"Trust" in Customer Relationship: Addressing the Impediments in Research

JOFFI THOMAS, INDIA

Trust has been recognized as “…the single most powerful relationship marketing tool available to a company.” However, research on trust has neither facilitated knowledge integration in the domain nor had made significant implications for practice. This article (i) synthesizes various studies employing trust to model customer relationships (ii) reveals issues in trust conceptualization and modelling that impede advances in trust research and (iii) offers directions to address those issues in - trust conceptualisation, treatment of trust and trustworthiness, dimensions of trust worthiness, trust facets, and modelling of antecedents of trust – drawing insights from interdisciplinary trust research.

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Joffi Thomas, IIIM Kozhikode

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Trust is a key feature of any relationship and research on “trust” has significant implications for marketing theory and practice. It can help marketing discipline adopt the relationship-marketing paradigm to understand customers and apply relationship perspective in managing customers, in practice. Further, trust research can contribute to theoretical advances in related research domains in marketing by (i) addressing the inadequacies in customer satisfaction tool (ii) offering insights into understanding and measuring attitudinal loyalty (iii) identifying the antecedents of brand equity and (iv) furthering research in integrated marketing communications.

Although trust as a concept/construct has received increased attention in the last two decades in marketing discipline, research on trust in customer relationship suffers from two major limitations; (i) It has not led to the integration of knowledge / understanding gained across different studies and (ii) It has few implications to practice. The objective of this article is to unearth the underlying causes for this state of affairs and suggest possible ways to address them.

An in-depth and integrative review of the trust studies1 revealed that lack of consensus in conceptualization, operationalization and modeling of trust are impeding the advancement of trust research (Gounaris and Venetis 2002). The article offers directions for modeling trust in customer relationships for addressing the impediments in trust research by drawing insights from trust research in the disciplines of economics, psychology and sociology. The review of “trust studies” and directions for trust research organized around five themes is explained below.

(i) Conceptualization of Trust

Trust has been conceptualized as belief, expectation, intention and behaviour across trust studies. Further, trust has been defined both as belief and behavioral intention; belief and expectation as belief, sentiment, and expectation; and as expectation and behaviour in other studies. There is also a need to delineate trust from the related constructs of confidence, predictability and security (Blois 1999). The lack of consensus in trust makes it difficult to compare findings across different studies and to improve our understanding of the construct for modeling customer relationships. This is a key impediment to knowledge cumulation in the area. Trust is a psychological state of having positive intentions and behaviours towards an entity in an interaction characterized by uncertainty. The definition of trust as expectancy can separate trust from its behavioural aspects as well as the antecedents and consequences of trust. The article makes a call to adopt the “expectancy conceptualization” of trust as it separates trust from its antecedents and consequences.

(ii) Treatment of trust and trustworthiness

The conceptualization of trust in relationship marketing tends to measure trustworthiness rather than trust, the exception being studies by Smith and Barclay 1997 and Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002. While trust is a feature of the relationship, trustworthiness is a characteristic of the trustee. The differentiation of trust and trustworthiness can facilitate research in identifying antecedents of trust in different contexts. This can make trust research relevant to practice.

(iii) Entities in the relationship and trust facets

While majority of the reviewed trust studies model only one facet of trust, a few studies have also considered trust in two facets. Recent studies in the consumer goods context have considered trust in brands, but they have not explicitly considered trust in the corporate brand or trust in the customer interface. There are three entities in a customer relationship: viz. the firm, which provides the product/service (corporate brand), the product/service (product brand), and the company / service provider personnel (customer interface) who interacts with the customer. Future studies should explicitly recognize and/or model the effects of corporate brand trust, product brand trust and customer interface trust in customer relationship.

(iv) Dimensions of trust and trustworthiness used

The review of trust studies reveals that majority of the studies have incorporated the generic trustworthiness dimensions of ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al. 1995; McKnight et al. 2002) in the model in at least one of the three stages: (i) in defining trust (ii) in the items used in operationalizing trust or (iii) in the items used for operationalizing antecedents of trust. Further, many trust studies, which do not explicitly consider the three generic dimensions of trust in conceptualization or in the measurement stage have implicitly captured them in the other antecedents of relationship outcomes included in the relationship model. This makes a strong case to consider the three generic trustworthiness dimensions in future trust studies and to use them as a starting point for conceptualizing and operationalizing trust.

(v) Antecedents of trust

Although there is consensus in the nature and significance of the trust in modeling relationships across studies, different sets of antecedents to trust and relationship consequences are considered in trust studies. The use of different theoretical frameworks in modelling relationship explains the use of different sets of antecedents. Musgrave and Anniss 1996 have identified the four dimensions of relationship: operations, control, structure, and emotion. Modeling the antecedents and consequences of trust in a relationship requires that the factors affecting the operations, control, and structure of the relationship be recognized while modeling relationships.

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1 “Trust studies” refers to empirical studies in relationship marketing that employ “trust” to model customer relationships.
The trust construct can be separated from its antecedents and consequences by conceptualizing it as an expectancy of positive outcomes and the recognizing trustworthiness evaluation as a distinct construct. The use of generic dimensions of trustworthiness is expected to enable knowledge integration and cumulation across different studies. Modeling the three trust facets separating trust and trustworthiness constructs has the potential to make trust research more relevant to practice. Explicit attention to the four dimensions of a relationship viz. structure, control, interactions and emotion can help in identifying the key antecedents in modeling customer relationships. These suggestions to address the five conceptualization and modeling issues are expected to facilitate knowledge cumulation and integration of trust studies, and make trust research more relevant to practice.

REFERENCES

1 “Trust studies” refers to empirical studies in relationship marketing that employ “trust” to model customer relationships.
2 “Studies” are not cited due to space constraints.
Keller, Kevin Lane (2001), Building Customer-Based Brand Equity” Marketing Management, 10 (July/August)14-19.


