

Exploring the antecedents and consequences of customer advocacy orientation

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Keywords

Customer advocacy, customer empowerment, service innovation, customer loyalty

Abstract

Advances in information technology are enabling customers to specify product/service features and prices, choose service delivery methods, control exposure to product information, and learn from other customers. Customer advocacy presents a cascade of stages, from the operating strategy and delivery system of the company to the customer's perception of service quality and its effect on customer trust and loyalty. Reviewing the related literature showed that few studies have explored the meanings and outcomes of customer advocacy orientation. Therefore, this research examines the antecedents and consequences of customer advocacy orientation in a service context. We formulated five hypotheses. Data were collected using a questionnaire survey of customers of Taiwanese telecommunication firms. Hypotheses were tested by applying structural equation modeling (SEM). These advocacy strategies enable firms to be more responsive towards customers and become more innovative, which increases customer trust and loyalty.

Introduction

As an increasing number of consumers gain access to powerful new media and information tools to compare products and services (Pitt *et al.*, 2002; Wind & Rangaswamy, 2001), organizations in a range of industries are responding by developing advocacy-based strategies and practices (McKenna, 2002; Baker, 2003). Using new computer-mediated technologies such as the internet, email, and the mobile phone, consumers are able to acquire more detailed information about brands, products and services to help them make smarter and more personalized choices on their own terms. They can validate a company's marketing and can more easily reject claims or statements based on their own knowledge (Ind & Riondino, 2001).

Even the telecommunications industry, long notorious for its aggressive marketing tactics, may be moving toward the use of customer advocacy tactics. Telecom companies have developed a virtual advisor to help people select a service package that suits them best from among a number of different plans, including those from competitors (Urban, 2004). Customer relationship marketing has enabled companies to target their customers individually, but this approach runs the risk of becoming too invasive when used continually.

The rational view adopted in this study is the basis of understanding how superior customer advocacy can improve customer trust and loyalty. We attempt to fill the gap in the literature regarding the roles companies play in implementing advocacy orientation designed to improve customer trust and loyalty. In this study, we investigated the antecedents and consequences of customer advocacy orientation. The results of this study are particularly

relevant to telecom companies who transact or plan on transacting with customers in a B2C setting. This study attempted to identify (a) the characteristics of customer advocacy orientation of telecom service; (b) the consequences of customer advocacy orientation; and (c) how influential customers adapt their own strategies in this advocacy environment.

Theory and hypotheses

Theory

Advocacy marketing treats consumers like intelligent individuals who seek to make informed decisions about the goods and services they purchase. Advocacy is a major advancement in the evolving relationship between companies and their customers. Customer advocacy is an advanced form of market orientation that responds to the new drivers of consumer choice, involvement, and knowledge. Customer advocacy orientation refers to the process of faithfully representing the customers' interests and providing them with honest information (Lawer & Knox, 2006). Customer advocacy aims to build deeper customer relationships by earning new levels of trust and commitment and by developing mutual transparency, dialogue, and partnership with customers. Customer advocacy requires a higher level of quality than relationship strategies, because a company that lacks superior products that is honestly trying to represent the customers' best interests cannot recommend itself. Customer advocacy is further supported by relationship marketing. In particular, learning about each customer and developing a relationship with them helps a company become a better advocate for their customers' needs (Urban, 2004). Building customer advocacy is one response to the vulnerabilities of services and branding in the face of rising consumer empowerment. It creates new opportunities for provider-customer dialogue, knowledge creation, and, critically, provides a context in which the interests of a corporation and those of its customers can be more closely aligned. Whether customer advocacy will gradually replace the traditional forms of market exchange remains to be seen. Although most customers may now possess greater knowledge about service firms and the relative value of their products, some are more interested, motivated, and prepared to engage in such relationships than others. In addition, many companies face competitive situations, operating conditions, or customer characteristics that preclude customer advocacy.

The advocacy strategy used in this study is a telecom strategy; thus, service providers must be made aware of the goals and methods of the project in advance. The telecom service providers work to acquire the trust and loyalty of the customer. To date, although the service management literature acknowledges the need for new skills and capabilities, it does not yet adequately define or empirically identify the nature or scope of the competency changes necessary to develop successful customer advocacy orientation. Little empirical evidence is available to improve our understanding of customer needs, participation, and behavior in customer advocacy orientation. More research is required to validate our proposition that customer and firm benefits can be realized by harnessing customer advocacy.

Hypotheses

Telecom services have complex fee structures (including activation fees, roaming charges, and early-termination fees) that make comparison shopping difficult. If a telecom service provider's efforts in customer advocacy are successful, it could gain a leading position in the telecom industry that competitors may find difficult to overcome. Even when other companies try to gain customer trust, the pioneers can maintain their superior positions by continuing to

innovate their advocacy programs. In contrast, choosing not to embrace advocacy can present great risks to a company if competitors are able to gain customer trust first.

Advocacy strategy incorporates the use of customer consultants (Achrol & Kotler, 1999) or trusted advisors (Sheth *et al.*, 2000) that seek to help customers make better purchasing decisions and maximize the value of the product or service. Instead of a monologue, company advocates are establishing a dialogue with their customers and are advocating for their needs. Companies assume that these customers will then reciprocate with their trust, leading to sales and profit growth (Urban, 2004). Customer trust refers to the extent to which customers feel that the service provider has goodwill and competence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). As trust increases and accountability and transparency build, customer advocacy is used to resolve the customers' problems, support their decisions, and monitor the performance of their dealings in a B2C context. We argue that as firms increase their customer advocacy orientation, they are more likely to develop higher-order service capabilities to achieve customer trust. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁ : Customer advocacy orientation has a positive impact on customer trust.

Customer advocacy-based firms seek to incentivize and involve consumers and customers in their marketing efforts. Advocacy implies that companies will partner with their customers in the expectation that satisfied customers will relay their positive partnership with the company to others (Urban, 2004). The implementation of customer advocacy orientation shapes many specific customer-focused capabilities of service firms, which support customers with marketing strategies and tactics that help them proactively and voluntarily convey their experiences to friends, relatives, and colleagues (Lawer & Knox, 2006). Customer loyalty refers to the degree to which customers feel that the service provider has consistent policies and procedures and increased service efficiency, as well as their likelihood of repurchase (Schneider & Bowen, 1999). Therefore, we believe that service firms must integrate new marketing techniques into the overall customer experience by creating and facilitating communities, environments, and contexts for customers to become involved with the service. By assisting consumers in finding and executing their optimum solution in a given market, a firm can more easily earn their long-term purchases and loyalty. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₂: Customer advocacy orientation has a positive impact on customer loyalty.

Customer linking refers to the ability to create and manage close customer relationships (Day, 1994), expressing the firm's ability to create, maintain, and enhance its relationship with its customers. Customer linking capabilities capture the ability of the firm to identify and understand the needs of its customers, and thus, create and maintain appropriate relationships with them (Theoharakis *et al.*, 2009). Hooley *et al.* (2005) noted that customer linking capabilities contribute significantly to the creation of a sustainable competitive advantage, and are therefore valuable to the firm. Firms focus on gathering extensive data about their customers, and then use the information to segment and personalize their offerings and marketing communications. We believe that service firms facilitate the creation and sharing of knowledge, competencies, and practices through open-mindedness to shape customer advocacy orientation. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃: Customer linking capabilities have a positive impact on the firm's customer advocacy orientation.

Service innovation has been found to be a main contributor to organizational success (Hult *et al.*, 2004; Leskiewicz *et al.*, 2003). Service innovation refers to a firm's receptivity and inclination to adopt new ideas that lead to the development and launching of new products (Hurley & Hult, 1998). Innovation implies that managers are able to devise solutions to business problems and challenges (Hult *et al.*, 2004). Service innovation is the firm's ability to collect information from its customers, recognize the value of this information, and leverage its knowledge (Srivastava *et al.*, 2001). This ability to reconfigure resources creates potential for firms to achieve new and innovative forms of competitive advantages (Teece *et al.*, 1997). Service innovation promotes the design of new services and enhancements in service delivery systems (O'Cass & Ngo, 2011). Therefore, we believe that firms that are more capable of forming customer advocacy orientation are also better able to draw upon the innovative practices that they learn from their customers. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₄ : Service innovation has a positive impact on the firm's customer advocacy orientation.

The Internet is a great enabler of customer power. People are now more educated and informed, and have the tools to verify a company's claims and seek out superior alternatives from competitors. That power enables customers to avoid pushy marketers and make their own purchasing decisions (Urban, 2004). Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) define customer empowerment as a process by which customers gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratically participate in shaping the services offered by their service provider. Several trends in service industries are bringing customer empowerment to the forefront. Advances in information technology are enabling customers to specify product/service features and prices, choose service delivery methods, control exposure to product information, and learn from other customers (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). Ramani and Kumar (2008) emphasized that customer empowerment reflects the extent to which a firm provides its customers with avenues for proactive customer involvement. Customer empowerment practices help institutionalize customer advocacy orientation through interaction activities. Therefore, we believe that to be effective, customer advocacy orientation should manifest in customer empowerment. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₅: Customer empowerment has a positive impact on the firm's customer advocacy orientation.

Methods

Measurements of latent variables

The question items used for measuring latent variables are listed in Table 1. The question items used to measure the manifest variables in this research consist mainly of positive statements. All items were assessed using a seven-point ordinal scale with responses ranging from *totally disagree* (one point) to *totally agree* (seven points).

Table 1 Research Variables and Measurements

Latent Variables	Measurements
1. Customer trust	V1 Believing that the telecom service provider has the professional capability for the service.
	V2 Implementing the telecom service has practical benefits.
	V3 The telecom service provider helps to increase efficiency in purchasing and service.
2. Customer loyalty	V4 I encourage friends and relatives to use services of this telecom firm.
	V5 I intend to increase usage of services of this telecom service provider in future.
	V6 In future, if I ever need a new telecom service, I will go for the same firm.
3. Customer advocacy orientation	V7 The telecom service provider provides complete and open information for customers.
	V8 The telecom service provider enable customers to share information about their experiences using various products and service
	V9 The telecom service provider can honestly trying to represent the customers' best interests
	V10 The telecom service provider can help customer help themselves
	V11 The telecom service provider can supply its customers with tools to help them solve their problems
	V12 The telecom service provider can provide information, enabling customer to choose easily among different options.
4. Customer linking capabilities	V13 The telecom service provider can try hardly to build customer satisfaction.
	V14 The telecom service provider good at creating relationships with customers.
	V15 The telecom service provider good at maintaining relationships with customers.
5. Service innovation	V16 The telecom service provider good at enhancing relationships with customers.
	V17 The telecom service provider is more innovative than competitors in deciding what methods to use in achieving targets and objectives.
	V18 The telecom service provider is more innovative than competitors in initiating new procedures or systems.
	V19 The telecom service provider is more innovative than competitors in developing new ways of achieving our targets and objectives.
6. Customer empowerment	V20 The telecom service provider is more innovative than competitors in recognize and leverage of the information and knowledge
	V21 The telecom service provider can support customer control over the service management.
	V22 The telecom service provider can support customer participation during the customer-frontline servicers encounter
	V23 The telecom service provider can provide customer education / support received from the services

Questionnaire pretesting and revising

To help respondents understand the questions, the questionnaire includes as many positive statements and as much simple language as possible, and avoids the use of jargon, leading questions, and double-barreled questions. Relevant customers of the telecommunications industry discussed the preliminary questionnaire and recommended additional suitable

customers to discuss the questionnaire. Finally, we revised the questionnaire to make the wording simple and understandable. We tested the revised questionnaire on the customers to determine whether they sufficiently understood the questions, and again revised them based on the opinions of the respondents before conducting a full-fledged survey.

Results

Sample structure

In this study, we researched customers of the Taiwanese telecom industry, and sought to understand their opinions and attitudes toward customer advocacy orientation that was promoted by telecom firms. The participants in this study include customers from the top five Taiwanese telecommunications firms. For convenient sample answering and collection, the questionnaires were provided directly to telecom firms' customers. In total, 475 questionnaires were sent to customers, and 438 questionnaires were returned, which were encoded and filed. After removing incomplete responses, 426 valid questionnaires remained.

We sampled the gender, age, service provider, usage period, and telecom service expenditure of respondents (Table 2). These samples are highly representative of the telecom industry in Taiwan.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics

Items	Category	Frequenc y	Percentag e	Item	Category	Frequenc y	Percentag e
Gender	Male	230	54.0%	Usage period	>1 year	38	8.9%
	Female	196	46.0%		1 ~ 2 years	49	11.5%
Age group	< 19 years	25	5.9%		2 ~3 years	55	12.9%
	20 - 25 years	135	31.7%		3 ~ 4 years	73	17.1%
	26 - 35 years	132	31.0%		4 ~ 5 years	93	21.8%
	36 - 45 years	82	19.2%		< 5 years	118	27.8%
	> 45 years	52	12.2%				
Service provider	Chunghwa Telecom	123	28.9%		Service expenditur e (NT dollar)	> \$ 300	45
	Taiwan mobile	112	26.3%	\$ 301-500		98	23.0%
	FarEasTone	103	24.2%	\$ 501-800		138	32.4%
	Asia Pacific Telecom	49	11.5%	\$ 801-1000		92	21.6%
	Vibo	39	9.1%	< \$ 1000		53	12.4%
	Telecom						

Non-response bias and reliability analysis

To investigate the possibility of non-response bias in the data, we tested for statistically significant differences in the responses of early and late waves of returned surveys (Lambert & Harrington, 1990; Lessler & Kalsbeek, 1992). For each phase, we treated the last wave of surveys we received as representative of non-respondents. We split each survey sample into two groups based on early and late survey return times, and performed *t* tests on the responses of both groups. The *t* tests yielded no statistically significant differences among the survey items tested. These results suggest that non-response bias did not significantly affect this study.

Table 3 shows the data reliability using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs (latent variables) had a high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.8; therefore, the data reliability is generally acceptable.

Table 3 Results of Reliability Analysis

Latent variables	Cronbach's α
Customer trust	.903
Customer loyalty	.870
Customer advocacy orientation	.935
Customer linking capabilities	.917
Service innovation	.870
Customer empowerment	.848

Confirmatory factor analysis

Each indicator variable in the measurement model should load only one factor; that is, none of the indicators are complex variables (i.e., measuring multiple latent variables; Hatcher, 1998). We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the psychometric properties of the measures used in this study. The model fit also used the estimates of CFI, GFI, AGFI, NFI, NNFI, and RMR (Table 4). The results shown in Table 4 indicate a good fit with the data; when the fit indices exceeded or approached 0.9, the estimated RMR was 0.0284 and the AGFI exceeded 0.8.

Table 4 Summary of Measurement Statistics

	χ^2	df	χ^2 / df	GFI	AGFI	RMR	NFI	NNFI	CFI
Modified Model	700.917	357	1.963	0.907	0.871	0.071	0.942	0.961	0.970

Notes : Sample Size = 426; GFI= goodness of fit index; AGFI= GFI adjusted for degrees of freedom; RMR=root mean square residual; NFI= normed-fit index; NNFI= non-normed-fit index ; CFI= Bentler's comparative fit index .

We assessed the reliability of the measurements using composite reliability and variance-extracted estimates. The composite reliability of each construct exceeded 0.7 in this study, satisfying a minimally acceptable level (Hatcher, 1998). However, Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested that variance-extracted estimates should exceed 0.5. All indices exceeded 0.5, indicating that the constructs used in this model performed fairly well. All indicator t values ranged from 12.4797 to 19.4911, demonstrating that all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$). These results supported the convergent validity of all indicators that effectively measured the same construct (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Path analysis

Based on these results, we used SEM to perform theoretical model testing with path analysis. The CFI, GFI, NFI, and NNFI exceeded or approached 0.9, the estimated RMR was 0.0291, and the AGFI exceeded 0.8. The research model achieved a relatively good fit (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993). Figure 1 shows a summary of the path analysis results. All path coefficients in the current model were statistically significant.

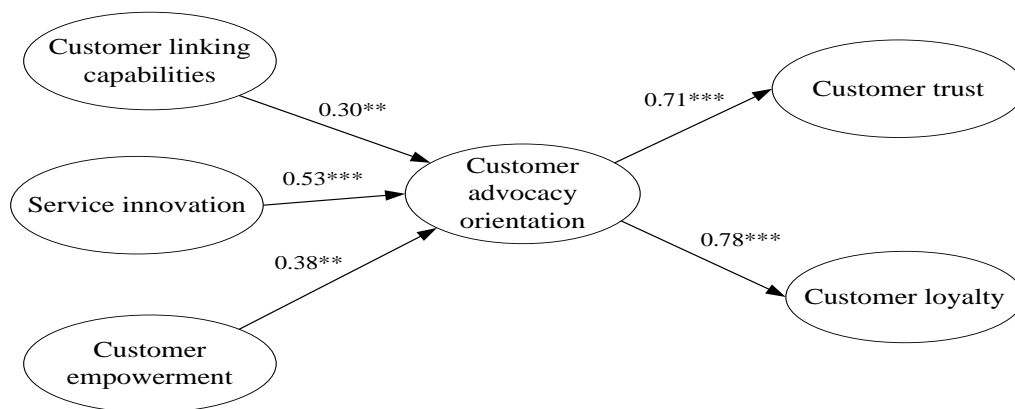


Figure 1. Testing results of the theoretical model
 (Note. Path coefficients are statistically significant ,
 *** denotes a significant value $p < .01$, ** denotes a significant value $p < .05$)

Discussions and conclusions

This study investigates how customer linking capabilities, service innovation, and customer empowerment capabilities of the telecom services firms contribute to their customer advocacy orientation to achieve superiority in customer trust and loyalty.

The research results show that customer advocacy orientation directly and positively influences customer trust and loyalty (H_1 and H_2 are supported). This indicates that customer advocacy orientation is strengthened by the service provider to elevate customer trust and loyalty. The main goal of firms pursuing customer advocacy orientation is “customer success,” which is creating more authentic customer relationships by providing expert levels of customer support and guidance. In response, service firms provide customers with open, honest, and complete information – and then find the best services for them. In short, these firms are representing their customers’ best interests, and essentially becoming their advocates. If a firm advocates for its customers, they will reciprocate with their trust and loyalty. The firm may then be able to command higher prices for its products and services, because customers may be willing to pay for the extra value. People that trust a firm often tell others about it, which helps the firm reduce its costs for acquiring new customers. Although the firm may sometimes lose out to its lower-priced competitors, customers often remain loyal simply because the quality of service reinforces their trust in the service firms.

The research results show that customer linking capabilities, service innovation, and customer empowerment directly and positively influence customer advocacy orientation (i.e., H_3 , H_4 , and H_5 are supported). This shows a strengthening of the customer linking capabilities, service innovation, and customer empowerment by the service provider to increase customer advocacy orientation. Creating a successful customer advocacy orientation requires a different set of service innovation competencies. It requires managers to develop and harness the competencies of customers as well as their own, and demands new communication infrastructures to enable managers to “listen in” and participate in market and customer conversations. At the heart of this shift in service management is the need for a greater

understanding of customer attitudes, values, relationships, and their perceptions of value. This means that the traditional tenets of product and service must be augmented by further benefits. We argue that customer advocacy-based services represent an effective means for firms to achieve better alignment with the empowered consumer. However, to become successful customer advocates, service firms must first acknowledge the rising forces of customer empowerment and then find new approaches to align the actions of the company with the needs of its customers.

Throughout this research, we have discussed customer advocacy orientation in the context of the vulnerabilities of telecom service companies and the changing drivers of customer trust and loyalty. We have identified a number of firms that are experimenting with customer advocacy orientation business models and we have used these to contextualize a framework for service management. For managers, our analysis will help them evaluate how their firms might benefit from developing customer advocacy orientation.

Research limitations and direction for further research

Because of restricted funds and time, the number of research samples was limited. To conform to the statistical sampling principle, the number of valid research samples surpassed 200. This is considered a large sample statistically, and the principle decreases progressively according to the scale effectiveness. If the number of samples increases, the information accuracy is not improved. Therefore, the existing information has a certain level of reliability. Comparisons can be conducted after analysis is completed on different clusters, and this will provide more comprehensive information.

Other industries may produce different results. Further studies should consider to what extent the measures proposed in this study are valid in different service industries, such as the supermarket or banking industries, and what modifications need to be made to the scale items across different samples and contexts. Various questions are raised: (a) In what market contexts are advocacy approaches least or most relevant? (b) How do firms change their service control mindset to create advocacy value for customers? (c) What are the new service model development competencies for creating customer advocacy orientation and how are they developed?

A cross-section of the information accurately describes the causal relationship and movement changes. Currently, this questionnaire only considers a specific period and does not progress to the customer's development phase. However, customer trust and loyalty are a type of interaction. In a different period, the influence level is potentially very different. During various stages of the service period, different mechanisms bring about different benefits; perhaps the customer needs a different type of management. Further research may incorporate the effects of variables like service quality, customer value, price perceptions on customer loyalty, and examine additional influences.

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