
RELATIONSHIP MARKETING, ENGINE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE IN THE ROMANIAN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a conceptual clarification of the terms sustainable development and organisational change. It studies the role of relationship marketing for implementing these two concepts. The main objectives are the perception of the three concepts by Romanian business decision-makers and their 'sensitivity' to organisational changes, with regard to implementing the relationship marketing at company level. Information was gathered via exploratory research, using qualitative in-depth interview based on a conversation guide. The conclusions of the study prove that the interlocutors have a relatively clear knowledge of the concepts, but without making a direct connection between sustainable development and major organisational changes triggered by implementing the relationship marketing. The authors recommend the development of a system which centralises all company connections with its stakeholders, to fully capitalise on its accumulated relational capital.

Keywords: sustainable development, organisational change, relationship marketing, qualitative exploratory research

JEL Classification: Q 01; M 31.

Introduction

Sustainability is a field of major importance and complexity because it focuses on humanity's chances of survival on our planet (Meunier, 2005). The concept of sustainability appeared when people started acknowledging their aggressive impact on the environment, the limited natural resources of the planet (Edwards, 2005) and overpopulation (Meunier, 2005, Morse, 2010). First brought into discussion in 1972 at the United Nations Conference on Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, the concept gained notoriety in 1987 through the Brundtland report, 'Our Common Future'. The Commission defined sustainability as: '*... the capacity of fulfilling one's current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs*'. The report represents the beginning of the Sustainability Revolution (Edward, 2005) or the Green Revolution

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(Clark, 2010). Similarly to the Industrial Revolution, the Sustainability Revolution creates a permanent and significant shift in people's perception of the world, thus expanding its meaning to more than environmental protection (Clark 2010, Roseland, Connely, 2005, Miron, Petcu, Sobolevski, 2011).

Incorporating sustainable development in a company's policy involves organisational changes, more precisely the reorganisation of the management system, company's strategy and procedures. Organisational change can thus be defined as: *planning, designing and implementing certain processes within the company in order to promote the efficient use of the resources (sustainability), and implicitly to increase economic efficiency* (Burduş, 2008, p.18). In this context, research becomes imperative in order to clarify terms such as 'sustainability' and 'organisational change', to identify the integrating factor of these two concepts within Romanian companies and to study how these concepts are perceived by decision-makers.

The authors consider that such an integrating factor is the implementation of the *relationship marketing* vision at company level. This sheds a new light on the decisional relationship between the company and all its partners (Pop, 2006), promoting a strategic perspective, on the medium and long term, over the company development on the market. Based on this approach, the company is perceived as part of a network of relationships, which trigger and develop its daily activities, planned for the long term and aiming at sustainable development. According to Gummesson, the environmental and social changes have triggered the reevaluation of marketing concept in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. This process gave birth to the *Green Relation* – CSR, which is one of the 30 relations within a company (Gummesson, 2010). At this point, we can say that the philosophy behind relationship marketing enables the sustainable organisational change. Relations are, eventually, the foundation of human behaviour and, implicitly, of any business. Moreover the current literature use the notion of *sustainable marketing*, defined as: „...the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout” (Martin, Schouten, 2012, p.10).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the availability of company's decision-makers for organisational changes required by implementing relationship marketing. Conclusions are based on the results obtained from a qualitative exploratory research, through which the opinions of decision-makers from ten major Romanian companies were analysed with regard to the connection between implementing relationship marketing and the need for organisational changes that would contribute to the sustainable development of the companies.

1. Concept clarification

The first study on *sustainability* belongs to Vitousek et al (1986) from Stanford University (Perreira, 2012) but it was the Brundtland report 'Our Common Future', published a year later, in 1987, that brought worldwide recognition to this concept. The acknowledgement of the aggressive impact on the environment and the limited natural resources lead to the rise of a new concept: the sustainable development (Edwards, 2005, Quental, Lourenço, Nunes da Silva, 2011), classified as a new revolution, which follows the Industrial one (Edwards, 2005, Clark, 2010).

Sustainability means different things to different people. Some authors believe that the debate should not focus exclusively on the effects of CO₂ emissions and of the greenhouse phenomenon, while other effects are totally ignored (Clark, 2010, Perreira, 2012). Sustainable development should go further than the 'protection of the environment': it implies social and economic changes in order to improve people's life and at the same time to reduce the need for environmental protection (Roseland, Conelly, 2005).

From a scientific point of view, identifying the principles of sustainability can be more interesting than providing a rigid definition because these principles are more abstract and conceptual (Quental, Lourenço, Nunes da Sliva, 2011). Thus, the three authors have defined *four principles of sustainability*: the principle of the limits, the means and goals, the needs and the complexity. Jacobs (1993) has identified *three components of sustainability*: environmental issues must be clarified and strengthened through economic policies; sustainable development incorporates the dedication to social justice; development combines both a qualitative and a quantitative improvement of the environment where humanity evolves and develops itself.

International organisations publicly support sustainable development. The Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Kofi Annan, declared: 'Far from being a burden, sustainable development is an exceptional opportunity - economically speaking, to create markets and jobs; in economic terms, to improve the standard of living, and politically speaking, to provide every man and woman with a voice and a choice in deciding their own future.' (The United Nations Division of Sustainable Development in Brief, 2005)

It concludes that sustainability is not a goal, but a process (Meunier, 2005). Undoubtedly, the transition to a sustainable society is an enormous challenge, but one that we can overcome. Change happens all the time, regardless of the chosen path (Perreira, 2012).

Six theories were developed to explain the concept of *organisational change*: the evolutionary theory, the theological theory, the lifecycle theory, the dialectical theory, the social knowledge theory, and the cultural theory (Kezar, 2001, p.4). The *evolutionary theory* relies on the idea that change is the answer of the companies to external changes (Morgan, 1986). The *theological theory* dictates that leaders and decision-makers are aware of the need for change and work on achieving it. The *theory of the lifecycle models* is derived from the study of human development and focuses on the three developmental stages of a company: growth, maturity, and organisational decline (Levy and Merry, 1986). In this context, change is seen as a component of personal and organisational development. The *dialectical theory* defines change as the result of differences among the belief systems, conflicts being interpreted as inherent attributes of human interaction (Morgan, 1986). The idea behind the *knowledge theory* is that individuals recognise the need for personal and professional development through learning and thus change their behaviour accordingly (Kezar, 2001). From the perspective of the *cultural theory*, change is the result of the deterioration of the values, beliefs, myths, and rituals (Schein, 1985).

Further complicating the matter is that change is a debatable subject in the business community. *Change* has been classified by theorists as follows: *revolutionary* and *evolutionary change* (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985), *convergent* and *radical change* (Greenwood and Hinings, 1988, 1996), *leading* and *transformative change* (second level) (Mink et al., 1993), *continuous* and *radical change* (Huy, 2002), *episodic, continuous* and *discontinuous change* (McCann, 2004).

With the rise of the information age, when knowledge becomes the main resource, companies tend to migrate from traditional and inflexible structures to a dynamic organisation in which employees are no longer simple executants in the hierarchical organisation, but an active part of decision-making. This mutation is the result of a *mentality change* among both decision-makers and employees. In this context, change translates into the improvement of the management methods in order to take the leap to new structures. Organisational change is often a very profound process of complex implications: the change of the company's vision and mission, the emergence of new types of activities resulting from the new technologies, the implementation of a new management system (e.g. management by objectives) or through a different approach of the provider-customer relationship - in which case the customer becomes a partner and is perceived and treated as such. Nowadays, in addition to the factors mentioned above, companies also undergo changes due to globalisation, economic crisis, technological innovation, easy access to information, but also to the business environment which becomes more unstable and competitive (Chun-Fang, 2010).

The sustainability concept is more and more present in marketing decisions. In 2007, Chamorro, Rubio and Miranda provided a chronological overview of the concepts which brought marketing and the sustainability idea together, thus changing the development of concepts such as: *ecological marketing* (Fisk 1974, Henion and Kinnear, 1976), *green marketing* (Ottman, 1993, Smith 1998), *environmental marketing* (Coddington, 1992, Peattie 1995), and *sustainable marketing* (van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996, Fuller 1999). From all these, the last one seems the most comprehensive, being considered '... a new vision, focusing on the efficient use of resources, designed to provide the best value to consumers and other stakeholders, and taking into account long-term interests of the society and of the environment' (Cătoi et al, 2010). But the real answer to the essential need for sustainable organisational change is the radical transformation of the marketing vision and the shift from the transactional marketing to the relationship marketing. Used for the first time in scientific papers in 1983 by Professor Leonard Berry, the term of relationship marketing has increasingly become a key theme addressed by American researchers with high interest, but also by Western and Northern European or Australian and New Zealand's schools. In many papers (Gummesson et al., 1987, Bruhn, 2007, Kotler, 2008), the quoted term was opposed to transactional marketing, which mainly tries to increase the company's performance through the acquisition of new customers, without focusing on long-term customer loyalty.

The theoretical foundations of relationship marketing are based on two major ideological trends: the northern school trend, focusing on the marketing of services and promoted by the Swedish professors Ch. Grönroos (1980, 1985, 1994) and E. Gummesson (1987, 1994, 2008), and the trend given by the networking approach of marketing (B to B marketing), developed by the International Marketing and Purchasing Group - IMP (International Marketing and Purchasing Group) (Rao, Perry, 2002, p.600). Similarities and differences between the relationship marketing trends of these two schools were analysed by Mattsson (1997, pp.447-461). Regarded as a contemporary marketing practice, the analysis of this concept was also the research subject of Coviello, Brodie and Payne (1998) in the Southern Hemisphere.

In our opinion, the most comprehensive paper outlining this concept belongs to Professor Gummesson, from the School of Business at the University of Stockholm. Entitled 'Total

Relationship Marketing’, the paper also benefits from an explanatory subtitle (‘Marketing management, relationship strategy, CRM, and a new dominant logic for the value-creating network economy’) (2009). On the inside cover, Ph. Kotler states that ‘... there is no one I know who knows more about relationship marketing than Evert Gummesson.’

2. Relationship marketing and the need for organisational changes

The development of relationship marketing concept and practices was due, on one hand, to the decision of promoting strategic thinking in marketing; this way of thinking shifts from short-term decisions to medium and long term decisions. On the other hand, the main market evolution - in direct connection with: global competitive pressure (highly competitive business environment), markets globalisation, diversity of customers’ expectations and fast-pace changes of consumer’s behaviour, amid an unprecedented development of marketing communication mechanisms via electronic media - places a significant barrier to each competitor’s possibility to extensively develop its market. As a consequence, the intensive development through the retention – on a long term – of the existing customers becomes, more and more often, the main way of keeping and increasing the competitiveness of the company. This trend is explained by the definition of relationship marketing given by Gledhill (2008), which states that it ‘... is a form of marketing that focuses more on customer retention and their permanent satisfaction, rather than individual transactions’ (Gledhill, 2008, p.41).

At the core of relationship marketing we place the *interaction* between the provider and the stakeholders with whom it interacts for business. Gummesson even brings some changes to the general definition of marketing (as it was formulated in the 2004 by the American Marketing Association - the most famous authority in the world). The Swedish author states that ‘marketing is a *culture*, an organisational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value together *with the customers* and for *interacting in networks of relationships* in order to benefit the organisation, its customers and other stakeholders’ (Gummesson, 2008, p.14). Assuming that the company is ‘... a complex network of systems specialised in providing services’ (idem, pp.14-16), the author affirms that *relationship marketing is an interaction in the networks of relationships* (Relationship marketing is interaction in a network of relationships) (idem, p.5). *Relationships* always involve at least two parties (provider - beneficiary, etc.); the *network* is a set of connections among several actors, who can generate a complex web of relationships. Multiple and permanent contact among the market players generates *interaction*.

In the real action plan applied by the company on the market, if the company adopts the relationship marketing, then its strategy will have the following characteristics (Peelen et al., 2009, pp.54-55):

- the *top priority objective of the company* is catering to its customer’s needs in specific ways;
- the *dominant strategy* is to develop special relationships with the customers, without prejudice to the identity, brand image or their main markets;
- the *guiding line of the company* and its approach towards relationships require the development of the employees’ empathy to ensure mutual trust between the provider and beneficiary, the latter becoming more and more involved in product / service development;

- the *value system of the company* requires to bring the relationships with all stakeholders and, especially, with each major customer, who should be given as much satisfaction as possible, to the forefront.

Of course, such an approach (n.n. relational) triggers major structural changes within the company. In this category, we think the necessary steps are as follows:

- the *management of the interface between the company and all stakeholders* involved in running the ongoing business;
- the creation of a *database* which allows the monitoring of these relationships;
- the development of *mechanisms with continuous activity*, through which the customer is a partner of the company (for example, the management of the complaints and claims, the involvement of the customer in the innovative activities of the company);
- the creation of an *early warning system* based on a set of reporting indicators, which can capture and predict rapidly all short-term market changes.

Within the management of relationships with the stakeholders, Gummesson (2008, pp.37-39) proposes for consideration *30 relationships* grouped into four categories, as illustrated by the authors of this study in figure no. 1.

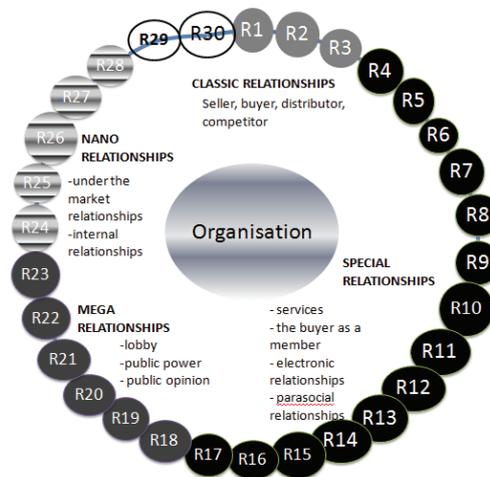


Figure no. 1: The 30 categories of the company’s relationships with its stakeholders

These four categories are as follows:

- *classical relations* (with sellers, buyers, distributors and competitors);
- *special market relationships* (with employees, investors, suppliers, customers of the customers, dissatisfied customers, electronic media relationships, parasocial, non-commercial relationships, ecological relationships or those requested by corporate social responsibility, relationships based on law, criminal relationships);
- *mega-relationships* – placed above the market relationships (personal and social relationships, relationships generating lobby, alliances and mega-alliances, relationships based on knowledge, relationships with the mass-media);

- *nano-relationships* – located at a lower level than the market (relationships inside the company, relationships with internal customers, with ESP marketing services, relationships with the business owner and the financial providers/supporters).

This perception of the marketing moves the decisional gravity centre from the traditional marketing mix (known as 4 P - from the four policies which incorporate the marketing instruments - product, price, placement and advertising) to 30 R (as Gummesson calls them), bringing together all categories of connections developed and maintained by the company with all its partners. Of course, such an interpretation of the marketing concept and action at the company level requires *changes in the hierarchical organisation*.

Change is required by both the creation and the development of a permanent *database*, whose main role is to distinctively manage the relationships with the customers, suppliers, distributors and the other categories of stakeholders (shareholders, financial providers, insurers, transporters, etc.).

If the implementation at company level of the management of complaints and objections is wanted (Jaschke, 2005; Stauss, Seidel, 2007), this approach also requires a systemic vision. This vision ensures performance from the moment of the complaint submission (or even the anticipation of it) until its final settlement and registration, as use case, of the settlement manner in the complaints database.

The development of a set of quantitative and qualitative indicators, capable to provide the company with the permanent monitoring of its relationships with the key stakeholders (customers and suppliers), also requires *organisational as well as mentality changes*, especially within the sales force.

To test the reaction of Romanian business environment towards organisational changes required by the implementation of the relationship marketing, the following qualitative exploratory method was applied. Without claiming to be representative, this research project tries to capture the *availability* to change and how this change is perceived. The organisation change option generated by implementing relationship marketing was selected to be illustrated because of the role of this new marketing practice (n.n. relational) in the sustainable development of the company.

3. The research methodology

To validate the idea that the shift from transactional marketing to the practical application of relationship marketing in the business activity requires organisational changes at this level, a qualitative research project was applied on managers of national and / or multinational companies from both the public and the private sector. The decision-makers involved in this study work for ten companies from different fields of activity (electricity, railway transportation, mobile telephony, banking, real estate and distribution of construction materials). There were three public shareholding companies and seven privately held companies.

The selection of a qualitative marketing research was motivated by the fact that changes in the organisational structure of a company are mainly qualitative. As relationship marketing implies, first of all, a mentality change of the decision-makers, such a shift requires to be investigated through a qualitative approach.

The *qualitative marketing research* studies specific phenomena and processes in a comprehensive-phenomenological way, by focusing on explanatory answers to questions like: 'Why?' and 'How?', while *quantitative studies* depend on a positivist-naturalist approach, responding primarily to questions like 'How?' (Cătoi (coord.), 2009, p.203). Precursor of the quantitative research, the qualitative research has emerged thanks the significant contribution of the psycho-sociological investigation in the second half of the twentieth century. Quantitative marketing research focuses on measurable numeric coordinates, which provide the necessary mathematical and statistical data for collective reports based on information collected from a sample. In contrast, the qualitative marketing research aims at revealing the working conditions in the market phenomena and processes, as well as their causal explanation. In terms of sample size, samples used by the quantitative studies are more numerous (in order to ensure the relevance of the information) than the samples used for the qualitative research (in order to reveal only the existence and causality of the investigated phenomena).

Qualitative marketing research is mainly *exploratory* or *analytical* (Cătoi, Teodorescu, 2003, p.191). It aims at identifying the reason behind a certain marketing action and tries to capture the causal link between the factors which determine a particular process.

The purpose of the research is to assess the availability of the interlocutors to company organisational changes, required by relationship marketing and with positive effects on the company's sustainable development efforts.

The objectives of the research were defined as follows:

- establishing how the following concepts are perceived: *sustainable development*, *organisational change* and *marketing*, as well as the importance of each of them for the company;
- determining the differentiated perception of the concept of *transactional* and *relationship marketing*, and of the connection between the latter with sustainable development;
- finding the necessity of organisational changes in order to prepare the company for the implementation of the relationship marketing.

To find the answer to these objectives, the following elements were used: method - free talk; technique - direct contact with the information carrier; instrument - semi-conducted in-depth interview (Pop (coord.), 2011, p.177). The direct contact technique, specific to the free talk method, differs from the indirect contact, which is based on projective tests or observation (Plăiaș, (coord.), 2008, pp.186-191).

The literature (Malhotra, Birks, 2008, pp.178 et seq., Weis, Steinmetz, 2008, pp.35-40; Cătoi (coord.), 2009, p.214; Lendrevie, Lévy, Lindon, 2009, p .75) recommends - for marketing research focusing on work-related issues in various fields - the face to face contact (one to one), which encourages the free monologue of the interviewee. This method complies with the *non-directional principle* (Cătoi (coord.), 2009, pp.195-196), which is characterised by the researcher's positive and unconditional attention, as well as an empathic attitude towards the interlocutor.

The research has been done using an *in-depth semi-conducted* interview. This latter feature was due to a *conversation guide* (which is not an open-question questionnaire, but a kind of

a discussion guide to be used in case the interlocutor does not address the proposed themes from his/her own initiative). An additional benefit of this instrument is that, by video-recording the interview, the researcher can analyse the nonverbal behaviour of the interviewee. During the research, a relaxed and constructive climate of honest dialogue was instated, while dichotomous responses such as 'Yes', 'No' were avoided.

To execute the research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1 – The decision-makers of the tested companies generally provide the correct meanings for the concepts of marketing, sustainable development and organisational change.

H2 – In the process of marketing implementation within a company, most of the interviewees do not make a clear distinction between the responsibilities of the supply-sales departments and the marketing department (even if differentiated organisational structures already illustrate it).

H3 – Most of the interviewees do not make a clear distinction between the transactional marketing approach and the relationship marketing approach in the businesses they run.

H4 – Interviewees from the privately held companies are more open to the implementation of relationship marketing than interviewees from the public sector companies.

H5 – In most of the cases, there is no clear view on the organisational change strategy for the implementation of the relationship marketing.

H6 - Most interviewees feel the need for organisational changes that lead to long-term development of the company.

H7 – Both categories of interviewees perceive the organisational changes required by the relationship marketing as specific, step-by-step measures and not as a result of a systemic approach.

Before starting the real dialogue with the interviewees, the conversation guide was tested via *pilot research*.

4. Results of the research

The interviewees were selected from a variety of working areas in order to provide a wide coverage of the Romanian business landscape. Despite the open and relaxed dialogue climate, most of the interviewees refrained from giving categorical answers. This was not only for personal reasons or lack of information, but mostly because they felt uncertainty about the national economy and the financial crisis that Romania is currently experiencing.

During the analysis of the answers, researchers tried to identify *keywords* used by the interlocutors for a minimal standardisation of the answers.

For the *first hypothesis* (H1) - which looked at the clarification of the three basic concepts – the *understanding of the marketing concept* was measured through the distinction between the characteristics of the classical meaning of the term (close to transactional marketing), such as: sales growth, market share growth, increase of the number of customers – and the characteristics of the modern concept of marketing (close to relationship marketing), such

as: customer orientation, consumer satisfaction, customers' long-term attachment to the company, product, brand.

With regard to *sustainable development*, efforts were made to identify the three axes (economical, social, and environmental), long-term vision and the systemic approach to this concept. In the case of *organisational change*, the elements taken into consideration were: minor changes, punctual change, major punctual change, major structural change and integrated structural change. In business slang, all three concepts were described at least partially correct - in answers such as: 'We believe that sustainability means balance between long-term and short-term objective, continuity [...]', 'our company has recently undergone change by reorganising the acquisitions department, switching to a structure of category management' or 'our marketing department has as goals the increase of sales and customer satisfaction' - which shows that *in theory these notions are familiar to the surveyed decision-makers*. The assumption H1 is confirmed.

Hypothesis H2 (most of the decision-makers do not make an operational distinction between the marketing and sales departments) is also accepted. Answers show that most of the interlocutors do not make a clear distinction between the responsibilities of the marketing and sales departments. Regardless of the company type (public or private), inside the studied companies there is no clear distinction between these two departments in the hierarchical organisation. The selected companies have at least 100 employees, which creates expectations regarding internal organisation, and answers like 'No necessarily, rather not sure what this quote means' or 'Marketing has a limited perception within the company, since it is rather seen as an internal function of the commercial area' to the question 'Is there a clear distinction between the sales and the marketing departments?' are certainly alarming, especially in today's economic environment. For example, in the case of service providers, the role of the sales forces, which is subordinated to the sales department, to prospect the market is very faint and sporadic without the existence of specific duties included in the job descriptions.

Surprisingly, the hypothesis H3 about the distinction - in theory - between transactional marketing and relationship marketing was rejected. Testing this hypothesis was achieved by means of dichotomies which characterise the two concepts, cited in the literature (Peelen et al., 2009, p.25; Kotler et al., 2009, p.52, Levens, 2012, pp.75-77), such as: short term objectives versus medium and long term objectives; market-oriented versus customer-oriented; undifferentiated marketing versus customised marketing; monologue about the brand supported by advertising versus ongoing dialogue with the customers; extensive development of the market versus intensive development of the market. Answers like 'the customer is the reason we exist', 'we develop loyalty and customer dialogue programs' or 'development aims at creating long term relationships with current customers' show that the principles of the relationship marketing are acknowledged by the interviewees. While theoretical concepts are not yet clearly crystallised for the surveyed decision-makers, none of them fails to mention how important the customer relationships are on the long term. Clear theoretical delimitation of the relationship marketing concept is the *premise* from which to start with practical implementation. But, additionally, major decision-makers from the top management should also be willing to support this endeavour.

To examine the hypothesis H4, there were set five key elements considered to define the relationship marketing: long-term objectives, customer orientation, customised marketing,

permanent dialogue with the customer, intensive development. The interlocutors from private companies mentioned more frequently these objectives as their daily priorities as compared to interlocutors from public companies. From answers such as: 'A long-term relationship means mutual respect and trust, which increase our future business potential with that client', it could be observed that the interlocutors understand that customer orientation and customer loyalty are essential. For example: '... we try to get in our customers' shoes in order to find the best answers to their needs and make them return to us' (statement of one of the interviewees). Both categories of interlocutors were asked to give examples of how the elements considered by the authors defining for relationship marketing reflected in the marketing activity of their companies. Again, the responses from the private sector were more convincing than those from the public sector. All these considerations led the authors to *accept hypothesis H4*.

Hypothesis H5 aims to test the lack of a clear vision regarding the implementation of the organisational change, which is required by relationship marketing. This change includes: *managing the interface between the organisation and all stakeholders*, structuring a *database* for monitoring these relationships, the customer should be treated as a *partner* (for example, the management of the complaints and claims, the involvement of the customer in the innovative activities of the company, etc.) and *a set of reporting indicators*, which can capture and predict rapid corporate changes. These elements were not brought into discussion extensively by any of the ten interlocutors. Consequently, the hypothesis H5 is accepted.

The need for organisational changes leading to long-term company development is felt by most of the interviewees, as anticipated in the hypothesis H6. The need for change is expressed either directly by interviewees or in the context of the exposed problems. The interlocutors' answers referring to '*strategic inconsistency*' or '*visible involvement of the academic forum in the development of the private sector*' demonstrate the need for organisational changes for long-term development. But although the human resources of private companies are more receptive to change, subordination mechanisms restrict the change, without the consent of central management (the 'mother' company). Inside public companies, there is a significant desire for change and for the relaxation of the system, but legislation and inflexible structures limit the possibility to work towards sustainable development. From the perspective of one of the public companies' representative, '*new legislative changes bring radical changes in the working approach, with consequences that are hard to predict on the long term*'. Without directly expressing it, a feeling of fear – of different degrees – can be identified at all interlocutors with regard to organisational changes, especially when no immediate positive economic results are foreseen.

By its nature relationship marketing requires changes as a result of a systemic approach, for the companies included in our research this translates into specific actions. As anticipated, the hypothesis H7 is confirmed. We noticed that the meaning of relationship marketing is known at the conceptual level, but only partially used at the operational level. Decision-makers are willing and try to give priority, on the long term, to customer relationship in all their actions. Upon request to rank the stakeholders of the company by their importance, one interlocutor summed up very well the intention of the majority, by answering: '*customers, customers, and customers.*' This answer shows that the surveyed interlocutors from the private or public sector understand the importance of the customer, but not all of them know or are not able to implement actions leading to long-term connections with the

customer, based on a systemic view, integrated into the company hierarchical organisation. Their approach is ‘one step at a time’, targeted mainly to improvement and not to a radical qualitative change.

To view the position of the ten companies included in the study, a matrix was used. It correlates the relationship between *openness to change* and *openness to implement relationship marketing*. Figure no. 2 shows the result.

The qualitative research allowed us to identify four distinct types of organisational behaviour, by following two criteria simultaneously: openness to change - located on the abscissa in the axis system, and implementation of relationship marketing - located on the ordinate. The placement of each company in one of the identified categories is based on the analysis of the interlocutors’ answers. To implement relationship marketing, the five key elements considered essential for this process (see hypothesis H4), and which formed the basis of an ordinal scale, were once again the starting point. Interlocutors who would have opted for all five elements could have been placed on a ‘very strong’ position. In opposition, at the other end of the scale is the ‘very poor’ position, consisting of the interlocutors who have not mentioned any of the elements. Openness to change was also evaluated by means of the same ordinal scale. Interlocutors who would have opted for structural change based on all items listed in H5 could have been tagged as ‘very strong’, while those who have not mentioned any of the elements – ‘very poor’.

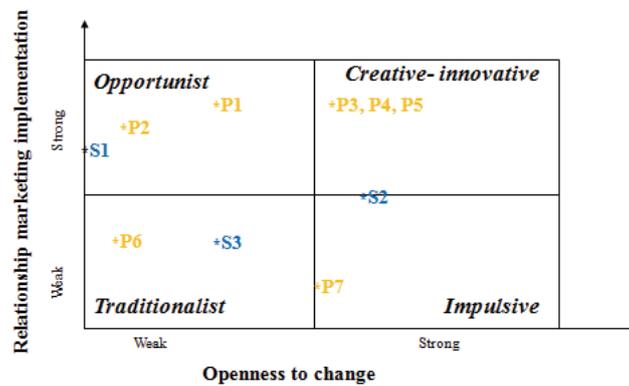


Figure no. 2 - Matrix of relationship marketing implementation versus openness to organisational changes

Four types of companies resulted upon this classification: traditionalist - when the company has a weak openness to change and to the implementation of relationship marketing, opportunist - the company promotes a strong implementation of relationship marketing, but is not so open to change; impulsive – strong openness to change, but not accompanied by the implementation of relationship marketing within the company; creative-innovative - both openness to change and implementation of relationship marketing are top priorities of the company. Using the ordinal five-step scale (from 1 - very poor, to 5 - very strong) for each of the two dimensions of the matrix (relationship marketing implementation and openness to change), we managed to rank the ten companies studied (see figure no. 2). Public companies were designated with S1 - S3 and private companies with P1 - P7. Three of the latter (from the retail, IT and advertising areas) were placed in the creative-

innovative section, which proves the existence of certain willingness for organisational change by adopting the concept of relationship marketing. Such an approach creates the *prerequisites* for the *sustainable development* of these companies. Of course, this representation is not to be generalised, because it is based on an exploratory qualitative research. It can be interpreted as a positioning matrix for a future quantitative study, through which authors seek to reach statistic conclusions regarding the Romanian business environment.

Conclusions

The exploratory qualitative research established some conclusions about how business decision-makers perceive the significance and the role of relationship marketing in the increase of the performance and competitiveness of the companies they represent. The concepts under discussion (sustainable development, organizational change, relationship marketing) are relatively clearly defined, without precious academic expressions in the interviewees' speech, which is a positive thing among practitioners. Surprisingly, the research showed a *pretty weak connection* between sustainable development and organisational changes required by the implementation of relationship marketing within the companies. Change is understood by almost all interlocutors as *punctual and not systemic*. They do not find major system changes necessary within the company. The authors believe that the implementation of relationship marketing undoubtedly requires organisational and structural changes within the company. The main argument is the systemic vision and the need to integrate and not 'to attach' new organisational structures, possibly giving up some elements of the old structures. Consequently, it is necessary to *build a system of relationship activities* within the company in order to turn the concept of relationship marketing into an *operational mechanism* with positive effects on stakeholders and on the company itself. This mechanism should include a database of stakeholders, consisting of key positions such as the database of customers and the database of suppliers. Distinct organisational structures may also generate activities such as complaints and claims management and internal marketing. In this respect, it would be interesting to develop a pilot experiment - conducted over a year – having as subject companies from Romanian business environment which are open to test these structures and to assess the effects on their economic performances.

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