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Customer orientation, the core of the company's competitiveness

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Abstract

Competitiveness has never been a hot topic as it is now. The challenges and constraints for companies are numerous and significant. However, this notion is not easy to define and to pin down because it is very complex and multidimensional, and is far from being unanimously agreed upon by the authors. But, whatever the definition given to it, and whatever the approach and means by which it is to be achieved, this notion ultimately boils down to a successful relationship with the customer, since the latter has supreme power over the market through the act of purchase and above all the trust he places in the company and through it in its partners. The consumer is the foundation of business and the cause of its survival and success. In this context, this article has shown that the only way to strengthen the competitiveness of the company both internally, upstream and downstream, is the customer orientation of its management system. Indeed, customer orientation ensures that the company has both an internal cohesion of all its staff and functions, and a cohesion with its various external partners. This double internal and external cohesion is centred on the final customer, the only guarantee of success for all. Customer orientation makes all partners (internal and external to the company) aware that their joint success is linked to the degree of trust placed in them by the end customer.

Keywords: Competitiveness, marketing, customer orientation, value chain, value system.

Introduction

The prosperity, even the survival, of nations and companies depends on their degree of competitiveness. However, this notion is very complex and multidimensional, and is far from unanimous among authors. But, whatever the definition we give it, and whatever the means and the approach by which we want to achieve it, this notion ultimately comes down to a successful relationship with the client. This is due to the simple fact that in today's competitive system, customers have taken precedence over other stakeholders. They are the ones who govern the business world and hold the right of veto over the decisions of firms. They vote with their money, but more importantly with their confidence, to determine what should be made and reward the company that achieves it. Moreover, as P. Drucker [1] rightly points out, it is the consumer and he/she alone who determines what a business is [...]. It does not really matter much what the producer thinks, especially when it comes to the future of

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the business and its success. What the consumer thinks he/she is buying, what he/she sees as having value, is what matters. This determines what the company is, what it produces and how well it does. The consumer is the foundation of business and the cause of its survival. [2] adds, customers are the center around which economic activity must ultimately be organized. In other words, marketing makes the consumer the centre of business, the point from which springs and flows the prosperity and destiny of the business.[2] In this context, customer orientation is, of course, the way to strengthen the competitiveness of companies, but also a managerial obligation imposed by the new changes and constraints of the cultural and technological environments, etc.

I. Customer Orientation, the Way to Prevent the Company From Getting Lost

We must first define the concept of customer orientation. Several authors have tried to define it, the most famous of which are:

According to R. Whiteley and D. Hessan [3], the “clientropic” company, centered on the client, wants and can make the client the very heart of its organization. At this stage, the customers are individualized and known. The whole company is informed of their needs and all employees ask one vital question about every process, every task and every decision: Will this create added value for our customers?

These authors explain, a center is “a node of activity or influence”. This definition applies to the customer-centric organization. By placing the customer at its center, the company allows all its employees, from the CEO to the courier, to know precisely what to do to earn the customer's loyalty over the long term. This process of knowledge and action becomes as natural, instinctive and indispensable as breathing [3].

According to J.C. Narver and S.F. Slater [4], market orientation refers to the organizational culture [...] that induces the behaviors necessary to provide superior value to customers. Accordingly, customer orientation is first of all a philosophy, a state of mind, an awareness of the whole company of the importance and vitality of customers for any company.

C. Donada and I. Dostaler [5] specify that, externally, customer orientation presupposes the commitment and permanent contact of all the actors concerned with customer satisfaction and, in particular, suppliers whose responsibilities are considerably increased with the needs of just-in-time production and the development of outsourcing.

II. Customer Orientation, a Managerial Obligation in the Face of a More Restrictive Environment

Recent changes in the business environment impose new constraints and offer new opportunities, all of which call for a strong customer orientation.

A new type of customer: The changing characteristics, habits and behaviors of consumers. Currently, companies are dealing with well-informed customers who are well informed about products, competitors, laws, the environment… especially in this era of the Internet where information is available, even overabundant. Companies are also dealing with a new type of customer, a committed customer whose expectations and requirements go beyond the simple satisfaction of his needs. The act of purchase is no longer a neutral act, but a means of action whose scope can go beyond the commercial universe to reach other universes: political, social, ecological, ethical...

Satisfying needs becomes multidimensional: Customer satisfaction no longer depends solely on the quality/price ratio but on many other parameters such as the quality of distribution, after-sales service, the quality of logistics, and the quality of the communication policy… To sum up, all functions of the company must have the ultimate goal of working for and with the customer.

The decline in customer loyalty: The leveling of product quality and the phenomenon of imitation between companies regarding products and marketing methods. This phenomenon is accentuated by the encouragement to change brands exercised by a panoply of reduction offers, each being more attractive than the other one.

The results of a study conducted in 1988 showed that in 28 countries, consumers noticed no difference in quality between brands in thirteen categories of products of all kinds. In this case, obviously, we understand that the consumer is taking advantage of a special offer or a reduction rather than remaining loyal to a brand [6].

Customization of needs: Consumers are gradually moving away from the standard, mass-produced products that characterized the industrial revolution of the 20th century. They are increasingly looking for personalized solutions that meet their specific needs, and are more involved in the creation of the products they consume [7].

The resurgence of competition: Indeed, in this era of globalization and liberalization of sectors, we are witnessing an escalation of offers in order to attract, satisfy and retain customers.

The decline in the effectiveness of traditional marketing methods: Indeed, some marketing techniques currently used are ineffective. According to some forecasts, the effectiveness of television advertising in 2010 reached just 35% of what it was in 1990 [8]. We can also mention the case of sales promotion. The results of a study, carried out by Nielson on 862 consumer product promotions, are very revealing of the lack of effectiveness of this technique: more than 50% of promotional events had no impact on sales, and 1/10 generated more than 10% volume gain [6].

In other cases, some marketing techniques can even be harmful to the product, as is always the case with advertising and sales promotion. Regarding advertising, a study by Y. Partners showed that 54% of consumers avoid buying products that overwhelm them with advertising and marketing actions [8]. With regard to sales promotion, William C. Johnson (Leader in this field) maintains, in this sense, that every time a brand is sold at a reduced price or is the subject of a promotion, it loses a little trust and respect among consumers until its total disappearance [6].

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In addition to their intrinsic aspect, this lack of efficiency and this nuisance are due to the fact that certain techniques are no longer adapted to current contexts. For example, each year about 10,000 new products are launched in the United States market, whereas a traditional supermarket can only present 17,000 items on the shelves [6].

This lack of efficiency and this nuisance be explained mainly by the phenomenon of customer fatigue with certain marketing techniques currently used [9]. For example, the audience for commercials broadcast on American television continues to decline, mainly due to consumer fatigue with this type of advertising. During the advertising screens, many spectators take a walk in their kitchen or their bathroom, or change the channel with their remote control [10]. A very recent study conducted by the Mozoo group [11] showed that even Internet advertising is a nuisance for 80% of French people. More surprisingly, half of them are ready to pay to stop being disturbed, especially on their mobile.

The logical consequence of all these phenomena that we have just seen is that the effectiveness and efficiency of traditional marketing techniques, methods and strategies are called into question. Faced with these constraints and, as noted by S. Rapp and T. Collins [6], the best companies try to explore the future of marketing by turning away from conventional practices.

The Internet promotes customer orientation: The Internet offers the company new means for consolidating its relationships with its customers and at the same time imposes new challenges and constraints on it [12]:

- The Internet gives customers more power over the company by allowing them to be well informed about suppliers and their offers. In addition, the Internet participates in the training of the client and allows him/her to acquire knowledge and skills.
- The Internet allows the company a very great interactivity with the customer and therefore a personalized and simultaneous relationship in the most effective way with targeted offers that leads to the reinforcement of the customer orientation since the whole company is in contact directly with him/her. In addition, this interactivity is done under much more favorable cost conditions.
- The Internet opens the door to new means of satisfying needs and carrying out transactions.
- The Internet allows international customer orientation. It allows to study, to prospect, to inform, to promote a very wide clientele and without geographical limit at a very low cost. On the Internet, space is folded in on itself. All customers, regardless of their country of origin, are just a click away. That said, customer orientation now has an international dimension and scope.

III. Customer Orientation, a Source of Major Competitive Advantages

The refocusing of various business functions around the customer has allowed many American companies to grow while others have shrunk [3]. To make it simple, customer orientation reinforces the satisfaction of customer needs, the raison d'être of any organization. Satisfied customers give the company several advantages that determine its performance in the market. G. Stalk and T. Hout [13] identify four:

- They will be more loyal to it;
- They will pay a higher price;
- They will buy more products and services from it;
- Finally, if these customers are demanding, they will give the company a strategic advantage, because they will be difficult to seduce by competitors.

On the other hand, the results of a large international survey to identify the determining criteria for success, carried out by R. Whiteley and D. Hessan [3], have highlighted the strong correlation that exists between the following five major competitive advantages and the condition essential to systematically place the current and future customer at the heart of the activity:

Targeting your business offer with precision: Virtually all successful companies have defined precisely how they could create an advantage by focusing on the customer. They figured out what they could and could not do for their customers, then they carefully learned how to meet the needs of each type of customer within their target market.

Take concrete account of customer feedback: Successful companies make sure to listen to their customers. Customer feedback is taken into account in the company.

Ensure the participation of all its employees: Growing companies make good use of teams and strive to create a favorable context for maintaining harmonious collaboration between all their employees, whether or not they are members of a team formally constituted in the concern for customers.

Turning regular customers into loyal customers: Successful companies have moved from the notion of satisfying customer needs to the notion of customer enthusiasm, which means not doing the same thing as the competition and doing it better, but being radically better in their relationships with its customers (marketing, quality, after-sales, etc.).

Leading “in the field” Leading is a contact sport: Leaders of growing companies go out to see customers, visit workshops, talk to employees, ask questions and pay visit in person when their employees need help. Their leadership style favors contact.

In addition, customer orientation can create barriers to entry and stimulate innovation [14]. It therefore contributes to a greater potential for value creation in the long term. The success of a customer-oriented strategy therefore means strengthening competitive advantage and maintaining superior performance [15].

At the same time, the benefits of customer orientation on the different aspects of performance are established on [15]: economic and commercial results;

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- customers (customer quality, loyalty and satisfaction);
- capacity for innovation;
- employees (involvement, team spirit, empathy for the customer, conflict management, job satisfaction).

IV. Need for Corporate Restructuring for Successful Customer Orientation

B.P. Shapiro [16] points out that market orientation is largely about how different sectors fit together. Indeed, according to the results of a study carried out by the McKinsey [17], successful companies were not customer-oriented only, but made the latter the center of their concerns, and all their functions (R&D, production, after-sales service, etc.) worked with the aim of satisfying the latter.

The mission of orienting the whole company towards the customer falls under the responsibility of the marketing function, which is the spokesperson for the customers within the company. Indeed, rightly state that marketing plays an important role in the success of an organization. Even those in a company who will perform functions outside of marketing will better understand the link between marketing and their work. In the final analysis, a company that cannot successfully market its products will have nothing to do with accountants, programmer analysts, personnel managers, production managers and supervisors, credit managers, etc. Without customers, any business loses its purpose.

However, as T. Levitt [18] asserts, this does not mean that the other activities of the company are less important, only that marketing has a unique role. This also does not mean that marketing should integrate other activities. Its role is to show them the true path to survival, success and growth that is customer satisfaction [19]. Therefore, marketing enhances the other resource functions and skills of the company by giving them meaning by instilling in them the concern for the customer [9].

Certainly, each function has an important role to play in the company and is necessary for the proper functioning of the latter. In this way, marketing cannot claim to replace them, but gives meaning to their actions. It tries to unify their goals into one, that of satisfying the customer and directing them towards the customer [9]. In this framework, marketing is more than a compartmentalized activity. It is a new way of thinking that permeates the entire company. These new ideas are important for all managers who must cope with change. And in today's business environment, that means just about everybody [20].

Now, as many companies have discovered, the modern concept of marketing will never go beyond the stage of intention without a good organizational structure. It is then necessary to ensure that the marketing thought is present in all the services of the company, since in the end all the employees work to ensure the greatest satisfaction of the consumers and the parties involved in the success of the business [21]. According to Ph. Kotler and K. Keller [22] , companies that consider the customer as the true source of business profit reject the traditional organization in favor of the inverted chart in which the customer is at the top, but not the boss. Then come the employees directly in contact with the customer.

The results of an English study carried out in the mid-1990s confirm this postulate: companies qualified as “excellent in marketing” reorganize their marketing departments; they integrate sales specialists into multi-functional groups organized around a type of customer or product [9]. For example, in German SMEs, when a customer has a problem, everyone, from the factory to customer service to design office staff, can participate in solving it. Moreover, when people from multiple departments are involved, they return to their day-to-day jobs better informed about how the product actually behaves. This way of working strengthens the overall capabilities of the company [23]. In these companies, direct contact between all the staff and the customers is very frequent, because the leaders of these companies are convinced that this is the only way for the staff to know what is happening in the field [23].

This means that in addition to its usual tasks, the marketing department also has a fundamental role to play in promoting this multifunctional approach. Indeed, as a representative and guarantor of the interests of the clients. It is best positioned to play the role of intermediary and team coordinator which essential objective is to always better serve the needs of the clients. Without waiting for an impulse from the general management, it is up to it to take the initiative to organize this necessary collaboration between all the departments to ensure the success of its marketing policy [17].

In a company where marketing does not play this role or it is non-existent, each department or service considers its activity as central and its function as principle and the activities and functions of other departments as peripheral. Each department works in isolation to achieve its own goals and in its own interest, regardless of the system (company) as a whole. Thus, ramparts are erected between the services [19]. Indeed, a growing number of companies today recognize that departments erect silos that slow down and often run counter to actions that are supposed to meet customer needs. The services make decisions not in the interest of society, but in their own [24].

Moreover, even if some coordination exists between these different departments, without their efforts being coordinated and directed by marketing, these efforts will be in vain because these departments risk working for a purpose other than customer satisfaction as they are unaware of this imperative due to the absence of marketing.

On the other hand, E.J. McCarthy and W.D. Perreault, Jr. [19] explain that the fences come down in an organization that has accepted the marketing concept. There may still be departments because specialization often makes sense. But the total system’s effort is guided by what customers want-instead of what each department would like to do. Of course, it is normal for different points of view to exist between the different activities or functions of the company and for certain objectives to be conflicting due to differences in culture and ways of acting [16]. However, the customer-oriented company has mechanisms for frankly discussing these differences in order to reach an agreement that reconciles the different points of view. Each function and each division must be heard by the others and encourages the expression of its ideas and requirements honestly and vigorously [16].

To succeed in customer orientation and ensure the cohesion of the different functions of the company around its satisfaction, marketing must spread its spirit so that there is a common range that interests the whole company, namely to be oriented towards its markets [25]. It is obviously only by leveling up Marketing knowledge in all functions, that we can gradually approach this permanent "inter-function" consensus which is the strength of successful companies in South Asia and Silicon Valley [26]. It is the same reason that has also prompted several large companies throughout Europe and the United States to question the organization of their marketing departments because of the relations deemed insufficient between them and the other functions of the business [27]. These firms have found that isolated marketing in the service that bears its name made people forget that, because of its importance, it must concern all the services of the company [27].

In light of the above, one can agree with R. McKenna that the fundamental aspects of the company, including all that defines its identity, will ultimately come down to the marketing functions. This is why marketing is necessarily everyone's business, since everything is marketing. In short, marketing is king [20]. However, this is more of a heavy responsibility than an honor, because to make the company competitive, in addition to its external role vis-à-vis customers (detection of needs, etc.), marketing must also play an internal role of mobilization, orientation, and coordination with regard to the other functions of the company.

V. Need for Involvement of All the Company's External Partners for Successful End-Customer Orientation and Shared Success

Through its role of guide and coordinator, marketing gives meaning to all the activity and management of the company and improves its operation and performance by directing it entirely towards customer satisfaction, the only way to success. However, this customer orientation cannot be properly achieved without the permanent and firm commitment and involvement of the external partners upstream and downstream of the company (suppliers, donors, distributors, etc.), who are also directly concerned with the satisfaction of end customers, the only guarantee of success for all. Indeed, the new form of competition no longer takes place, as K. Clark [28] reminds us, between companies, but between groups of alliances and federations (suppliers, distributors, universities, governments, etc.). This new type of competition is essentially based on a good choice of partners and on close, long-term collaboration between them. Thus, as C.K. Prahalad and V. Ramaswamy [29] point out, Over time, then, the unit of strategic analysis has moved from the single company, to a family of businesses, and finally to what people call the "extended enterprise," which consists of a central firm supported by a constellation of suppliers. The company's value chain is only part of a larger system comprising its external partners, which M. Porter [30] called the value system. Besides, the competitiveness of the company does not only depend on the quality of its management of its value chain, but also on the quality of its management of the value system in which it belongs. In other words, the competitiveness of the firm also and above all depends on the quality of its partners and the quality of the relationships it enters into with them.

Indeed, whatever the power of the company, its degree of competitiveness depends on that of its less competitive partner. We can mention, in this context, for example, Dell Computer Corporation developed the capability to assemble personal computer quickly in response to customers' orders but found that ability to constrained by component suppliers' long lead times [31] Addionally, millions of cars recalled during the summer of 2010 by car manufacturers due to non-quality of supplier parts remind us of the importance of the latter in the search for the greatest satisfaction of customers [15].

To ensure this smooth running, three types of problems must be solved according to A. Caglio and A. Ditillo [32] :

- problems of cooperation: the organizations involved often have divergent interests; it is necessary to introduce mechanisms to align these interests;
- coordination problems: organizations cooperate on the basis of a division of labour, resulting in an interdependence of tasks and joint actions that require coordination;
- problems of appropriation: organizations must ensure that the value created by the cooperation is distributed fairly and that the resources exchanged are not diverted by one of the partners.

Even in this context, marketing also finds a fertile and very fruitful field of application and can contribute to solving its problems and therefore improving the competitiveness of the entire value system by directing it entirely towards the end customer. By its conquest of all exchange relations of any kind whatsoever, both those undertaken by the firm downstream with its customers (marketing-downstream) and those it undertakes upstream with its suppliers (marketing-upstream or -purchase), marketing opens up great potential for improving the value system. On one hand, downstream marketing allows the company to choose a target well suited to its means and skills and to carefully study its needs in order to establish lasting relationships with it through mutual satisfaction. On the other hand, upstream marketing allows the company to choose well, upstream, the partners capable of satisfying its needs and strengthening its potential for competitiveness. The contribution of upstream marketing does not stop there, because just as downstream marketing seeks to establish lasting relationships with the customer, upstream marketing is also responsible for ensuring that relationships are established as well as sustainability with the company's partners [9].

Indeed, when marketing permeates this whole system, it intervenes between the various partners to improve the exchange relations that bind them and transform them into partnership relations, and its spirit will guide the whole value system towards satisfaction of the end customer. We can cite, in this context, the case of the American distribution chain Wal-Mart, which is not content to put Procter and Gamble products on the shelves. Wal-Mart shares daily sales information and works with P&G in product warehousing and replenishment to ensure that consumers can always find the goods they want at low prices [30]. Thus, the marketing spirit ensures that suppliers have the concern to satisfy the customer-company while having as a major objective the satisfaction of the final customer, and this in him (the customer-company) delivering raw materials and services capable of satisfying the latter.

The end customer, then, by buying a well-defined product, places his trust in the value system whose marketing system is the most effective in managing relations between the different partners and directing them all towards this end customer, in order to satisfy and earn their trust. Conversely, by turning away from other competing products, it turns away from all other value systems whose marketing systems are ineffective.

Conclusion

At the end of this research, we note that the customer orientation of the company's management system strengthens its competitiveness on different levels, both downstream vis-à-vis customers, internally vis-à-vis staff and of the company's other functions, and vis-à-vis its external partners. Indeed, customer orientation ensures the company both internal cohesion of all staff and functions, and cohesion with its various external partners. This double internal and external cohesion takes as its hard core the satisfaction of the needs of the end customer, the only guarantee of success for all. Customer orientation makes all partners (internal and external to the company) aware that their fate is linked and depends on the trust placed in them by the end customer, the true center of gravity of the commercial universe. Customer orientation ensures that the entire value system gravitates and always maintains the best orbit in relation to the end customer.

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