

The Effects of Recession on B2B Loyalty

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The paper discusses the results of a research made in a Central European country. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to explore whether loyalty exists in the B2B markets, if yes, which are its most important dimensions, and how they have changed due to the recession. The survey unanimously proved that the recession has divided the reactions of the organizations in terms of loyalty. As far as the personal relations are concerned the results of the research showed certain contradictions: the interviews indicated an increasing importance of the personal relation in the time of recession, this phenomenon was however not totally supported by the results of the questionnaire survey.

INTRODUCTION

The relations among organizations represent interactions with the goal of utilizing mutual advantages. While exploring the most important factors of inter organizational relations researches have focused mainly on perceived quality, satisfaction, trust, commitment (Morgan – Hunt, 1994), and fairness (Ganesan, 1994, Jambulingam et.al., 2011), but only few have raised the question whether loyalty exists on the B2B market and if yes, what are its features (Costabile, 2000, Rauyruen et.al. 2005). Many researchers refuse the existence of loyalty in the inter organizational contacts saying that the main objectives of an organization operating in the market are profit making and achieving growth, and since the notion of loyalty includes certain emotional commitment, there is no place of it here, so there is nothing to research on. In spite of these views both in theoretical and empirical researches there recently have been some clues, which indicate that there is place for researching on loyalty in the B2B context, there is a need for working on its definition and exploring its indicators. These researches have claimed that loyalty can be interpreted among the actors of the B2B market, and it is also possible to define it through different dimensions (Rauyruen et.al. 2005, Čater – Čater 2010). If the fact is accepted that loyalty exists in the organizational market, it is worthwhile to investigate how inter organizational relations have been altered by the economic recession, how handling of these relations has changed and in summary how the understanding of loyalty has been modified by the crisis.

The first part of the study discusses the theoretical background of the topic then it will list the hypothesis of the field research and will show the methodology of it. At the end the paper will summarize those dilemmas in terms of the determining factors of loyalty which have been influenced by the crisis of 2008 and which naturally inspire further research in this field.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical and empirical analysis of inter-organizational relationships has gained priority in the past twenty years in fields like strategic management, innovation management and also in marketing. The basic value drivers affecting the success of inter-organizational relationships have been more or less revealed already. Researchers dealing with inter-organizational relationships are focusing more on the analysis of change, formation and manageability of these values.

The significance of relationship marketing has also opened new directions in B2B markets. Research emphasizing the essence of relationship marketing has actually begun with the analysis of B2B markets (Hakansson – Osteberg, 1975, Ford, 1980, Morgan – Hunt, 1994), but the theories of psychology (Thibaut – Kelley, 1959), economic sociology (Granovetter, 1992) and social networks (Burt – Minor, 1982, Burt, 1992) have also considerably influenced the defining of the long-term relationships determinants.

To summarize the different approaches of the inter-organizational relations on the B2B market it is to conclude that the different researches included the following characteristics of stable, long-term relationships: perceived quality, satisfaction, commitment, trust, fairness. Nowadays there is a trend to deal with the role of personal relationships in this context, and to make loyalty researches on the B2B relations. In the following an overview is given about the different approaches of the dimensions of these relations.

Different Approaches of Dimensions of B2B Relationships

The definition of partner **loyalty** in organizational contacts is more sophisticated than in B2C relations. Among the theoretical models Costabile's dynamic model, which analyzes the phases of loyalty development is worth mentioning (Costabile, 2000). Some researchers' differentiate between behavioral and attitudinal loyalties and their results show that among the various factors the trust and the commitment (which can be affective or calculative) are in strong relation with loyalty (Rauyruen et al. 2005, Čater – Čater 2010).

Co-operation presupposing mutuality is relevant in long term relations. Researches prove that attitude for co-operation depends on level of the **satisfaction** experienced through the set of transactions (Anderson & Narus, 1984, 1990).

Some authors (Hennig-Thuaru – Klee, 1997) analyse the effect of customer satisfaction and **relationship quality** in retaining customers. The central components of such a model are customer satisfaction, relationship quality, and their effect in retaining customer (on loyalty). In this model relationship quality can affect loyalty through commitment and trust but the effect is not unambiguous. In buyer-seller relationship **commitment** is defined as a kind of willingness of partners to maintain a continuous relationship with each other (Dwyer et al., 1987), in more simple words, commitment means that the involved parties are motivated to maintain the relationship (Moorman et al., 1992). Commitment has been divided into three components by Meyer and Allen (Meyer – Allen, 1991). The first component is an input expressing the fact that parties make some investments used only for the given relation. The second is a kind of attitude showing emotional commitment towards each other, and the third expresses the time dimension of the relation, that is their commitment stands only if both parties think in long term. In another approach Geyskens and Steenkamp created a two-components model: the first expressing how much parties want to maintain the relation, and the second relates to the rational of the relation – where not emotions but sound math makes the relation necessary (Geyskens – Steenkamp, 1995). According to Morgan and Hunt trust and commitment are important dimensions in successful relationships (Morgan – Hunt, 1994). In B2B relationships, commitment signifies a psychological attachment as well, which can also be defined as a “permanent desire to maintain an important relationship” (Costabile, 2000).

Organizations attract customers with promises, whilst customers' decisions are based on the **trust** that the given company will satisfy their needs. To develop commitment trust is needed, the first step of which is “advanced trust” based on perceived factors (Singh – Sirdeshmukh, 2000, Vollmer et al., 2000). Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) treat trust as a critical factor of the transition from discrete market transactions to

steady relationships. The trust factor also plays a determining role in Costabile's (2000) dynamic model and according to him neither monadic nor dyadic loyalty can develop without trust.

In addition to the above factors, several studies deal with the role of **personal relations** in the analysis of inter-organizational relationships. Empirical researches prove the importance of personal relations, e.g. as the appreciated contact person moves to a new organization, the partner also leaves the supplier and they buy from the contact person's new company (Lindgreen, 2000, Reynolds – Beatty, 1999). Andersen and Kumar's (2006) researches highlight that the absence of a positive human relation hinders the development, moreover, often the maintenance of the relationship. Other authors' studies emphasize that personal relations can also have a considerable role in resolving conflict situations (Gedeon – Fearne, 2009).

According to others the role of **fairness** is also very important. Perception of fairness and parity is based on evaluation of inputs and outputs of the given exchange and if the rate is acceptable it can effect satisfaction positively. Low parity perception may evoke the feeling of opportunism in the partner, but if fairness and mutuality exist it may however not hurt satisfaction. Short term sacrifices may be compensated by long term fairness (Huppertz et.al., 1978, Swan – Mercer, 1981, Ganesan, 1994). Others studied the mediating role of trust as a governing mechanism in the fairness-loyalty relationship in the different structures of interdependence between suppliers and buyers. The results showed fairness and trust influence loyalty, strengthening relationships in different ways under different conditions of interdependence (Jambulingam et.al., 2011).

EMPIRICAL RESEARCHES

The next part of this paper describes the empirical researches conducted in a Central European country. The main aim of these researches was to explore whether loyalty exists in the B2B markets; which are its most important dimensions, and how they have changed due to the recession.

Before making the field research it was necessary to define the main notions. Loyalty was defined as follows: a loyal partner is committed to the company she is striving for long term relations, she is staying with the company in spite of smaller dissatisfactions and smaller price discounts offered by the competitors, besides the loyal partner recommends the company to others.

Crisis and recession used as synonyms were defined as the period of general economic decline, marked by high unemployment, stagnant wages, and fall in retail sales. Since no theoretical model has been found in the literature about the effect of recession on loyalty the Hungarian research was carried out in two phases. A pilot study was elaborated to explore the dimensions of partner loyalty in 2010. The aim of the second phase was to investigate the effects of recession on loyalty. This part of the research was made in 2011 and 2012.

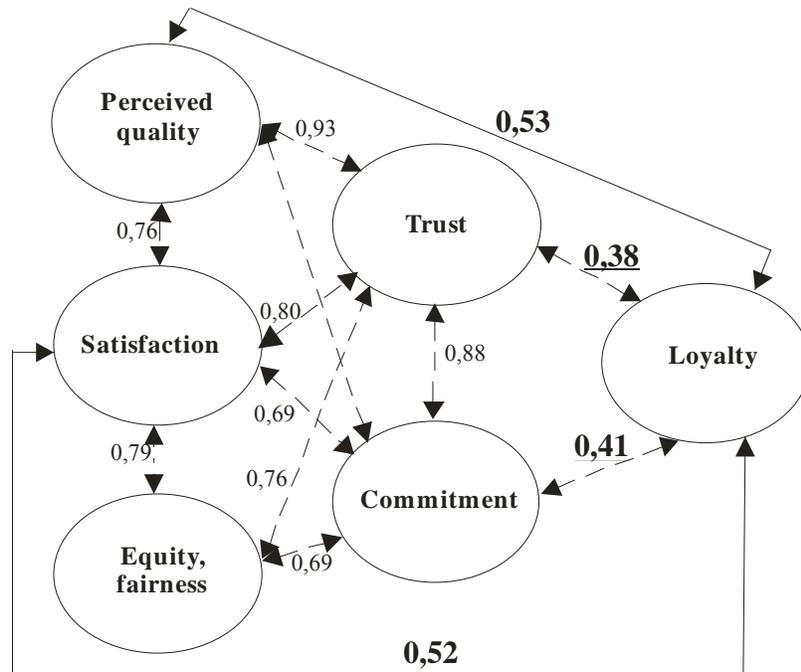
The Pilot Study

The main aim of the pilot study was to explore the dimensions of B2B loyalty and the correlation between these dimensions. Few studies have examined the relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction (Hennig-Thuaru and Klee, 1997), between fairness and loyalty (Jambulingam et.al., 2011), or between trust and loyalty in the buyer–supplier context (Schurr – Ozanne, 1985, Rauyruen, 2005, Čater – Čater 2010). Our hypotheses were the following:

- There is a correlation between perceived quality, satisfaction, trust and commitment.
- Satisfaction correlates with trust and commitment.
- Moreover correlation can be found between fairness, trust and commitment.
- Trust and commitment highly correlate with loyalty.

The interviews were conducted face to face, and the questionnaire analysis involved only 20 respondents from different sectors. The results are shown in the following figure (Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1
THE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE DIMENSIONS



The correlation values showed, that the main hypothesis was not verified. Correlations presumed before have not been found significant but some significant correlations have been found that were not presumed earlier. The earlier hypotheses could not be confirmed, because the correlation between loyalty, trust and commitment was very low and not significant.

The analysis of the results supported the presumption that the recession had altered the roles of trust and commitment in loyalty. The second phase of the research aimed to verify these presumptions.

The Effect of Recession on B2B Loyalty

The second stage of the research was conducted from 2011 to 2012 in Hungary. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Qualitative Study

The aim of the qualitative research was to understand how people interpreted loyalty and to find out how recession had affected loyalty.

The qualitative research was planned in two phases. First a focus group discussion was conducted with contact persons from different organizations. Although only eight people participated in this discussion, among them there were two from multinational firms, and the others represented medium and small enterprises (business). After the focus group 27 in-depth interviews were made in three steps. Firstly there were five interviews with the customers of a chemical company which was not really touched by the recession, secondly 16 interviews were made with leading managers in different industries, and thirdly six discussions were carried out with the key account managers of a leasing company suffering deeply from the recession.

The Results of the Qualitative Research

According to all participants of the qualitative research loyalty does exist in inter-organizational relations. Interesting result of the focus group and in depth interviews was that behavioral loyalty (rebuying) had not been mentioned. Another interesting result of focus group discussion was that there was a considerable difference between the opinion of buyers and suppliers, and we also found some differences of opinions of big and small companies in the issue of loyalty. According to interviews loyalty in B2B relationship was perceived as an endeavor to maintain relations, and as the main indicator of this “trust” was mentioned. The development of trust is a long process, in which the partners (customers or suppliers) prove their reliability, correctness, and fair behavior. Keeping personal relations also proved to be an important factor of trust. Beside attitudinal and affective loyalty the notion of calculative loyalty has emerged. It means that the partners consider emotional loyalty as an investment. As far as the recession is concerned, the respondents could be classified into three groups: those who refuse loyalty, those who are uncertain, and those who are supporting loyal relation also in recession. **Refusers** argued that profit was the only driving force in recession; there is no place for emotions („*Emotional factor is negligible in recession. Trust in our partner is useless, at the given moment everybody is interested in money*”). The **uncertains** tended to maintain relations but they did not know what would happen in the future, so they did not trust in the partners or even not in themselves („*Nowadays we have close relationships with our customers but the question is: whether we survive the crises or not?*”). The **loyals** on the contrary believed that they could survive together better than alone, so both parties could benefit from mutual loyalty. According to them trust and fairness is even more valued in recession, giving the feeling that they can count on the partners („*Loyalty is based on trust in times of crisis, people help each other, they are stronger together!*”). They thought that personal relationships were intensified in these times, and even top managers participated in the personal meetings („*Successful business needs „friends” instead of business partners since the crisis.*”).

The results of qualitative research were contradictory, that is why a quantitative research was planned to control the qualitative results.

The Quantitative Research

In the next phase of the research an on-line questionnaire was sent out to the contact persons of 1265 different companies. Although reminding letters were sent out every two weeks the respond rate was rather low: altogether 130 questionnaires were completed. The sample was representative in terms of the number of employees and of the revenue, the distribution of the sample according to the industry branches however was only near to that of the basic pool.

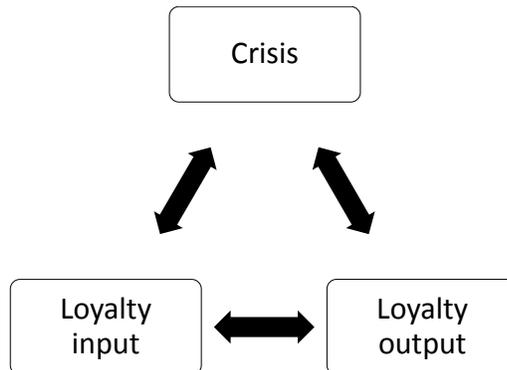
Questions and Method

The quantitative research aimed to explore three issues:

1. The opinion of the respondents about their own loyalty to her company’s largest supplier.
2. The influencing dimensions of loyalty both on customer and supplier side.
3. The changes of loyal attitude due to recession.

The rationale of the survey can be illustrated with a triangle model (Figure 2.).

**FIGURE 2
THE TRIANGLE MODEL**



According to the triangle model three issues had to be evaluated:

1. The output side of loyalty through the evaluation of the relation with the best supplier.
2. The input side of the loyalty through the evaluation of relations of suppliers and buyers.
3. The effect of recession on partner contacts.

The responses were measured with a Likert scale of 1 to 6 where the higher number indicated a better agreement with the statements.

RESULTS

The distribution of the responses was analyzed with the Friedman test, and the reliability of the scales was measured with Cronbach's alfa. Besides doing factor analysis the relations among factors were analyzed by a correlation model.

By analyzing the data of the 130 questionnaires the following result were obtained. 58% of the respondents answered, that there were some changes in the relations with the buyers after the crisis, about one-tenth is the number of those who felt a change on the supplier's side, and only 30% reported no change at all.

The Opinion of the Respondents about Their Own Loyalty to Her Company's Largest Supplier

The loyalty was measured with the well-known classical scales published also in the literature (Gronholdt et.al., 2000, Čater – Čater 2010).

**TABLE 1
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BEST SUPPLIERS' RELATIONS**

Items	Mean rank
We stay with our partner if the price is the same, however the competitors offer slightly better other conditions	4.36
We used to recommend our partner to others	4.12
We stick to our supplier even in case of smaller mistakes	3.70
We stick to our partner in spite of the little bit better prices of the competitors	3.64
We co-operate with our partner in different fields of business	3.41
We stay with our partner even if the prices of the competitors are much better	1.78

The distribution and the Friedman test ($p < 0.05$) showed that the respondent would stick to their best supplier even in case of smaller mistakes or little bit higher price. In case of higher price difference only 30% would maintain relation with its main supplier. 41% of the respondents totally agree with the statement that they used to recommend the supplier to others. The value of Cronbach's alfa was in this case 0.718, which shows that all the statements of the scale have a significant positive relation with the total sum of the points.

What factors influence loyalty? The results of dimensions of loyalty show (Table 2. and Table 3.) that trust, commitment and reliability are important for loyalty on both side, on the supplier's side and also on the buyer's side.

**TABLE 2
THE DIMENSIONS OF LOYALTY IN THE SUPPLIERS' SIDE**

Items	Mean rank
If they promise something we know they will do their best to keep it	4.90
They will never let us down when we are in trouble	4.30
We can trust their discretion (secrecy)	4.26
The partners treat each other as (an) equal	3.90
They would always tell the truth	3.64
I like to collaborate with the colleagues of the partner organization	3.60
We have a positive attitude towards (together) the partners even in case of newer mistake	3.40

**TABLE 3
THE DIMENSIONS OF LOYALTY IN THE BUYERS' SIDE**

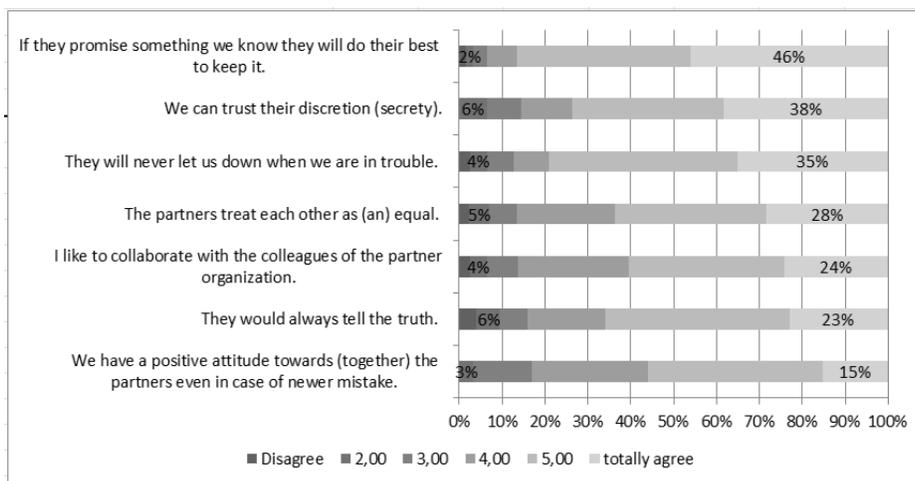
Items	Mean rank
They will never let us down when we are in trouble	4.56
If they promise something we know they will do their best to keep it	4.40
We can trust their discretion (secrecy)	4.01
The partners treat each other as (an) equal	3.95
I like to collaborate with the colleagues of the partner organization	3.84
We have a positive attitude towards (together) the partners even in case of newer mistake	3.69
They would always tell the truth	3.55

On supplier side the share of the mostly agrees answers on the questions of meeting the promises, confidentiality, truthfulness, and fairness is at least 80%; while on the customer side of these answers on the questions of trust and fairness is at least 75% each. The value of Cronbach's alfa was in this case 0.886.

FIGURE 3
THE DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS ON THE SUPPLIER'S SIDE



FIGURE 4
THE DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS ON THE BUYER'S SIDE



The value of Cronbach's alfa in case of these questions was 0.896.

How recession has influenced B2B loyalty? For measuring the effect of recession on B2B loyalty there were no studies publishes so far, so a new scale had to be created. The Cronbach's alfa in this case was 0.78. The distribution and the Friedman test ($p < 0,05$) showed that the respondent shared the view that it was easier to overcome problems together with partners than alone. Price offers have become more important, price competition has increased, and many tried to make benefit from the deteriorated position of others. 75% of the respondents agreed that co-operation could help to overcome recession problems. The share of those who fully agreed was 48%, while 31% fully agreed with the statement that it would be incorrect to change partner just for short time advantages. The distributions also showed the conditions of business relations had become more severe (31% fully agreed with that statement).

With the help of factor analysis eight factors were identified:

- loyalty
- uncertainty

- quality control
- procurement price rationalization
- rationality
- willingness to change partner
- service quality
- business interest.

Some of these factors are worthwhile to feature: loyalty, uncertainty, and endeavor to rationalize. The factor *loyalty* is composed of items like fairness, trust, and co-operation each with high eigenvalues. The factor of *uncertainty* is composed of elements like defenselessness, severe conditions, unpredictability; whereas the factors of *quality control*, *price rationalization* and *rationality* can be described with items of efficiency, profit, and price war.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS

The results of the qualitative and quantitative research proved that the actors of the B2B market interpret the notion of loyalty; they identify it as an endeavor for durable, long term relationships. The results harmonize with the findings of the international researches (Rauyrueen et.al., 2005, Čater – Čater, 2010, Jambulingam et.al., 2011) in terms of the most important dimensions of loyalty. These are: trust, commitment and reliability. Summarizing the results is fair enough to state, that loyalty exists during the recession, but it is characterized by some uncertainty and more rationality. The focus group, the in-depth interviews and the questionnaire survey unanimously proved that the recession has divided the reactions of the organizations in terms of loyalty. The results of the quantitative research also called the attention to the fact that loyalty could exist in time of recession. In these times uncertainty, rationalizations and cost reductions became important and price and quality gain in importance. As far as the personal relations are concerned, the results of the research showed certain contradictions: the interviews indicated an increasing importance of personal relations during the recession; this phenomenon was however not totally supported by the results of the questionnaire survey.

The limitations of the research can be detected in the small size of the sample and in its regional scope. It would be interesting to extend the investigations to an international level, and to study how the role of personal contact will change in the future.

TABLE 4
THE MAIN FACTORS

Elements	loyalty	uncertainty	quality control	price rationalization	rationality	change of partners	service quality	business interest
It would be unfair to switch partner because of the crisis	0.855							
We try to be loyal to our old partners	0.785							
We stick together tighter with our partners	0.707							
Price advantage lasts for only limited time	0.680							
I have to be loyal to my partners in order to expect our customers to stay loyal to me	0.572							
It's easier to cope with the difficulties with well proven partners	0.522							
Some of the partners are in a defenseless situation		0.825						
The general market trust diminished		0.769						
The partners are making stricter standards		0.578						
During a crisis personal relations come to the front		0.502						
Quality control is more frequent during crisis			0.843					
Quality standards are stricter			0.656					
Crisis is about rationalizing				0.828				
Price advantage is critical during crisis				0.687				
Prices come to the front because of the crisis				0.621				
Price war became more important					0.794			
Efficiency became more important					0.720			
We switch partners frequently						0.624		
Frequent partner switching affects the product/service quality							0.842	
We established a cooperated system with our partners in order to reduce costs							0.504	
Many companies exploit their partners								0.838
The crisis changed the partner relationships								0.597

(KMO=0.643; explained variance 67.6%)

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