Creating Advocates: The Roles of Satisfaction, Trust and Commitment

Why do people say good things about their service providers to their friends, relatives, coworkers and acquaintances? This is an important question that has received considerable attention by marketing scholars over the decades (Anderson, 1998; Engle, Keg gereis and Blackwell, 1969; Fornell et al, 1996; Haywood, 1989). In marketing relationships, there are a number of relational constructs that will drive positive word of mouth behavior. Services have been viewed as a natural setting for the study of relational phenomena because the intangibility and inseparability of services makes it possible and necessary for services providers to think in relational terms (Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995). The purpose of this paper is to understand the drivers of advocacy from a relationship marketing perspective. To that end, a conceptual model of the role that satisfaction, trust and commitment play in creating strong advocates was developed. That model hypothesized that three components of commitment (affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment) were the primary drivers of consumer willingness to act as advocates on behalf of their service provider in a service relationship.

The hypothesized model was examined in one service setting, financial services. Participants were drawn from 4 convenience samples of graduate students and employees at a mid-sized Canadian University, graduate students in business at a second mid-sized Canadian University, employees of a high-technology firm and employees of a consulting firm. Both businesses were located in medium-sized cities in Canada. Over the 4 convenience samples, 429 surveys were distributed and 207 were completed, for a response rate of just under 50%. In completing this survey, participants were asked to reflect on their relationship with any particular provider of financial services with which they do business.

The items and constructs measured in this study demonstrated both convergent and discriminant validity in the measurement model. The hypothesized model offered a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 314.2$, df 160, p.<.001; CFI=.96; RMSEA=.07; GFI=.86,AGFI=.82). Overall, the model does a very good job of explaining the variance (71%) in the advocacy intentions dependent variable. All but one of the specific hypotheses developed in the model were supported. With the most notable finding that affective commitment was positively related to advocacy while continuance commitment was negatively related to advocacy.

This study provides some good support for the position that customer commitment is an important determinant of a customer’s willingness to act as an advocate on behalf of a service provider. The study also continues a trend in the field (Bansal, Irving and Taylor, 2004; Gruen, Summers and Acito, 2000) where researchers have been able to demonstrate that the full 3-component model of organization commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990) applies in the context of a consumer-organization relationship. Third, the paper provides some support for the view that the components of commitment are formed through the dynamics of the service experience.