Supply chain relationships in local government in the United Kingdom: An exploratory study

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(MKT_06) SUPPLY CHAIN RELATIONSHIPS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT
Local government in the United Kingdom is undergoing a period of transformational change. The Modernising Local Government white paper “In Touch with the People” (DETR 1998) has instructed local councils to obtain best value in the delivery of local services and this includes re-examining and challenging the use of in-house support services. This paper reports on an exploratory study examining the concept of relationship marketing focusing on the relationship that exists between Middlesborough Council’s laboratory service and its customers and to what extent government regulations have affected and changed attitudes and behaviours towards each other.

One of the key aims of the research is to challenge the linear nature of the way in which the stages of a relationship are considered in favour of a circular model of the development of relationships. This examination is set in the context of the “enforced” nature of local authority relationships.

Research findings indicate that the nature of the relationship can been seen as cyclical rather than linear and the nature of the relationship in terms of social distance needs to be re-evaluated in a context where social distance itself remains a significant factor for local government employees as a mean of avoiding the scrutiny of inter-personal relationships.

Key Words: Relationship Marketing, United Kingdom, Local Government, Stages in the Relationship
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Local government in the United Kingdom is undergoing a period of transformational change, the Modernising Local Government white paper “In Touch with the People” (1998) has instructed local councils to obtain best value in the delivery of local services, this includes re-examining and challenging the use of in-house support services. This study examines the concept of relationship marketing focusing on the relationship that exists between Middlesborough Council’s laboratory service and its customers and to what extent government regulations have affected and changed attitudes and behaviours towards each other.

More specifically this work attempts to investigate two key issues that impact on the nature of relationship within local government in the UK. Firstly the effect of a key attitude dimension – namely an “enforced” relationship - (governed by local government procurement guidelines) within which the local authority customer is permitted to only enter into contractual relationships with an “approved” supplier. Secondly, most previous studies of relationships have expressed the various stages that a relationship goes through in linear terms. This suggests that relationships move from the pre-relationship stage (courtship) to the long term stage (institutionalisation) (Ford, 1997) or from prospect to partner up a relationship ladder (Payne 1994), This study attempts to evaluate a new relationship model in a cyclic rather than a linear direction based upon the stages in the relationship.

The laboratory service was established in 1968 with the birth of Teesside – a new local government unitary authority in the UK. Subsequently, in 1974, local government reorganised and Teesside split into two tiers of local government, Middlesborough Council and Cleveland County Council. The laboratory continued to provide in-house testing facilities to the Highways Department for Cleveland County Council ensuring that the construction and maintenance of all roads and footpaths within the region were laid to a safe and qualitative standard. The new County Council undertook responsibility for the delivery of major highway projects throughout the region, building motorways and providing new road infrastructures to new Council housing estates, thus providing the laboratory service with a steady demand for their services. Growth of the service ensued alongside the increasing good reputation and image of the unit. The service received the prestigious British quality standard B.S. EN 678 in 1989 awarded by National Accreditation of Measurement and Sampling (NAMAS) which eventually amalgamated with other accreditation bodies and is today called United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).

The abolition of Cleveland County Council in 1996 resulted in the reorganisation of local government and the establishment of four unitary authorities within the area – Middlesborough Borough Council, Stockton Borough Council, Hartlepool Borough Council and Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council. The laboratory service had operated for many years across the districts, disaggregating the County Council in this way posed a problem for the service in terms of redefining management of the unit and maintaining good service delivery to all four borough Councils.

The four unitary authorities agreed that certain services should not be disaggregated and as with all local government reorganisations clear boundaries in relation to service delivery cannot always be achieved therefore each unitary authority became a “lead authority” in respect of these unique services. Lead authority arrangement policies were agreed and whilst the management of a particular service would be the responsibility of one unitary authority,
the overall running costs would be divided between all four authorities and the services provided to them all would be uniform and non-biased with the “lead authority” assuming accountability and disclosure of expenditure to the other three authorities. The laboratory service was assigned to Middlesbrough Council under the supervision of the Head of Service for Transport and Design Services who assumes an overarching managerial role, encompassing the service in the department’s action plan outlining future strategy, aims and objectives of the service aligned to the overall vision and corporate aims of the Council.

The UK Government White Paper “Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People”, (DETR 1998) put in place a programme for the reform and modernisation of local government in England. The change was needed in local government to: Strengthen the links between councils and local people, to deliver high standards for local people everywhere, to spread best practice and to tackle serious failure.

Best value is described by the modernising agenda as: “A modern Council – or authority – which puts people first will seek to provide services which bear comparison with the best. Not just with the best that other authorities provide but with the best that is on offer from both the public and private sectors. Continuous improvements in both the quality and cost of services will be the hallmark of a modern council, and the test of best value” (Modern Local Government in Touch with the People: DETR 1998)

Best value is founded on four major concepts: Challenge - why and how a service is being provided, comparison – with others’ performance (benchmarking), consult – with users of the service and competition – means of securing efficient and effective services

2. CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING

Traditionally, marketing philosophy encouraged firms and organisations to base their activities on the needs and wants of customers in selected target markets and channel resources to meet those needs. The external environment influenced marketing in terms of outlining market forces and restricting factors – legislation, industry agreements, norms etc, balancing and matching all the ingredients which are to be considered in a marketing programme has widely become known as the “marketing mix”. This was primarily developed by Borden (1964) who listed twelve elements which should be considered in formulating a marketing programme however over time marketing mix decisions have been simplified under four headings known as the “four P’s” they include: Product – the product or service being produced, Price – the price charged and terms associated with its sale, Promotion – promotion and communication activities associated with marketing the product, Place – the distribution and logistics function that needs to be considered when making the product or service available.

The marketer who was placed in the marketing department blended the four elements so that profits could be optimised. In recent years the P’s of the marketing mix have become too limited and in the context of mega-marketing, defined by Kotler (1986) as adding politics and public relation expanded them to six P’s, although this improved and updated the old definition adding a few more items to the list cannot be considered the best way of redefining marketing in view of the increasing changes in the complexity of the business environment neither does it recognise the essential inter-relationships between the elements of the mix.
Many academics have criticised the four P’s model. Such criticisms have been expressed by; Dixon and Blois (1983), Gummesson (1987), Van Waterschhoot and Van de Bulte (1992) and Gronroos (1989).

Relationship marketing has been developed, arguably from the early 90s. Christopher et al (1994) describes two major considerations of relationship marketing as: “first at the macro level, the recognition that marketing impacts on a wide range of areas including customer markets, employee markets, supply markets, internal markets, referral markets and “influencer” markets such as the governmental and financial markets, and second, at the micro level, the recognition that the nature of interrelations with customers is changing. The emphasis is moving from a transaction focus to a relationship focus” (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 1991).

Gronroos (1989), determines that customer relations are the “cornerstone of marketing” where the objectives of the parties involved are met through continual exchanges progressing to long established relationships. Only when the relationship is continuing and leads to more business does the customer become more profitable to the seller.

Ford et al (1998), argue that: “the marketing function in a business company is frequently evaluated on the basis of the volume of sales it makes and the profit margins….” They go on to state that these factors “provide an inadequate view of marketing’s function” and that “an emphasis on short-term sales or profit can actually divert the company away from building the long-term relationships that are necessary to enhance and exploit its technologies and to build future sales volume”.

Cram (1994) defines relationship marketing as: “the consistent application of up-to-date knowledge of individual customers to product and service design which is communicated interactively, in order to develop a continuous and long term relationship, which is mutually beneficial”

As relationship marketing has developed conceptually, various models have been suggested as a means of explaining the concepts. Such models include; Payne (1994) who defined the “advocate” rung on the ladder of loyalty. The six markets model of Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (1991 revised by Peck (1996). Gummesson (1999) developed a rather more complex framework to convey the complex reality of relationship marketing. He identified 30 separate relationships and categorised them into a series of groups:

A significant area of relationship marketing theory to date is the perceived existence of a series of stages within the relationship typically moving from “loose” relationships to “tight” relationships. An analogy is often made with the human relationship (Tynan 1997), moving along a linear continuum form “courtship” to “institutionalisation”. Such theory is typified by Payne’s “Relationship Ladder” where the relationship moves from Prospect to Customer to Client to Supporter to Advocate and ending with Partner (Payne 1994). A similar approach is taken by Ford (1997) whose five stages are described as: pre-relationship, early stage, development stage, long-term stage and final stage.

The concept of the “internal” customer was discussed by Gummesson (1999) explaining the dependency between different functions in a company. It requires vertical interaction and inter-hierarchical dependency. The notion of the internal customer brings customer-supplier relationships into the company. It also requires employees to see other employees as
customers who receive deliveries of services etc. Usually an employee fulfils the role of being both a recipient of something as an internal customer and to deliver something in a value-added state to another internal customer. Only when the customers are satisfied – and it is satisfied customers that count whether these are internal or external – a job is completed. He comments that:
“common sense tells us that the outcome to external customers cannot be satisfactory if the internal customer relationships and collaboration are walking along with a limp”

In the value chain the customer is an external end user of a firm’s output, in the value constellation the customer is part of the process, a co-producer, and not just an end user.

The relationship marketing concept has been extended to embrace the not for profit sector. Drucker (1990) has suggested that “The typical non-profit has so many more relationships that are vitally important. Every non-profit organization has a multitude of constituencies and has to work out the relationship with each of them”. A number of frameworks have been put forward to categorize the parties involved in not-for-profit organizations. Bruce (1995) sets them into four groups: beneficiaries, supporters, stakeholders and regulators. Kotler and Andreasson (1996) have four groups of “publics”: input publics, internal publics, intermediary and consuming publics.

McCort (1994) also demonstrates how many of the challenges facing not-for-profit organizations can be met through a relationship marketing approach. As such a strategy stresses mutually beneficial relationships rather than a single transaction this may overcome the unwillingness of some not-for-profit organizations to accept marketing. Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) suggest organizations could improve relationship-marketing success by strengthening the ties between the organisation and the identities people find important.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to test the hypothesis that: The “enforced” model is circular rather than linear. Theorists of relationship marketing, as previously stated, have derived the concept that stages in a relationship move in a linear direction e.g. from courtship to institutionalisation. Testing this hypothesis will result in evidence that will either support such a concept or reveal new evidence which shows relationships move in a cyclic way whereby internal “enforced” customers who act in an opportunistic manner will return to using the service and enter the cycle again at an advanced stage.

The study undertook primary exploratory research using a qualitative empirical approach in the form of unstructured in-depth interviews. An exploratory study using interviews in this way can be helpful to find out what is happening and to seek new insights; this kind of interview has also been labelled as an “informant interview”. The interview was recorded allowing the researcher to analyse the data in detail and draw out key themes. The researcher acted as a complete observer, remaining impartial and non-biased to the interviewee. In total five depth interviews were conducted with the sample of respondents being chosen judgementally and the sample included both internal and external customers of the organisation.

The exploratory research was then augmented by a series of semi-structured interviews based on the exploratory research. The researcher used a list of themes and questions to be covered
but these did vary from interview to interview depending on the organisational context that is encountered in relation to the research topic.

The researcher used purposive sampling. This form of non-probability sampling conformed to certain criteria in this case study; interviewing customers of the laboratory service provided a sample quota whose views are relevant and representative to the study. The researcher was able to analyse the data from these interviews by merging related data drawn from different transcripts and identify key themes for further exploration, drawing and verifying conclusions. At this stage some seventeen interviews were conducted from the population (126) of the organisations customers

The researcher then conducted descriptive research using a postal questionnaire to all internal and external customers (126) – using a census ensured that the study was completely representative. Using the key themes from the semi-structured interviews formed a questionnaire containing important and relevant closed questions having been tested and piloted first to identify ambiguities or possible misinterpretations. Statistical analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The use of exploratory, descriptive, qualitative and quantitative research allowed triangulation to take place and enabled the researcher to use different data collection methods within one study and increase the validity of the study.

4. INDICATIVE FINDINGS

Middlesborough Council implemented a procurement strategy in September 2001 (Middlesborough Council 2001). This document sets out a framework for the selection of a partner following the European Community Public Procurement Directives, Standing Orders and Financial Regulations.

The debate continues within the public sector about contracting-out public services, Darwin et al (2000) suggests that in the early period of the contract relationship the clients confidence in the ability of the contractor’s ability to do the job was questionable because the client felt the contractor did not understand the authorities special requirements with regard to service provision, this meant that client officers operated in a transactional manner, monitoring closely the work of the contractors and issuing defaults, moving towards an aggressive transactional approach. Barrow (2001) argues that “there is no need for a political process in delivering services, it is simply a matter of professional procurement” and goes on to describe how politicians should hire the best professionals to deliver what the customers and voters want.

Public private partnerships offer the potential to accelerate the improvement of public services through providing access to resources, expertise and economies of scale, however Morley (2002) warns that many public and private sector organisations find it difficult to work effectively together because of cultural differences. He suggests:
“like a marriage, how partners will work together is difficult to predict with certainty at the start. Successful partnership working hinges on mutual trust and understanding, which develops only with effort over time”
The risks associated with partnership working do include damaging the council’s reputation if negative perceptions are generated because the partner’s performance does not meet expectations. Morley (2002) suggests the success of a partnership depends as much on mutual faith as it does on anything that can be put on paper “it is hard to take risk in the absence of trust. The greater the risk the more important the relationship will be and the higher the management level that must be involved” (Morley 2002).

Table 1 – Relationship Compared to Considering Using an Alternative Service Provider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Alternative Yes</th>
<th>Alternative No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courtship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalisation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial Separation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that 15 respondents who are internal “enforced” customers have considered using an alternative service provider, compared with 34 respondents who have not considered using an alternative service provider. Interestingly 8 respondents consider themselves to be at the institutionalised stage of their relationship with the laboratory, 5 of those respondents have considered using an alternative service provider.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Danger lurks in the external market place, stalking, seduction, rape and prostitution are all metaphors, which can be used to describe the full range of business relationships that occur, and often leave one party bewildered, confused and in extreme cases render companies bankrupt! Those customers who used an alternative service provider should be aware of the dangers in seeking a new partner. The research findings revealed that customers in fact returned to using the laboratory, only one customer was still thinking of a trial separation. The proposed new model highlights the direction and movements of those previously “enforced” customers who used an alternative service provider and are depicted in Figure 1 overleaf. The researchers propose a new and different hypotheses which suggests: “You can only maintain a monogamous relationship” and although the model shows “short affairs” with different companies where commitment and trust may not exist and can be described as “one night stands” - acting in a transactional manner, the journey finally ends with one dyad where both parties maintain effort to enhance and build a relationship and bond that will last long into the future.

Continuing the “arranged marriage” theme, the lure for customers to be promiscuous proved ineffective within this study. 11 respondents who had considered using an alternative service provider remained faithful. Closer examination of the reasons given for not choosing another provider was influenced by the benefits received within the existing relationship e.g. local knowledge, quality and impartiality.

Reluctance to depart from the existing internal relationship may be as a result of ethical considerations, continuing with the established supplier who is perceived as “tried and
tested”. Good audit procedures exist and accountability is clear, venturing into new partnerships will inevitably require new audit trails and new monitoring procedures.

The above discussion of the nature of both a monogamous and the “short affairs” relationship types may be in danger of being a too simplistic analysis of the nature of the relationship. It is conceivable that a portfolio of relationships might exist from any one of the partners in a relationship with, for example, one supplier being in a monogamous relationship with the customer whereas with another supplier may be quite simply “playing the field” in a transactional and short term approach.

. Figure 1 Finding the Right Partner

The establishment of relationships over time has been evaluated by Ford (1980) conditioned by three factors: experience, uncertainty and distance. Historically Ford (1980) theorised that the establishment of long term relationships required parties to reduce distance between them in terms of social, cultural, geographical, technological and time factors

The perceived need for local authority officers to maintain social distance in external relationships is a requirement necessary to avoid accusations of collaboration and ultimately the possibility of corrupt practices. Such a perceived need to maintain social distance is by no means exclusive to relationships in the public sector. Such reluctance may occur whenever external pressures of, for example, corporate governance, impact on the nature of the
relationship. However, the long–held traditions of the public sector, including such procedures as sealed-bid pricing and mandatory multiple quotations will inevitably tend to mitigate against a relationship approach. Thus the new way of thinking is suggested in this paper could be seen to be a reversal of Ford’s theory and perhaps an important reason why internal customers chose to remain within the “arranged marriage” - feeling comfortable and at ease with the close social distances existing within their own organisation, thus avoiding scrutiny of inter–personal relationships with external organisations and the necessity to maintain social distance.

Figure 2 - Continuing the “Arranged Marriage”

Academic research has examined the stages and development of relationships over a period of time and have established that relationships progress in a linear direction, (Payne, 1994; Ford 1980; Cram 1994) however the research findings in this study clearly indicate that when mapping and plotting the stages of the relationship based on the information received the analysis shows they move in a cyclical direction and therefore the findings do not reflect academic theory that relationships move in a linear direction. The results of the questionnaire showed that following a period of “promiscuity” or “freedom to choose” stage in seeking best value, internal customers either remained loyal and continued to use the existing service provider or had “short affairs” with an alternative provider but then returned back to using the original service provider, suggesting that the stages of a relationship move in a cyclic direction.
Suggested reasons for this behaviour are based upon the assumption that local government officers are comfortable with using in-house services, ethical considerations and the need for officers to remain accountable and transparent are all seen as forces in favour of remaining with the existing provider. Ford (1980) theorised that distances were minimised when relationships became strong, secure and long term, this research concludes that in the public sector the desire to maintain a social distance is a pre-requisite for a relationship with a private organisation in order to safeguard officers from any accusations of corruption or collaboration.

The researchers accept that this study cannot provide full clinical proof of a cyclic model but further research within the public sector context will enable writers to probe and investigate the possibility of applying a similar model to public organisations undergoing similar strategic change in procurement procedures.

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