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Internet-Based Relationship Marketing: A Sub-Saharan African Perspective

Mahmoud Abdulai Mahmoud, Adelaide Naa Amerley Kastner,
and Jared Offei Lartey

Department of Marketing & Entrepreneurship, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships over the Internet have progressively gained global attention. Nevertheless, the dawn of this modernization draws many theoretical debates and practical concerns, some of which have received little research attention, especially within the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. On this premise, we explored the contemporary practice, challenges, and benefits of Internet-based relationship marketing (RM) within the Ghanaian telecommunication industry. Expert interviews with 12 employees from four telecommunication firms elicited a wealth of experiential data analyzed thematically to understand the practice, challenges, and emerging benefits of Internet-based RM. Our findings suggest that issues of privacy concerns, erosion of face-to-face communication, and the tendency of unsolicited communication do not necessarily militate Internet-based RM within the Ghanaian telecommunication industry. We also identified emerging benefits, including online “virality,” a discovery environment, and improved firm reputation. We suggest enhancing online personalization through empathy, creating value with analytic information and managerial openness, and supporting enhanced knowledge development within the area. Directions for future studies include the possibility of comparative studies across service industries and examining the role of content marketing in Internet-based relationships. The challenge of exploring Internet-based RM was similar to hitting a moving target, as the use of the Internet for relationship marketing activities is constantly evolving. Additionally, our findings and conclusion are confined to the knowledge contribution of the experts interviewed. As one of the few studies within the Sub-Saharan region, we expand contributions from the Sub-Saharan domain. The findings of this study also bring to light new insights for establishing, maintaining, and enhancing Internet-based relationships.

KEYWORDS

Ghana; Internet; qualitative; relationship marketing; telecommunication

Introduction

The relationships businesses keep with their customers may be compared to a polygamous marriage; it has become essential for businesses to establish trust,

CONTACT Mahmoud Abdulai Mahmoud ✉ mamahmoud@ug.edu.gh 📮 UGBS, Box LG 78, University of Ghana, Legon.

commitment, continuous communication, fulfillment of promises, and the enhancement of relationships with several parties to ensure longevity. Berry (1983), first conceptualized this act as relationship marketing (RM). RM has since been an issue of serious discussion among academics and marketing practitioners. Accordingly, a number of Sub-Saharan African businesses are striving to attract, maintain and enhance their customers base through RM (Narteh et al., 2013). Indeed, the evolution from transaction to relationship marketing has arguably been one of the most dominant developments in marketing (Egan, 2011; Brennan et al., 2003). However, its practice has not been so easy for marketing managers (Buttle, 2001).

Successful relationship marketing is, to an extent, based on the technological capacity to build, enhance, and maintain long-term relationships (Sheth, 2002; Zineldin, 2000). For this reason, Internet-based technologies, including websites and social media, have emerged as viable catalysts (Viljoen et al., 2005), contributing to the birth of the concept of Internet-based relationship marketing. That being said, the pursuit of Internet-based relationship marketing in itself remains a debate, marked by promises and unintended consequences (Rebolledo et al., 2005). As Patino et al. (2012) identified, the techniques and approaches to using it remain unclear.

Interestingly, these debates are not confined to the lack of practical techniques, but also ascribed to the lack of a theoretical foundation. While extant contributions on the subject have been valuable, a number of these have been conceptual, lending themselves to a host of critiques. As noted by Grönroos (1994) and Narteh et al. (2013), a conceptual approach to knowledge development without a strong empirical foundation has little practical value. Consequently, it appears clearer that uncertainties around Internet-based relationships require more empirical research.

In the Sub-Saharan region, where businesses, markets, and Internet usage are generally emerging (ISSER, 2012; Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2014), few have realized the need to bridge the theory and practice of Internet-based relationships. In effect, the subject of Internet-based RM, especially in Ghana, has largely been under-researched. Existing studies are not sufficient to express its full extent. Internet technologies cover the spectrum of e-mails, blogging, podcasts, social media, and websites (Wong, 2012; Woodside et al., 2011). However, the purpose of this study was to explore how social media and websites are used for relationship marketing practices, to understand the challenge of using these technologies, and to investigate the benefits derived from Internet-based relationship marketing within the telecommunication industry.

In Ghana and across the Sub-Saharan region, the telecommunication industry is progressively expanding with multinational service providers featuring prominently. With the presence of Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN), Millicom and Vodafone among other operators, various innovative services have been introduced, including teleconferencing, entertainment, and Internet-based services (Mahmoud & Hinson, 2012).

Literature review

Using social media and websites for Internet-based relationship marketing

Social interaction via the Internet is emerging to a degree unimaginable a few years ago (Patino et al., 2012; Finn, 2011). This trend has given rise to the use of websites and social media for firm-customer relationship marketing activities. In exploring Internet technologies, Keenan and Shiri (2009) find their use as an alternative medium for social interactions and their potential to increase exponentially in user numbers. They also recognize the potential of social media in representing a real world where relationships could be established and managed. As they indicate, users of this platform can indulge in both public and private interactions and can also execute standard forms of expressions. Hall (2011) also notes that social media offer a number of networks which are relevant to many organizations. These include Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, YouTube, and several mobile-based networks. Keenan and Shiri (2009) argue that Facebook and Twitter are common social media platforms used by businesses for customer relationships. Major uses of social media and websites for RM include establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships through communication (Melewar & Smith, 2003; Zineldin, 2000), intelligence gathering (Egan, 2011, Wang & Head, 2005), personalization (Melewar & Smith, 2003), and customer service (Clark, 2000).

Benefits of websites and social media for Internet-based relationship marketing

As Egan (2011) notes, the speed of change in technology makes a discussion of Internet-based RM difficult as even new technology can become outdated quickly. Despite this challenge, a key benefit of Internet-based RM is the opportunity to enhance trust. Trust is seen as a component of every relationship (Iyer & Bejou, 2004). As Al-Weshah et al. (2013) found, it has become a prerequisite for successful relationships over the Internet, making social media and websites an inducement to strengthen customer trust (Zineldin, 2000).

Bauer et al. (2002) indicate that the Internet has turned into an impressive success story, providing an opportunity to interact in ways unavailable before. Using websites and social media for relationship building and management allows speed of interaction through a great variety of interlinked pieces of information (Ballantyne, 2000). In a way, these technologies combine the advantages of the mass media, especially their easy availability and relevant and up-to-date information, into an effective communication medium (Bauer et al., 2002). Internet technologies, especially websites, also allow users to select and personalize information (Ernst & Young LLP, 1999). As Okazaki and Taylor (2013) describe, social media and websites have a global reach with standard applications that represent a powerful personalization tool. In other words, they offer new abilities to attend to individual customer's concerns.

Technology has also changed the way many services are delivered, often replacing costly face-to-face interaction (Palmatier et al., 2006). According to McAdam (2005), there is an evident benefit for firms, since the Internet has made the costs and rewards of online relationship marketing more transparent. Peck et al. (2004) also argue that firms can take advantage of reduced costs associated with building and maintaining relationships online. Comments, complaints, and questions from customers online provide feedback which translates into greater knowledge about current customers. Viljoen et al. (2005) indicate that a website's content and offerings can be adjusted to improve customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction obviously sustains loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994). In fact, some studies acknowledge that Internet customers display a higher sense of loyalty than other customers (Bauer et al., 2002). Fournier and Lee (2009) also observed that, in modern service relationships, companies can foster longer-term bonds with customers using social media. While these benefits exist, some studies have found that using the Internet for the development and maintenance of relationships is not a panacea for all firms and that existing technologies may not be sufficient to facilitate RM (Rebolledo et al., 2005; Gabbott & Colgate, 1999).

Challenges of websites and social media for Internet-based relationship marketing

It is suggested that the increasing use of Internet technologies such as websites and social media in business-to-consumer relationships can have a negative impact on the development of long-term relationships (Rebolledo et al., 2005). This has resulted in debates of unintended consequences, including customer concerns for privacy, erosion of emotional attachments developed from face-to-face interactions with customers, and the propensity of unsolicited communication from Internet technologies. Security and confidentiality of private customer data are highlighted as the foremost concerns of connected parties in an online relationship. Some researchers reason that using social media and websites only increases vulnerability and encroachment from unauthorized personnel (Barnes et al., 2000; Vlosky et al., 2000). Pillai and Sharma (2004) assert that privacy in business relationships over the Internet is a major issue.

Interaction with technology rather than with employees may affect the social aspects identified as critical in business-to-customer relationships, mainly affecting trust, commitment, or friendship (Rebolledo et al., 2005). The prolonged absence of contact with a service provider can therefore erode the customer's emotional attachment to the service provider, thus decreasing loyalty and increasing the probability of switching (Bitner et al., 2000; Barnes & Glynn, 1993). For Egan (2011), many employees who handle online relationships fail to realize that, in social networks, the people themselves are the medium and not the site. Meanwhile, Johns et al. (2009) state that interaction is sufficient, even if this interaction is not carried out face-to-face. While constant communication is a requirement for every strong relationship, unsolicited communication, especially through the use of social media

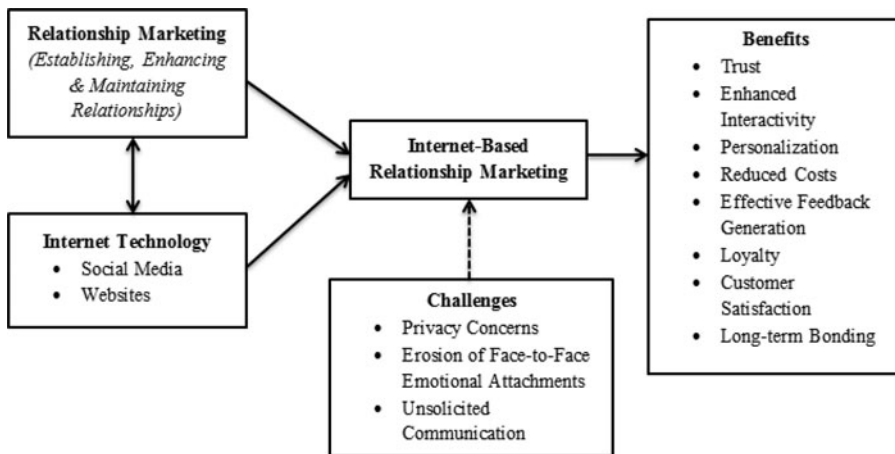


Figure 1. Pre-study framework of Internet-based relationship marketing.

and subscribed feeds from websites, may become problematic. An extreme consequence may be the dilution of customer interest, even in personalized communications (Barnes et al., 2000). The framework in Figure 1 was adapted from Gabbott and Colgate (1999); it was a useful tool to guide data collection, analysis, and a discussion of our findings.

Methodology

We believed that using naturalistic procedures could yield the experiential data necessary to understand the practice, challenge, and benefits of Internet-based relationship marketing. An additional justification for this approach was that the purpose of this research was intended to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the practice of Internet-based RM, not simply measure relationships between the concepts. We chose to conduct the study within the telecommunication industry, since some earlier global studies had focused on the financial industry (Rebolledo et al., 2005), tourism (Al-Weshah et al., 2013), and retail (Liao et al., 2004). As such, insights from the telecommunication industry, where electronic mediums are common, could provide valuable insights. Out of six main service providers, only four were eligible to participate in the study. These were companies who were actively managing Internet-based relationships and had agreed to participate (see Table 1).

Comparing similar qualitative studies (Al-Weshah et al., 2013; Liao et al., 2004), our sample of 12 was considerable to yield useful results. This sample consisted of the head of the digital marketing department and two members of the online marketing team in each of the four participating firms. For their experience on the subject and the ideology that Internet-based RM was a technical task (Bauer et al., 2002), these participants were purposively selected and considered as experts. Our data collection procedure was through in-depth interviews which lasted for a period of two months. Each of the 12 interview participants were directly questioned for at least 20 minutes. In some instances, additional interviews were conducted over the phone

Table 1. Demographics of interviewees.

Date of interview	Gender	Interview duration (approximately)	Position	Years of experience
			CASE A	
26/3/2016	M	30 Minutes	Digital Marketing Manager (DMM)	6 Years
26/3/2016	F	25 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	4 Years
03/4/2016	F	20 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	4 Years
			CASE B	
12/4/2016	M	40 Minutes	Digital Marketing Manager (DMM)	4 Years
16/4/2016	F	25 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	3 Years
16/4/2016	M	30 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	3 Years
			CASE C	
02/4/2016	F	30 Minutes	Digital Marketing Manager (DMM)	6 Years
02/4/2016	M	30 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	3 Years
02/4/2016	M	25 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	3 Years
			CASE D	
25/4/2016	M	45 Minutes	Digital Marketing Manager (DMM)	4 Years
27/4/2016	M	25 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	3 Years
27/4/2016	M	25 Minutes	Member, Online Marketing Team (MOMT)	4 Years

when we felt that data collected needed extra clarification. The first phase of analysis involved transcribing the interviews. We further extracted relevant themes from the data, after which a comparison of themes across the four firms was identified to generate relevant insights (Yin, 2009). To ensure the objectivity of our findings, final themes were examined by three independent researchers.

Interview analysis and findings

Company profiles

Case A

This company is a multinational telecom operator serving more than 45% of the Ghanaian market. The company employs various Internet-based relationship marketing technologies, of which websites and social media are very significant. Interviewees from this company are tasked with overseeing the day-to-day operations of the company's website and social media accounts, online advertising, providing online customer care and innovative ways to reach customers online.

Case B

This company is a leading operator of cellular services. It operates in emerging markets across Latin America and Africa. In Ghana alone, it serves more than four million customers and has been recognized for the best use of social media in the past few years. Interviewees are tasked with overseeing the day-to-day operations of the company's website, social media accounts, and online advertising.

Case C

This company is a seasoned telecommunications operator with a presence in 20 African and South Asian countries. Recently, the company has been acknowledged

as the social media company of the year. Relationship marketing, especially over the Internet, has been a key focus. Interviewees from the company take charge of social media and everything related to online efforts, such as mirroring advertisements from TV to interactive online platforms.

Case D

This company is a world-leading mobile telecom company and has been serving the Ghanaian market for at least seven years. It has made headway with its strong presence over most Internet platforms, including websites and social media. For its efforts, the company has been named telecommunications company of the year. Relationships over the Internet have been a focus for this firm, including mobile applications management, and are handled by an online marketing team.

The use of social media and websites for Internet-based relationship marketing

We first explored each case's perspective on RM and Internet technologies. In Case A, we understood that RM was a leverage and was built on mutual exchanges.

So it is a relationship whereby there is a mutual exchange; the customers get what they want and you also get what you want through a mutual understanding. You give something in exchange for something. (DMM, Case A)

So it is a relationship whereby there is a mutual exchange; the customers get what they want and you also get what you want through a mutual understanding. You give something in exchange for something. (DMM, Case A)

RM was also more of a technique than a core organizational policy or strategy:

It is not necessarily a policy. We are, however, a customer centric organization. (MOMT, Case A)

Significantly, we found that the conscious utilization of Internet technologies for relationship marketing had not been longer than three years. Apart from websites, social media platforms used by Case A spanned across more than six networks. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were identified as the main Internet-based platforms on which relationship marketing was pursued.

We are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Skype, YouTube, Google Plus and recently we opened an account with Snapchat which is yet to be actualized. But we focus more on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. (DMM, Case A)

Interviews from Case A suggest that communication and customer service are the main relationship marketing tasks pursued over Internet platforms. Explicitly, it was revealed that Internet-based RM was more a complement to than a mirror of traditional RM practices. The website was used as a "store house" for information and a communication channel on which the company's products, services, and terms and conditions associated with services were displayed. Though analytic information from website visitors was available, it was not used to monitor and track customer

behavior; for instance, what customers looked for the most. What was important to the company was that any information the customer might want to access was there.

First of all, Facebook and our website are used widely for communication to keep our customers up to date on our products and general information sharing. Social media is to a large extent for customer service to customers who are unable to access our call centers. ... (MOMT, Case A)

For specifics on our website it is almost like a general house for information. ... We do have analytic information but our website is a storehouse for information so we do not go to track how our customers use the website. With regards to mirroring what we do traditionally online, not really. We talk to them to solve their issues and, after that, we give them our online access information where further chat goes on. (DMM, Case A)

The company denied tracking customer relationships via social media as part of their relationship marketing practices, but after continuous probing, monitoring customers was mentioned as an activity that was pursued.

It is very difficult to use the social media and website to track customer relationships. But we use social media to monitor our customers, listen and get a fair understanding of what they are saying and how they feel about our services. (DMM, Case A)

Generally, Case B perceived Internet-based RM as a part of an overall digital marketing strategy. For them, the concept meant inviting and engaging customers through conversations of interest for an extended period in order to earn loyalty.

It involves engaging people in conversations ... you are to use content to bring the conversation and if it's online media you have to use the right strategy to be the first and interest the customer. Once we get in touch with someone, we do the follow-up for loyalty, so the cycle is long. (DMM, Case B)

Apart from their website, the company operates on four main Internet platforms for relationship marketing:

We are on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, but YouTube so far has not been a high focus for us. We are also on Instagram, but we really want to re-launch the page and use the right content like videos and more engaging content. (DMM, Case B)

Online relationship marketing tasks in this firm were ascertained to include communication, customer service, customer tracking, and customization, which was set to happen later in the year. Promotion of services and the use of the website as a discovery environment were also deduced as uses.

We have priority products so we want to ensure that we communicate about our products online. The website is a discovery channel to let our customers know our products and makes it the best way for them to think of trying our products. You can track a trend; for example, which type of section people are visiting, you can use Google Analytics to do this, but the information on the website is more natural, so you know that people are visiting and you know the interest of people. Customizing self-care is going to happen on our website this year, basically digital customers want to log in on your website, they don't want to go to your shop anymore, and he wants to know how to solve an issue by himself, he wants to know where is the closest store, and he wants to do things quicker, so it's something we are trying to do. (DMM, Case B)

It is also a customer service so people always have questions, issues and queries. As a service company we must be able to answer to these and that is what we do. ... (MOMT, Case B)

It was significant to find out that these Internet technologies were not an “island” on their own. Sometimes, it became necessary for offline technologies like the telephone to be used to complete relationship marketing activities commenced over the Internet.

... if you look at a lot of issues people have with social media for example, in most of the cases we have to take your phone number and give you a call. It depends on the issue, if it is a simple one and can be resolved in one answer you do not need to use your traditional media, if you know the customer as a high value customer, maybe the interaction deserves a call. So it depends on the type of issue but yes, in some cases we have to use traditional media to complement the online media. (MOMT, Case B)

Interviews with experts from Case C suggest relationship marketing as the way forward and a process of developing empathy for how customers feel or resonate with the brand and making brands profitable. For them, this relationship opens an opportunity to obtain insights of what customers think about the brand. It focuses on relationships with all customers, rather than identifying which customers need to be kept in a relationship and which need to be terminated.

It is the way forward because, when you have a relationship with your customers, you get first-hand information to know how they feel about your brand. You know how they resonate with your brand and whatever happens, they are the first to tell you. ... In relationships, there is nothing like a customer less profitable, it does not work like that, every customer is profitable, you can make a customer profitable. (DMM, Case, C)

Internet-based relationship marketing was influenced by the previous perception. It was a reflection of traditional relationship marketing practices over social media and the website.

It has to do with handling relationships on our social media platform and online channels. (MOMT, Case C)

Case C also had a presence on more than six social media platforms, including a website:

Currently for us on social media, we have a Facebook page, Twitter, YouTube, Vine; the video for Twitter and Instagram. We have spaces with Ghanaweb.com and myjoyonline.com where we place our products. (MOMT, Case C)

In Case C, relationship marketing activities over the Internet focused on communicating, obtaining response rate or feedback, customization, and providing customer service. However, obtaining response or feedback was identified as the most significant.

The most important thing we need is your response rate, we need to have an accurate response rate because online is king of live and as soon as somebody makes a complaint or talks about your network, you should be quick to respond to the person. We also use the website and social media for customizing services. We actually have a service there that is actually customized

to you. Also, our social media is more like a customer service point where people come and leave their issues and we resolve it for them. (MOMT, Case C),

In Case D, relationship marketing was perceived as inevitable once a company had customers. It required the company to manage customers throughout their lifetime by satisfying their requirements.

As long as we are in the business of marketing, we have no options than to manage our customers throughout the lifetime in their place as our customers. We are to make sure that, for anything that they want, we not only provide it but provide it exceptionally. (DMM, Case D)

Internet technologies employed by Case D for managing relations with customers comprise a website and four social media platforms:

Currently we operate on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. We are looking at doing some other platforms but as of now we haven't come out yet with those platforms. (DMM, Case D)

Customer service, communication, promotion of campaigns, customization, and gathering feedback were uses inferred from the company's response.

We interact with them or make them aware if there are campaigns that are coming up or competitions that are coming up. Also, one other important thing that we try to do as much as possible is to manage our relationships with customers, especially when it comes to customer care. (MOMT, Case D)

We make sure we gather feedback and respond to their claims and delve deeper and provide that customer care. (MOMT, Case D)

Our customer service teams do a lot of customization, they try to contact them on several specific offers so that the customers will be more open to us. (DMM, Case D)

Challenges of social media and websites for Internet-based relationship marketing

Three of the four cases expressed the challenge of Internet-based RM. Managing communication online was one of the difficult aspects of using a website and social media for relationship marketing in Case A. Personalizing messages and anticipating what customers may want to be updated on was also not an easy task in Case A; this issue was expressed differently in the other cases. Case C admitted its challenge as managing irritated customers. However, in Case D, the issue was about developing the right content and identifying customer trends.

It is difficult to build relationships with everybody. ... It is very difficult to use the social media and websites to track customer relationships. But we use social media to monitor our customers, to listen, to get a fair understanding of what they are saying and what they feel about our services and if there are general issues that need to be addressed. (MOMT, Case A)

Regarding personalization online, you can implement that when it comes to using email services. But for other platforms like social media it may be possible, but you may need to invest a lot in specialized software to do that kind of personal relation, to personalize the interaction for hundreds and thousands of customers. It is very feasible but it needs quite a bit of investment. ... Like I said, it is not very easy to customize the kind of messages that we are

sending out to the customers because you need to analyze customer's needs. Being able to predict human behavior is a challenge. ... (DMM, Case A)

To answer how easy it is to personalize relationships, well, on social media, for example, when a customer posts to you, you have his name or his social name so first you just have to call him by his name and say you are available for him. ... We train our online team that this is how we post it so maybe you shouldn't have said it that way. (MOMT, Case B)

Sometimes we have some customers who are very irritated, so they turn to express out their feeling, they hide behind their social media accounts to talk to us anyhow and all that, but even when it happens we manage the situation. (DMM, Case C)

... when it comes to the website, the difficulty is to have the most relevant content or making sure you identify the right trends that you need to identify to make sure your website is engaging enough or attractive enough or relevant enough. ... Similarly, for social media, you have to be always checking out and monitoring their activities to make sure that you are on top of issues and those hidden trends that you might have missed some time back, you are identifying them to make your platform the best among competitors in terms of customer service and then relationship management for customers. (DMM, Case D)

Responses to privacy concerns, the possibility of erosion of face-to-face communication, and the danger of unsolicited communication noted in the literature were also investigated.

On Twitter, we normally direct our customers to their inbox because, you know, Twitter is more or less very public, so we do not want to put customer information on public. When you realize a message is not welcome, you just have to draw your attention to it and stop. It happens mostly for off-line tools. Because, online, we post messages to our pages and not directly to our customers. With online, nothing is pushed into your inbox without permission. But sometimes we send these messages to update the customer ... we do not spam our customers. (MOMT, Case A)

I do not think face-to-face erosion is a problem. Customers mostly keep in touch with Facebook and Twitter. The face-to-face aspect does not really come up. Well, in a way, the face-to-face communication may be eroded but I don't think it does anything to the relationship. (DMM, Case A)

With unsolicited communication, we are trying to give the most relevant post bases on the content we post, so if we post something that has a very low level of engagement, we would not post the same type of thing, so we always listen to our content to identify which content relates much with people. (DMM, Case B)

In response to erosion of face-to-face, not at all, social media is social by nature so when a customer is coming to me, even if he is not in front of me, I can handle his emotional messaging, again, if our team are properly trained, they would know how to use this emotional messaging. ... Am not worried about the capability to include emotion in my messaging, it's not a challenge. (DMM, Case B)

Benefits from social media and websites for Internet-based relationship marketing

In all four cases, we identified feedback as a common benefit. A location or discovery environment was also identified in Cases A and B. Meanwhile, Cases B and D shared the benefit of "online virality." Loyalty, real-time customer care, reduced costs, customer acquisition, and a chest of information were further identified in our interviews.

The good thing about these platforms is being able to listen to your customers. The world is now going digital. Everybody is coming online. Mobile penetration in Ghana is quite high, so using social media gives us an opportunity to listen to what our customers are saying because social media allows you to search through conversations, unlike other channels like personal discussions. Social media and websites provide credibility. For any product that you see out there, the first place you want to check is online information. ... So, in terms of building relationship, at least the website provides support for establishing trust. In the P's of marketing, you have the place or location, there must be a place to find you and if not, there is no way to build relations with the customer. (DMM, Case A)

Social media is beneficial for having two-way conversations. We can move the conversation from one platform to another to find a solution that is of interest to the customer. Social media seems also compatible for gathering and handling complaints. (MOMT, Case A)

Every year we run a lot of promotions. ... We use social media in communicating who the various winners are. It also gives people a very good point of record to access and reduces scams where people are sent messages that they have won something. It is good to gather customer intelligence that can be used by our product development teams to develop more meaningful products for our customers. (MOMT, Case A)

The website first, as I said, is a discovery environment. You have different phases when you do a website, you have the discovery phase, then you can get to transactions, self-care we mentioned, and maybe in the future selling. The benefit you get if your website is correctly organized and then gives out the right content is to give some consideration to your client or your prospect. (DMM, Case B)

In terms of social, it is much more like for sure, a loyalty tool. Because you can get a way to interact constantly with your customer and resolve their issues and listen and show that you care. So it can be a way to acquire because the voice of one customer who is giving a good feedback gets viral, so his friends, his social graph, gets to know that you say. So social is definitely playing on the "virality" to bring more people, so it can be a way to acquire as well. (MOMT, Case B)

We get first-hand information, we get constant feedback. Feedback is like the mother of all, it is like the key, because if you have good feedback then you know what you actually have to work on to make the customer right. So the main thing there is feedback. Social media gives us a very unique opportunity to be able to go back and fish out what people have said on different platforms, analyze that information, and use it to actually give the customers more value. (DMM, Case C)

Well, it assists us to know how customers feel and how they think about us. With our website, for example, we gather a good number of requests from customers. (MOMT, Case C)

Websites are a treasure chest of information for visitors to use for whatever they want to use it for. Also, with customer care, real-time customer care, social media is almost something that you can't go without. (MOMT, Case D)

For website and social media, I think one important thing is that it helps you to sell your product to fans and in real time. So they don't need to be listening to radio at that point in time or they don't need to wait to watch TV before they see what you have, wherever they may be, once they log on, they see everything that you are sharing. Whether you like it or not, the world has become more social, people get to talk among themselves and share information and let other people know what is going on in their space and what the challenges they are facing are. So, if that is where people go to talk and air their grievances, it is almost suicidal not to be there to listen to them and gather intelligence. When you look at it historically, the cost involved in social media as a channel as against other channels like the radio, TV, and stuff has been very cheap; in as much as it is cheap, it is not free. It comes at a cost, even though it is much lower than the traditional means, yeah. Sometimes, if maybe another competing brand throws a swipe at us, you feel people defending us and people backing us in such instances,

so the bonding is always there. We try as much as possible to make them feel good so that they will be our ambassadors and support us when we try to do something. Any time you search for our hashtag, you realize that a lot of people post their testimonials there every day. So what we try to do is maybe once in a while we pick one testimonial, make an artwork out of it, and post it back so that people know that, hey, this guy on Twitter said this about us. (DMM, Case D)

Discussion and managerial implications

Our findings reveal that relationship marketing was generally understood among the selected telecommunication firms as a longitudinal process (see Table 2). This outlook seems consistent with some early and recent Western contributions to relationship marketing practice, where it is argued that RM, at a strategic level, involves the creation of longitudinal relations through several tactics (Egan, 2011; Grönroos, 1994). Our findings also identified relationship marketing as not fully perceived as part of strategy in one of the cases used in this study. This is quite surprising, because RM is being recognized as an immense contributor to marketing theory and practice and, hence, a worthy component of any customer-centric strategy (Gummesson, 2001; O'Malley & Tynan, 2000). Nevertheless, this perhaps affirms the argument of Berry (2000) that relationship marketing is still on a growth curve towards becoming a matured concept.

Though Facebook and Twitter are identified in extant contributions as common social media platforms used for Internet-based RM (Keenan & Shiri, 2009), this study further identified the common use of Instagram among participating telecommunication companies. Content marketing was also an integral aspect of Internet-based relationship marketing. Narteh et al. (2013) and Harker (1999) both agree that the concept of RM has become a melting point for several practices. The term "relationship termination" was not effective in the selected telecommunication companies; the response was that every customer is profitable and can be made profitable. This seems to contradict some European contributions which suggested that RM includes the termination of relationships (Grönroos, 1994; Strandvik & Storbacka, 1996). Each of the four cases shared customer service, communication, and customization as common activities pursued in Internet-based relationship marketing. Another relevant finding was that a major fraction of the participating firms practiced Internet-based relationship marketing as a support or complement to traditional RM practices. This turns out to be in line with research by Strauss and Frost (2001) and Melewar and Smith (2003) which found that, despite the hype of the Internet as an advanced platform to execute organizational strategies, it should not be used as a stand-alone marketing tool.

Our study found that personalization mainly required empathy or attaching a human element, as opposed to investments into sophisticated technologies which may not be necessary for customer relationships. Rebolledo et al. (2005), in their study of the role of technology in enabling relationship marketing, found that although strong arguments exist for enabling sophisticated technologies in

Table 2. Thematic categorization of interview responses.

Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D
	Understanding of Internet-Based Relationship Marketing		
1. Mutual exchange	1. Inviting and engaging customers	1. Inviting and engaging customers	1. Inevitable with customers
2. One-to-one in nature	2. Longitudinal	2. Longitudinal	2. Longitudinal
3. Improving customers	3. Part of the organizational strategy	3. Profitability	3. Engaging customers in real time
4. A technique other than organizational policy	4. Content marketing is a key focus	4. No relationship termination	4. Managing customer emotions
5. Quite a difficult task			
	Use of Internet-Based Relationship Marketing		
1. Communication	1. Communication	1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Customer service	2. Customer service	2. Customer service	2. Customer service
3. Customization	3. Customization	3. Customization	3. Customization
4. Website is an information store-house	4. Relationship tracking	4. Promotion	4. Promotion
5. No relationship tracking	5. Discovery environment	5. Relationship tracking	5. Relationship tracking
6. Complements traditional RM activities	6. Autonomously used for RM	6. Website is an information store-house	6. Website is an information store-house
		7. Reflection of traditional RM practices	7. Complements traditional RM activities
	Challenges of Internet-Based Relationship Marketing		
1. Personalization requires more investment in technology	1. Personalization requires a human element (empathy)	1. Personalization requires a human element (empathy)	1. Personalization requires a human element (empathy)
2. Effective for listening relative to face-to-face	2. Effective for listening relative to face-to-face	2. Effective for listening relative to face-to-face	2. Effective for listening relative to face-to-face
3. Technical failures are rare	3. Technical failures are rare	3. Technical failures are rare	3. Technical failures are rare
4. No or minimal privacy concerns	4. No or minimal privacy concerns	4. No or minimal privacy concerns	4. No or minimal privacy concerns
5. No complaint of unsolicited communication	5. No complaint of unsolicited communication	5. No complaint of unsolicited communication	5. No complaint of unsolicited communication
6. Erosion of face-to-face has no negative effects	6. Erosion of face-to-face has no negative effects	6. Erosion of face-to-face has no negative effects	6. Erosion of face-to-face has no negative effects
7. Managing content is challenging	7. Content development is challenging	7. Handling irritated customers is challenging	7. Identifying trends and content is challenging
	Benefits of Internet-Based Relationship Marketing		
1. Credibility	1. Customer acquisition	1. Enhances trust	1. Customer satisfaction
2. Discovery environment	2. Customer loyalty	2. Better interactivity	2. Better interactivity
3. Enhances trust	3. Enhances trust	3. Feedback generator	3. Enhances trust
4. Effective communication	4. Discovery environment	4. Improved bonding	4. Cost effective
5. Better interactivity	5. Better interactivity		5. Improved bonding
6. Flexibility in communication	6. Credibility		6. Feedback generator
7. Feedback generator	7. Feedback generator		7. Improved company image
	8. Online "virality"		8. Online "virality"

managing customer relationships, there was not a direct link between the use of sophisticated technologies and relationship orientation. In other words, the extensive use of Internet technologies in supporting relationships did not necessarily lead to the development of stronger relationships. As such, human influences, including showing empathy, are vital to personalization. Our identification of little or no privacy issues in using websites and social media for RM is relatively controversial. However, it supports the findings of Pillai and Sharma's (2004) study of business relationships over the Internet. They simply assert that privacy in relations over

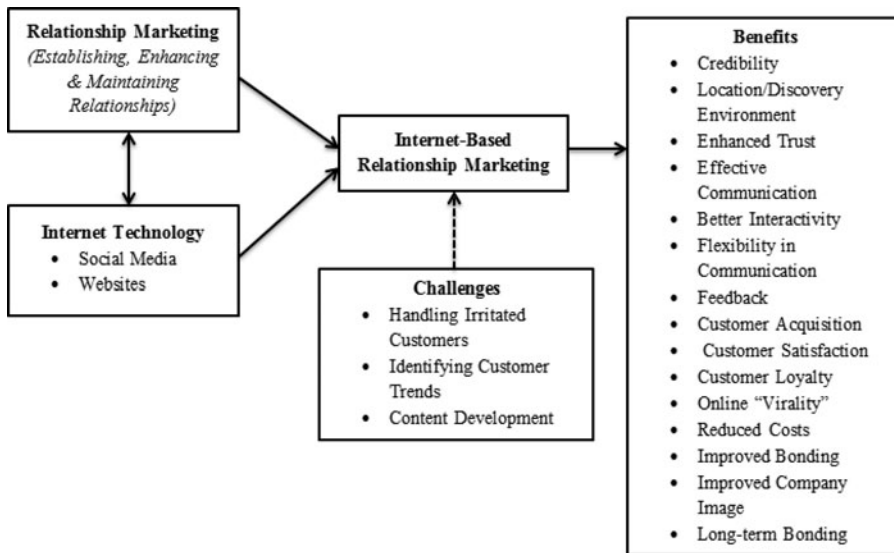


Figure 2. Post-study framework of Internet-based relationship marketing.

the Internet is fading as an issue. Customers seem more interested in the convenience and speed of Internet-based services. Significantly, it contradicts conceptual contributions by Barnes et al. (2000), who claim that the integration of Internet technology in service encounters can raise customer concerns of privacy and confidentiality. In the same study by Barnes et al. (2000), unsolicited communication via Internet technologies was raised as a concern. However, this study again disputes their findings, holding to the view that the telecommunication firms investigated indicated that customers did not express complaints on such issues.

Moreover, findings from this study contradict the conclusions of Bitner et al. (2000) that Internet-based relationships erode face-to-face communications and emotions. While the researchers maintain their argument, this research reveals the concern for convenience over face-to-face interactions. Feedback was one of the common benefits perceived among the selected telecommunication firms. Websites and social media, as a source of real-time valuable feedback, confirm the view that customer feedback on the Internet is in real time (i.e., feedback is part of the interaction) and continuous (Egan, 2011; Rebolledo et al., 2005). Another finding was the benefit of website and social media as a discovery environment for RM activities. This benefit has been implicit in the literature, but not explicitly covered in Internet-based RM literature. Peck et al. (2004) provide empirical support for the reduced costs associated with retaining customers online, which was also a finding from our study. Our finding that selected telecommunication firms benefited from online buzz or "virality" is not pronounced in Internet-based RM literature. However, Reichheld and Sasser (1990) argued that customers who receive excellent service remain loyal and provide free advertising by talking about the organization's products and services.

Conclusion and future research directions

From our findings, we conclude that certain conceptual arguments to Internet-based RM literature—for instance, the erosion of face-to-face emotional attachments, privacy, and unsolicited communications—may not hold within the Ghanaian setting. Though susceptible, they may not necessarily mitigate the practice of Internet-based RM within the domain. The pace of development in Internet technologies creates more relationship marketing advantages. We accordingly express the contemporary challenges and benefits of Internet-based relationship marketing in Figure 2.

As our study adds to existing knowledge on the benefits of Internet-based relationship marketing, we suggest that further studies should investigate emerging benefits across other Sub-Saharan industries. Furthermore, comparative studies of different industries within the service sector would richly expand knowledge on use of the Internet for relationship marketing. Comparative studies from both the firm and customer perspective may be helpful in understanding the impact of suggested unintended outcomes of using the Internet for relationship marketing. Finally, content marketing is becoming an inevitable aspect of RM online. As a response, we suggest that other studies examine the role of content marketing in building and managing Internet-based relationships.

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