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## **Reactivation of Relationships with Customers In The Case Of Telecommunications: A Qualitative Study**

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### **Abstract**

Overall there has been a scarce focus on why customers come back after the relationship ended, when customer regain and win-back are an important part of a customer relationship management strategy. Determinants of customer relationship reactivation are addressed based on ending literature and equity theory. A case study, of a telecommunications company delivering a mix of goods and services, is described and includes a total of 40 interviews in the marketing and customer service departments and with customers. Telecommunications explore reactivation possibilities mostly on the relationship's rupture phase and with a retention focus. The most relevant reactivation determinants are considered to be customer characteristics (as age, involvement and variety seeking), cognitive factors (as offer's value, procedures and satisfaction), reasons to switch and alternatives. The contribution of this empirical study is to advance knowledge about antecedents (as inertia, emotional factors and relationship characteristics) of successful reactivation.

**Keywords:** relationship reactivation; win-back; customer relationship management; relationship marketing.

### **Introduction**

The threat of "churn"<sup>1</sup> is a growing concern of consumer-oriented businesses. Research has shown that there is a negative correlation between the number of "lost customers" and business income (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Customers who remain with a business, whether through retention or by defection and subsequent reactivation are potentially interesting when, in addition to contributing to revenue contribute to reduce costs by being less expensive (Ganesh et al., 2000), to reduce the costs of attracting new customers through positive word of mouth referrals (Keaveney and Parthasarathy, 2001) and to decrease the uncertainty of exchange through the experience accumulated during the relationship (Heide and Weiss, 1995). Stauss and Friege (1999) have found that the net return on investment from a new customer is 23% compared to a 214% return on investment from the reinstatement of a customer who has defected. Customer win-back focuses on the re-initiation and management of relationships with customers that have lapsed or defected from a firm (Thomas et al., 2004).

Customer Relationship Reactivation (CRR) has become more important as the concept of regain management complements the relationship marketing theory by focusing on loyal customers that, for some reason, ended their relationship with the firm. The existing research studied value determinants and price strategies of the regain offer (e. g. Tokman et al., 2007, Thomas et al., 2004, Kumar et al., 2015) and did not relate them to the process of dissolution after it had elapsed. To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have focused on the key drivers of

win-back success (Krafft and Pick, 2007, Homburg et al., 2007, Tokman et al., 2007, Pick et al., 2016).

This study is interested, from a holistic perspective, in a dual analysis relating relationship dissolution and reactivation in B2C services. The research question is: Why do some ended relationships reactivate? Determinants of a successful customer relationship reactivation are addressed.

This short paper is organized in four main sections. Introduction discusses the problem and setting of our research and briefly presents the literature review on relationship reactivation. After this, methods and results are explained. Finally, conclusions and implications for further research are drawn.

## **Methods**

An empirical study was carried out in a large Portuguese telecommunication company and two different data collection techniques were chosen. Firstly, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with employees who deal with retention and reactivation practices inside the Company (from marketing, retention, customer service departments and telemarketing partners). Secondly, additional and separate interviews took place with 20 customers who had called the Company to end the relationship. All interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed. The transcripts were confirmed by the employees and at the end the report was analyzed by an interlocutor of the telecommunication operator. Data were categorized, and transcripts repeatedly read during this analysis. The qualitative analysis included the use of data triangulation, combining several documentary sources (official websites, social networks, interviews and media reports, and official and public documents provided by the interlocutor). In addition, the field notes and the transcriptions made in the observation of a win-back campaign were added. Comprehension (*verstehen*) is the epistemological principle and the text is the empirical material. The WebQDA (Web Qualitative Data Analysis) software, version 2.0.0, was used to analyze data collected from employees, customers and other sources. In this interpretative analysis, content analysis was performed on the transcripts and field notes, considering as the unit of record (designated references) the sentence or set of words and as a unit of context the paragraph. Categories and subcategory / indicators were used in addition to the dimensions. The observations resulting from the interviews were analyzed in terms of frequencies, specifying and comparing them, but trying to avoid a quantitative logic. As a result, employee's opinions and narratives and customers dissolution/reactivation processes were described, identified and categorized in terms of reactivation determinants (customer and relationship characteristics, reasons for switching, procedure, distributive and interaction justice, satisfaction, barriers, willingness to return...). In interviews with experts, we questioned them regard to dissolution aspects, win-back activities and about customers' profile and relationship characteristics. Telecommunications explore reactivation possibilities mostly on the relationship's rupture phase and with a retention focus. Here reactivation relevant determinants are considered to be some customer characteristics (as involvement and service perceived importance) and cognitive factors (as offers value and procedures), reasons to switch and available alternatives.

## **Results**

Research question is answered with this qualitative study, where the following references and categories were obtained. The "Customer characteristics" category comprises three subcategories: i) age (34 references); ii) involvement (33 references); and, iii) inertia (19 references). The "Previous relationship characteristics" category encompasses the elements that characterize the previous relationship between the customer and the company providing the service. This category comprises three subcategories: i) duration (13 references); ii) quality of the relationship (47 references); and, iii) overall satisfaction (58 references). In the proposed model, the "Attitude towards reactivation" category, categorized as willingness to stay had some significance (27 references). The "Cognitive and emotional factors" category comprises five subcategories: perceptions of justice, specific

satisfaction (65 references), emotions and switching reasons (76 references), and attributions (20 references). The perception of justice category, in the light of the Homburg et al. (2007) model and the theory of equity, has three subcategories: distributive justice (107 references), interactional justice (73 references) and procedural justice (64 references). The emotions category consists of two subcategories: negative emotions (71 references) and positive emotions (19 references). The "Barriers to reactivation" category refers to the factors (barriers or constraints) that hinder the maintenance or customer return to the company. This category comprises two subcategories: i) attractiveness of the available alternatives (20 references) and ii) network effect (11 references). These exploratory results are not deepened and explained in this work but led to the next stage.

## Conclusions and Implications

Customer relationship reactivation is still a neglected area of research in customer relationship management, despite the growing evidence in business practice that well-developed reactivation activities can be highly effective and efficient (Griffin and Lowenstein, 2001, Homburg et al., 2007).

Telecommunications explore reactivation possibilities mostly on the relationship's rupture phase and with a retention focus. Here, the relevant reactivation determinants are considered to be some customer characteristics (as age, involvement and service perceived importance) and cognitive factors (as offer's value and procedures and satisfaction), reasons to switch and available alternatives. The contribution of our empirical study is to advance knowledge about the antecedents of successful reactivation strategies.

Several limitations are acknowledged. Data were obtained from only one industry in one country. However, the fact that three different services were included compensates for the lack of diversity (at least to some degree). Nevertheless, it would be interesting to have examined other industries and socio-cultural contexts. Future research could also study this phenomenon analyzing the regained customer's value or/and extend the present study to the reactivation determinants in terms of intentions and future loyalty (e.g. propensity to switch, return intention and recommendation).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Churn rate or defection rate measures, on percentage, the customer's proportion that defects the firm relatively to the total number of customers.

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