperation; mutual benefit will develop relationship between the two parties for eternity.

4.1.5 Priority Management

Regarding distribution channel such as convenience store (7-Elven, Family Mart, Sun 108, and Lawson 108), Super and Hyper Market (Tesco Lotus, Big C, and Tops Super Market) some conflict in management may occur easily (Interviewee 7, personal communication, November 4, 2015). It is very important to set the priority so that we can manage them easily. If we concern only some certain channel, we may have a problem with other channels that we miss. In order to reduce the problem, Ichitan uses priority management to prioritize the importance of each channel and method of approach. The keys that Ichitan use for prioritizing channel are as detailed below:

1. Number of Sales also Contribution of sales compare to other channel in the same segment
2. Potential to growth
3. Number of store in Thailand

What Ichitan really need to do is prioritizing what important the most, how to handle it, who should be the responsible person, how to solve, and how to reduce the conflict. The first priority of Ichitan is 7-Eleven, due to its large number of stores in Thailand, as well as the benefit from merchandising, and the second is Tesco Lotus. Comparing to the literature review in chapter 2, no one really mentions priority management. In my opinion, priority management will facilitate your life by identifying who is important to you, who you need to care, and how could the company take care them in a better way.

This priority management will be important in the expansion and stable stage as it will match with the business you are in for a while and how can the company manage them in the long term. Expansion and stable stage refers to long relationship of the two parties. Prioritizing helps indicating who is the most important person that the company should take care of very well. Consequently, it will enhance your performance effectively and systematically.

4.1.6 Dealing with Strategic Level and Skillful Person

A tactic that Ichitan uses for client relationship management is dealing with strategic level and skillful person. The first step is dealing with strategic level; this is how Ichitan encourage people who are in the same level to deal together. For example, it can be described by the situation that Ichitan need to deal with. In the regular situation, Ichitan will choose a normal person who is in operation level only. If we discuss about the aging product or update sales report, officer in operation level or some of management level is allowed to work in this situation. If the situation is more difficult such as signing a contact that values more than 10 million baht, Ichitan will choose manager level to complete the task. The purpose of choosing management level for dealing with the similar management level is for maintaining bargaining power in different situations. If the negotiation is very difficult, Ichitan will use assign those in high level to deal with executives or company owners for those certain cases. Ichitan do like this because it wants to maintain a relationship, honor the people who work in each level, secure bargaining power with the client, and to place employees who have the different experience to deal with each stage.

The activities are in the paper that we found in Chapter 2. It is very important for Ichitan to honor to people in each level. If we compare with client relationship process, people in every stage are separated by duty and scope of work, especially in a hard situation that needs a sharp decision. Assigning the task to the right person will provide better bargaining power.

Table 4.1 Client Relationship Practice by Ichitan Company at Different Stage of The Relationship Development base on Dwyer

Stage/ Phase	Ichitan's Client Relationship Practices
Pre-Relationship Stage	• Create trust and constancy on each other • Get to know, understand and listen to each other • Personal relationship in Thai context, Thai culture • Dealing with strategic level and skillful person
Exploratory Stage	• Create trust and constancy on each other • Get to know, understand and listen to each other • Win-Win Strategy • Personal relationship in Thai context, Thai culture • Dealing with strategic level and skillful person
Expansion Stage	• Create trust and constancy on each other • Get to know, understand and listen to each other • Win-Win Strategy • Personal relationship in Thai context, Thai culture • Priority management • Dealing with strategic level and skillful person
Stable Stage	• Create trust and constancy on each other • Get to know, understand and listen to each other • Win-Win Strategy • Personal relationship in Thai context, Thai culture • Priority management • Dealing with strategic level and skillful person

Source: Schurr and Oh (1987) and Ford et (1988)

The overall objective of client relationship management that Ichitan does is to increase the bargaining power over the client, to improve sales including number of channels and number of shops, to reduce some operation conflict, to grow up with their clients, and to secure long-term relationship.

4.2 Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the relationship marketing practice in B2B at different stages in the relationship development process are different from previous study (Ford ,1980; Leminen, 2001; Theng& Goh, 2005; Lavinsky, 2014; Woo and Leelapanyalert, 2014.) as detailed below: -

When comparing the differences of 4 stages of the relationship development process and finding, we can see that it is quite same the research of Ford (1980) which are similarly divided into 4 stages. However, if we compare to the find of Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014), there are both similarities and differences such as activities due to different business styles. The model of Woo and Leelapanyalert (2014) is service company or B2C, while this case study is based on the relationship of B2C. The similarities are trust and understand between the parties, the differences are management or techniques used for Thai employees.

From the finding, existing activities are not those with clear steps. Insread, the difference is based on the degrees on each stage. For instance, trust is important for every stage, but building trust in pre-relationship stage may take some time and dedication. Once understand between the two is clear, building trust in the following stage would be much easier than the first stage. However, trust is still required for securing the relationship

The pre-relationship of Ichitan and their clients contains 4 activities such as creating trust and constancy on each other, getting to know & understand and listen to each other, personal relationship in Thai context and dealing with strategic level. In the exploratory stage contains 5 activities, which includes creating trust and constancy on each other, get to know & understand and listen to each other, personal relationship in Thai context, priority management and dealing with strategic level. As for the expansion and stable stage contain 6 activities consisting of creating trust and constancy on each other, get to know & understand and listen to each other, win-win strategy, personal relationship in Thai context, priority management and dealing with strategic level.

The detail related to literature contains 3 activities, which are quite similar to creating trust and constancy on each other, get to know & understand and listen to each other, win-win strategy. Last but not least, the others 3 are the new and different ones, most of them might happen in the context.

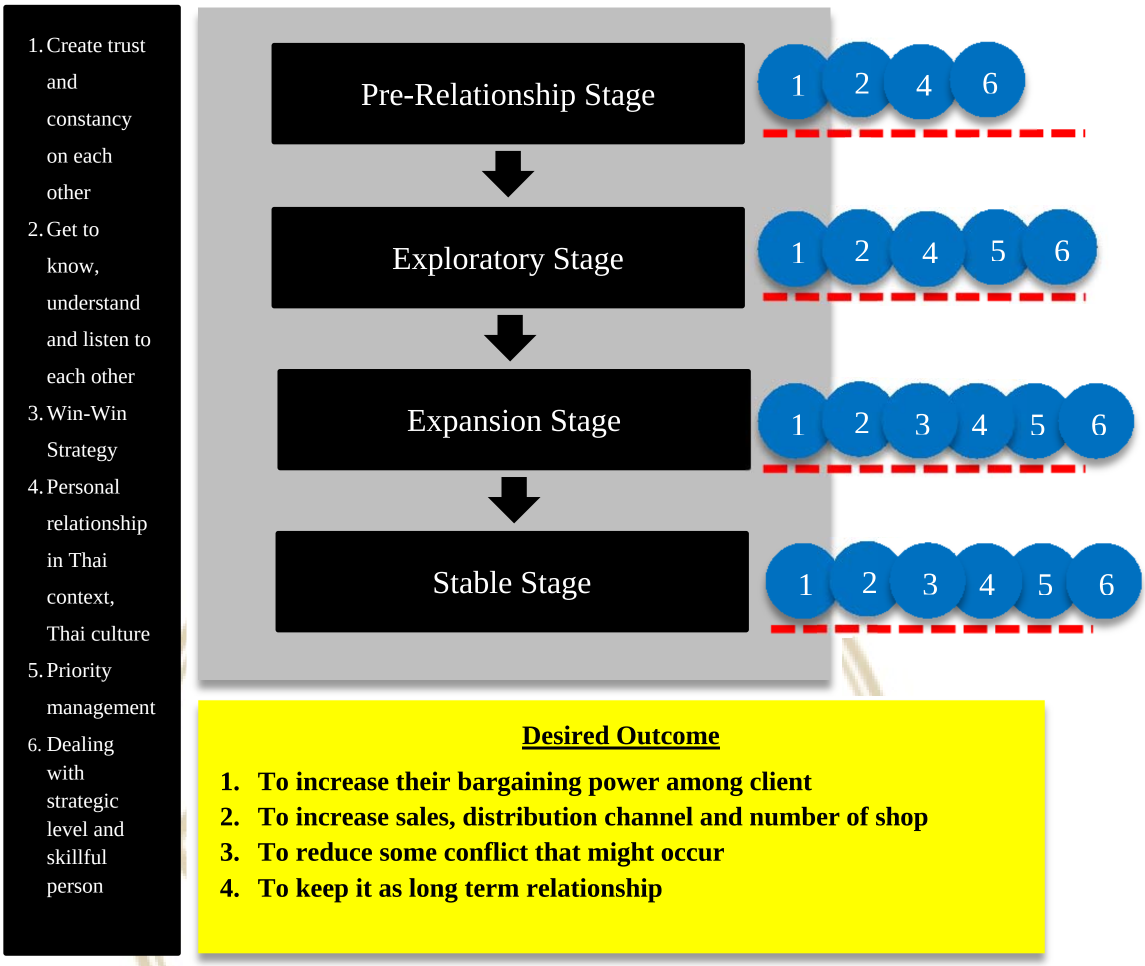


Figure 4.1 Client Relationship Marketing Practice at the Different Stage of Relationship Development Process Toward Achieving The Desired Outcomes of A Firm.

Source: Base on Dwyer (1987), Ford (1988) and Gronross (2000). CRM = Client Relationship Management

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, we first divided research questions into 2 parts. The first part is the importance of client relationship marketing in FMCGs business. And the second is finding out how to build and maintain the client relationship management focusing on the relationship between company and distribution channel on modern trade. I would like to summarize them as follows: -

The first is the importance of client relationship marketing in FMCGs business. The answer is it very important, not only in FMCG market, but also every market since this will return the benefit to the company in long term.

The second is about finding out how to build and maintain the client relationship management focusing on the relationship between company and distribution channel on modern trade. Ichitan has been working on relationship management in several ways, but they mostly focus on trust and Thai relationship management, which is quite suitable for working with Thai business. Ichitan is quite successful in terms of relationship management, not only with end-consumer, but also with their clients, both modern trade and traditional trade, in order to secure long-term relationship, gain more bargaining power, increase sales and reduce any future conflicts.

5.2 Managerial implication

I expect the finding from this research will help Ichitan understand their current situation better, as well as allowing me to understand many points of view from different departments in the company, such as trade marketing department marketing department, and from their distributor, DKSH. I hope the result from this project will help them define the right problem, right area to improve, and right solution for total Ichitan corporate. Also, I hope Ichitan will use this research result in order to improve their client relationship strategy, and add some new strategy for developing relationship management with their clients and new comers, and to impress their clients as much as they can. Furthermore, I wish Ichitan could acknowledge more points of view from the client for a better strategy in the future.

5.3 Theoretical implication

The interesting point that I found from the research is how to deal with personal relationship in Thai context such as how to deal with Thai people. This is very important because, as mentioned in many studies, the focus of research will focus only international companies or international business. In my opinion, this project is different as it focuses on Thai company under Thai culture. This allows employees to work in an atmosphere of family business, do business with relationship, coupled with hierarchic system and lots of tactics for working with the relationship management. When we compare to the previous study about client relationship management, there are not so many paper focusing on Thai company or even on country business management style. Also, priority management and dealing with strategic level and skillful person, especially with Thai hierarchy, is one of the most important things everyone needs to concern. Finding out the differences on business culture will spice the research up.

The similarity between this paper and the previous is that the 4 stages was used, as well as other main factors including trust, understanding and consistency for building and maintaining relationship between the two parties. The significant differences are management specification of Thai style relationship, which comes with different methods and techniques when compare the similar cases between Thai and foreign cases. Moreover, it would be better if there is a study on the difference of client relationship management from the different operation style in various continents such as Asia, Europe and Americas. This will provide better understand of client relationship management style in each county.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Even interviewees for this project are also the key person, who is involved with everything related to client relationship management from Ichitan company. Nevertheless, there remains an area of improvement that will make this research more reliable, that is having more in-depth interview with those departments who are involved with the client such as 7-Eleven, Tesco Lotus, and Big C. After, we will compare and contrast the result from both sides, and the area to improve.

This research focuses on client practice: an exploratory study in business-to-business (B2B) Ichitan and distribution channel on modern trade. It is important for the future research to explore the validity of this conceptual framework. Further testing in relationship between international company and their client like modern trade helps us understand better about what should be compared to Thai company like Ichitan. Testing on the relationship between Thai company and their client like traditional trade is also another way that helps us better understand how Thai company works on the relationship management with their wholesalers or retailers.

As for the recommendation, from my interview on the activities, the finding illustrates that not everyone who the 6 activities. Therefore, in order to align internal operation of the company, I would like to suggest the company to launch a plan or guideline, as well as training for all employees in every department or any related person. This will allow them to understand working techniques or how to create client relationship management effectively.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: A Key Interview Question

Introduction

1. How long have you been working for this firm?

Part 1: To explore individual perceptions of client relationship marketing

2. In your opinion, is it important for your firm to practice client relationship marketing? How important is it and why?

3. How important are building and maintaining relationships with your

Part 2: To understand client relationship marketing practices

4. How do you build relationships with your clients? Can you please give some examples?

5. How do you maintain relationships with your clients? Can you please give some examples?

6. What kind of activities would you normally do to build relationships with clients? Can you explain in detail?

** Don’t forget to find out at what stage it happens

7. What kind of activities would you normally do to maintain relationships with clients? Can you explain in detail?

** Don’t forget to find out at what stage it happens

8. Who is involved in building and maintaining relationships with clients? Can you please give some examples?

Tips: Find out why he or she said so

Don’t forget to ask for examples

9. Can you tell me about the scope of your roles and responsibilities in

** Try to extend the discussion in detail for each practice

** Don’t forget to ask for examples

** Try to link each practice to different stages/phases by interpreting (e.g., “Would you say it happens during the initial phase?”)

10. Do you work with other departments to build relationships with client If yes, how do you work with them in order to achieve better results?

Can you please give some examples? If no, why do you think this is the case?

11. Do you work with other departments to maintain relationships with?

If yes, how do you work with them in order to achieve better results?

Can you please give some examples? If no, why do you think this is the case?

12. Do you have any teams involved with maintaining relationships with clients?

Can you explain in detail?

13. Is there any support or encouragement from the firm to build and maintain relationships with clients? Why do you think the firm is doing that?

14. Is there any other information you would like to add to our discussion?