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The Notion of “Promises” in the Context of Web Site Design

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ABSTRACT

Building and maintaining customer relationships is crucial in order to market products or services. We argue that this also holds true in the online environment. This paper presents a framework to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of B2C websites. The framework is grounded on the notion of promises in the field of service relationship marketing. Relationship may be initiated by making promises but those relationships have to be maintained and enhanced by enabling those promises using the proper tools and keeping promises for future encounters with the website.

INTRODUCTION

There are an increasing number of modern businesses providing internet-based services as a mean to gain more customers and to increase existing customers' loyalty and satisfaction (Gefen and Devine, 2001). Companies use the internet to promote their products and services and to provide interactive business transactions.

With the Internet, companies are in a better position to build long-term relationship with their customers through customizing and personalizing their offerings to meet the customer's special needs. They are also able to target specific group of customers especially with the expected prevalence of mobile-commerce and Interactive web television. Therefore, the Internet can be considered an integral part in enabling the business to consumer (B2C) relationship. It can be used as a source of competitive advantage by attracting new customers and strengthening the relationship of the existing customers with the business.

The Internet has therefore contributed to a change in the marketing paradigm. Since consumers on the Internet are a click away from the competitors, this risk necessitates a close relationship between the website providers and the customers and has pushed the views of marketers and researchers toward relationship marketing paradigm (Hoffman & Novak 1997). Building and maintaining customer relationships in the online environment is now seen as crucial in order to market products or services.

In view of that, this study makes use of the concept of relationship marketing in the context of websites. An important part of the relationship marketing approach is the promises concept (Bitner 1995, Grönroos 1994). This approach stresses the fact that the relationship with customers does not end with the transaction. In contrast, relationship marketing emphasizes the need for building long term relationship with the customers in order to achieve the ultimate goal of long-term profitability through customer satisfaction and retention. Relationship marketing in an online environment implies a mutual relationship between customers and the website, which is achieved through the fulfillment of promises (Zeithaml & Bitner 2000). According to the expectancy-disconfirmation model (Cardotte et al. 1987), if the [website] performance does not exceed the customers' expectations, then customers are not satisfied and pleased. In addition, customers' expectations are rapidly changing due to the highly competitive market and

continuous changes in technology. All these changes influence consumer's taste and their expectations of the website's service quality. Therefore, companies must always seek to understand the current and future customers' expectations and desires (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000).

PRIOR RESEARCH

Over the last few years a good number of IS and marketing studies generated frameworks and performance constructs that are considered guidelines for the evaluation of website design. Liu and Arnett (1999) stressed that literature in both areas was appropriate. Approaches adopted by the marketing researchers put forward different evaluation measures than those presented by IS researchers.

IS research mainly addressed the characteristics, performance and usability of websites – eg. ease of use, interactivity, trustworthiness, content and appearance (Chung & Tan, 2004; Tan & Tung, 2003; Palmer, 2002; Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002; Liu & Arnett, 2002; Agarwal & Venkatesh, 2002; Hahn, 2001; Huizingh, 2000; Katerattanakul & Siau, 1999).

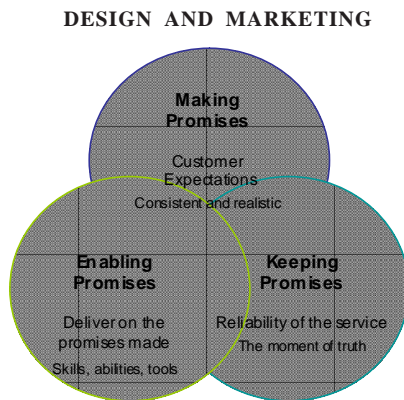
In contrast, marketing studies have focused on empowering the website with informed marketing strategies that maximizes customer satisfaction, retention and loyalty. Saunders & Brown (2001) proposed a tool that focuses marketers on the critical marketing communication characteristics of successful websites. They have identified two essential elements for successful B2C websites, attractive interface supported by technology and website design that benefit fully from the informed marketing. Nour and Fadlallah (2000) have provided a framework for web-based marketing strategies. They argued for a redefinition of marketing concepts. They contend that different companies in different virtual markets should use different marketing strategies.

Despite the paradigm shift in marketing due to the opportunities the Internet offers, research into website design and evaluation has placed little emphasis on relationship marketing. This paper therefore proposes a framework to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of B2C websites using Bitner's (1995) model of service relationship based on the notion of promises. Bitner's model, adapted to develop a framework for strengthening the relationship of customers with the website and accordingly enhancing the effectiveness of the websites, is discussed in the following section.

Bitner's Service Promises Model

Bitner (1995) presented a framework for service relationship based on three promises model. Her framework is grounded on the concept of relationship marketing and is achieved through enabling three interlinked groups that work together to develop, promote and deliver services. Figure 1 shows the service triangle, which consist of three groups: “Making Promises”, “Keeping Promises” and “Enabling Promises”. Each group incorporates different activities that play a role in promoting service relationship. Making realistic promises to consumers regard-

Figure 1. Service Promises



Every phase presents different challenges for building long term relationship with the customers

ing what they expect is the first step for building mutual beneficial relationship with consumers. The second group is responsible for the enabling of the promises. This is achieved by deploying efficient internal system and empowering employees with the skills, training and motivation to deliver the promises. The third group is critical, because the promises made must be kept by promoting commitment and trust. Bitner's calls it the "Moment of truth". Every time the customer interacts with the organization, there is an encounter. Each encounter tests the organization ability to keep promises and may result in reducing the customer's perception about service quality and breaking the relationship if the customer is not satisfied with the service. On the other hand, encounters that fulfill customers' expectations and perception will increase customer's satisfaction and loyalty.

Bitner's model can be adapted to the context of online-stores in the following way:

- **Making Promises:** This is where customers' expectations of the service quality are identified. It focuses on the critical constructs that meet customer expectations and enable the website to offer the intended services to achieve the customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- **Enabling Promises:** It is important that promises are delivered through the service delivery system. This dimension is where promises are delivered by choosing the appropriate technology and tools. The "Enabling Promises" group represents the features or constructs that are required to enable each success element identified in the first group.
- **Keeping Promises:** This is the key element supporting the relationship concept. The moment of truth, that judges the success of the website. It is significant here to obtain customers' satisfaction and loyalty; customer relationships are built in every encounter with the website. This dimension is concerned whether customers are likely to return to the website, and how often; therefore, long-term relationship with the customer has been achieved.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 2 presents the theoretical framework. The conceptual model is derived from Bitner's (1995) promises triangle, and the application of the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Cardotte et al. 1987) and the adoption of relationship marketing model (Zineldin, 2000).

Making Promises

Based on the expectancy-disconfirmation theory we contend that customers form post-judgments about the website service quality based on previous experience. They compare the usability, design and services provided by the website with their prior expectations. If expectations are met or exceeded, the consumer is satisfied. On the other hand,

dissatisfaction happens, if the perceived performance falls short of expectations. Therefore, the making promises group focuses on providing constructs that address customers' definitions of quality B2C websites. The proposed constructs are considered prerequisite for customer satisfaction of the service quality of the website (Yüksel & Rimmington, 1998).

Based on the literature review, this promise can be organized around 4 major elements: ease of use, interactivity, content and appearance and trustworthiness. Following is a description of each element.

Easiness of use implies to the ease by which consumers are able to find relevant information on the website. Many usability and design studies have considered the easiness of use as a major category in their evaluation instrument and is considered a strong predictor of technology acceptance outcome. (Agarwal & Venkatesh 2002;).

Interactivity is one of the valued constructs because it facilitates the interaction and communication with the website. Because there are no face-to-face interactions with the website provider, therefore it is imperative to provide means of interaction with the website. Palmer (2002) defined interactivity as *the manipulation and utilization of the information provided via websites*. According to the media richness theory, the web can utilize the power and the capability of all the other media channels, such as text-based email, faxes, audio and video conferencing in conveying messages. Hence, it is capable of harnessing all the advantages of multimedia in one source (Palmer 2002).

Content and appearance are well recognized by literature (Huizingh 2000; Ranganathan & Ganapath 2002; Palmer 2002, Katerattanakul & Siau 1999; Hahn 2001). Website content covers the quality of the information, presentation style and esthetic appearance.

Trustworthiness is defined in the context of this study as the willingness to participate in e-commerce shopping. With respect to relationship-marketing paradigm, one important determinant of the building successful relationship is trust (Corbitt et al., 2002). The authors in their study attempted to identify factors that affect trust on B2C websites found that trust and customer's web experience play a positive role in e-commerce participation. They have also found that customers trust levels is influenced by experience with e-commerce, site quality and technical trustworthiness.

Enabling the Promises

It is not enough to build B2C website based on the four broad constructs identified in the making promises. One of the objectives of this study is to provide a framework that will help managers identify the strengths and weaknesses in their marketing or design efforts. Therefore, the focus of this group is to identify the subcategories that can achieve the promises stated in the making promises group.

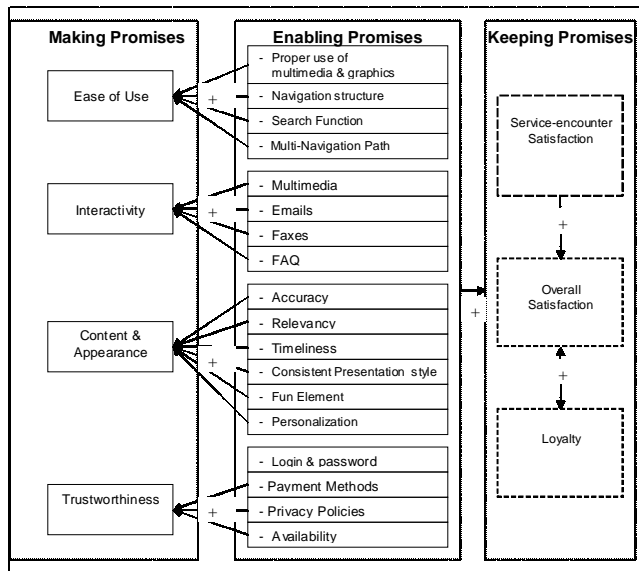
Enabling Interactivity

A common similarity between store-based and online selling is that a single transaction may involve the interaction between the seller and the customer for several times. However, the major difference between retail stores and online selling is the seller's face-to-face interaction with the consumers. With this respect, the media richness theory can help us differentiate the effectiveness of the website interactivity. Media richness refers to the medium ability to communicate messages. To cover this limitation online sellers give significant attention to the interactivity elements at their site, by incorporate communications tools such as email, faxes, and Frequently Asked Questions as a mean to interact with the customers or receive feedback (Zhang et al, 2002).

Enabling Ease of Use

Gehrke & Turban (1999) recommended to keep graphics simple and meaningful and to limit the animation or multimedia requirements. There should be a compromise between the usage of graphics to enhance the visual aids and site appearance with the download speed of the site pages (Huizingh, 2000). The presence of a search function will also

Figure 2. Web site Evaluation Model



facilitate the location of information easily on the website (Huizingh, 2000). Huizingh found a strong correlation between the size of the website and the availability of a search function.

Most potential e-commerce customers expect to locate what they are looking for easily and quickly. Hahn (2001) found that the number of hits to locate a product was a strong predictor of the purchase behavior. Ranganathan & Ganapathy (2002) found that the ease of navigation, identified by the time taken for navigation and the presence of visual aids came third in their factor analysis result. Palmers (2002) argued that navigation is an important construct and identified it as design element. He stated that good links and navigation mechanism enhances the usability of websites. In addition, the availability of more than one navigation paths to the product or information was also linked to the effectiveness of information search (Hahn, 2001).

Enabling Content and Appearance

Huizingh (2000) argues that the sales operation can be enhanced by ensuring easy access to accurate and current product information such as price, specification, term of delivery and digital photo or animation of the product. In addition, providing information about the background of the company, sponsored events, or links to information that is useful to the customer are recognized to reinforce customer's relationship with the site (Huizingh 2000; Hahn 2001). Agarwal & Venkatesh (2002) consider information content as multidimensional and contend that content needs to be accurate, relevant and current/timely.

Web appearance can be defined as the consideration of graphics, colors and the presentation style by which the information is displayed (Zhang et al, 2002). Katerattanakul and Siau (1999) defined presentation style as the concern about the layout of the design components such as color, background font and image. B2C websites should be designed in a way to reduce mental efforts in understanding the contents of the site. They highlight a number of recommendations such as dividing the web pages to appropriate size; all web pages should follow a consistent presentation style.

Website can motivate customers to interact with the website by incorporating in the design fun and excitement features such as fun characters, jokes or current sport events. This is recognized by literature as promoting a psychological satisfaction and positive attitude towards the site. (Liu & Arnett, 2002; Huizingh, 2000)

Finally, information content can be personalized and tailored to the needs of individual users. The web offers massive tools and mechanisms

that enable the customization of information. Relationship marketing requires marketers to personalize web promotion in the sense that consumers only receive selective information unique to their taste and interest.

Enabling Trustworthiness

Trust in the website is achieved through three constructs a) privacy, b) security and c) availability of the website.

The internet poses a privacy threat. Cookies are widely used to capture information about the pages and links visited by the user. Cookies are considered by most users a major violation to their privacy rights especially if the web providers allow advertising and direct marketing companies to generate their own cookies from their site. Chung (2002) has identified a number of threats: web bugs which works with cookies that can track users' online travels and send it to third parties. Another concern identified by Chung is cross-referencing which is normally posed by marketers who try to match information on their database by the information collected from the cookies. This type of violation can reveal sensitive information that users don't wish to reveal. Literature has touched on this concern, raised by web users about the misuse of personal information (Ranganathan & Ganapathy 2002; Liu & Arnett 2002). Privacy policies offered by the website are significant in building customers' trust in the website.

Security is another challenge for B2C websites. It is defined by the protection of the elements of monetary transactions against fraud, such as the security of the credit card information. Despite the availability of security mechanisms such as server authentication, cryptography, digital certificates, this issue is still a major concern for users. To overcome this obstacle Ranganathan & Ganapathy (2002) suggested that website providers can offer alternative means of payment such as checks or telephonic transactions. Also the availability of login accounts and passwords will enhance customers' trust in the website.

In addition to privacy and security, the availability of the web site reflects consumers' trust in the website.

Keeping Promises

Several studies have provided evidence about the positive impact of customer satisfaction of online stores on loyalty. Shankar et al (2000) have referred to a number of studies that support this premise. Their study shows that the level of customer satisfaction for online services is the same as offline services. On the other hand, they found that loyalty to the service provider is higher when the service is chosen online than offline.

A central part of relationship marketing is based on the fact that the consumption of a service takes the form of a process or encounters (Bitner 1995; Grönroos 1988). According to Grönroos (1988) "perception of the process [of producing the service] is important for the perception of the total quality of a service, even though a satisfactory outcome is necessary and a prerequisite for good perceived quality". Bitner (1995) also argues that service relationship is built from customer's encounters with the firm. Each encounter is considered the moment of truth and attempts to test the organizations ability to keep its promises. Each encounter contributes to the overall customer satisfaction.

Based on above, this study differentiates between two types of customer satisfaction, service-encounter satisfaction which is the result of the individual customer encounters with the firm via its website, and the overall customer satisfaction.

Applying the expectancy-disconfirmation theory, it is expected that the greater customer pleasure and satisfaction from the website is achieved when customer's experience with the website exceeds his/her expectations which have been identified in the making promises group.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical model proposed in this paper is grounded on Bitner's(1995) triangle model which is based on the concept of relation-

ship marketing. The key benefit of this model is building customer relationship, based on satisfaction, and loyalty. The paper aims to contribute to the development of a comprehensive framework with the goal of improving customer's relationship with the website. Firstly, the paper has identified four service quality attributes capturing customer's expectations of a quality websites. Secondly, the paper has provided lower level constructs that help web providers in enabling the identified attributes. Thirdly the framework integrates the benefit of building customer relationship through achieving customer satisfaction. Also the framework is intended to provide practitioners with guidelines to create competitive websites and to identify the strength and weakness of their websites.

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