

THE USE OF CRM IN PUBLIC RELATIONS WORK OF PRIVATE SECTOR IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Customer Relationship Management or CRM seems to be part of oriental culture, rooted in its traditional trading style. This research aim to study CRM practiced in private sectors specifically in Thailand. Also, intend to study their customer's satisfaction and loyalty. Research methodologies are In-Depth Interview to get insight about CRM practice of 14 Private Sectors (7 service based and 7 merchandise based businesses) and Focus Group with 16 individuals, age between 20 to 25 and 26 to 30, intend to evaluate customer's preference.

All private sectors agree that CRM is very important to their organization. Some organizations such as DTAC, AIS, TRUE and Siam Commercial Bank, value this strategy and include CRM into their policy. They believe customers can "feel" this intangible offering and promise, thus organization highly value this aspect. These result in various customer activities, event and sales promotion. They use more active CRM strategies in order to win customers' hearts. Each company has common practicing of setting up a subdivision respond to CRM; developing and managing customer databases; creating a customer segmentation system; and conducting evaluation of CRM.

Although the finding shows 14 organizations perceive that they are successful in term of CRM. However, assessment of customer's opinion towards CRM seems to be on a contrary. Customers; however, are not always value CRM activities, seeing this as a hidden agenda and sometimes – insincere and irritation. What they value the most are reasonable price, usefulness, and good service by the company. Their preferences and repurchasing depends on how the companies respond to their need and the satisfaction with the product or service. What they prefer the most is a "privilege" to purchase at cheaper price than other.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been part of Asian-style trade for a long time, blending well with the culture. Traders are not only deliver goods and service to satisfy their customers, but naturally establish a deep relationship with them. A grocer keeper; for example, know all of her clients well and sometimes offer advices as any good family's friend will do.

CRM, the strategic communication intends to reach out and gain solid affection from patrons, has become part of worldwide business trend. Though the idea was conceived in Western continent, arise of globalization has brought it to Asian business world. Following the worldwide economic recession that critically affects Thailand, Thai private sectors have begun to shift from heavily invest on short-term sale driven campaign to something that will establish a last-long customer loyalty; hence, the adoption of CRM into their policy. Maximizing profit and market share;

therefore, are not their only concern. It's the life-long relationships with customers, which will support them over time and crises.

Philip Kotler said *cost of finding a new customer is 5 time of maintaining an old customer*. Marketers need to create a strategy and tools to maintain good relations with their existed client. Sales volume is not the ultimate accomplishment; it's the solid customer loyalty towards brand and company. Committed customers are valuable to company as they usually spread positive words to other customers and company's potential clients. They also act as voice against negative comments, protect and support the company they favor. (Philip Kotler :2000)

Market rules by "buyers". As they become more careful of purchasing, they have plenty of alternatives and information of each complete brands and outlets. Winner in competitive national and international market must possess more than the best and unique product/service; they possess customer's affection and loyalty. They also need support from other stakeholders (such as employees, suppliers, press, communities and government bodies). CRM strategy can help businesses to achieve this relations and favor.

This research intends to study the use of CRM strategy in Public relations that executed by private sector in *Thailand*, and level of their customers' satisfaction and loyalty. The result can be used as a guide to the development of effective CRM strategy. Research Questions are as follow:

- 1) How private sectors in Thailand execute Customer Relation Management strategies?
- 2) How customers satisfy with relationship they have with private sectors and become loyal to the organization they are patronizing?

THEORETICAL REVIEWS

Customer Relationship Management (CRM), basically, is how businesses establish and maintain relationship with their customers through interaction between them. It's a business practice that has been used even before computer. A shop owner remembered his regular customers' name and treated them like they were his kin. He could recall what they had purchased and suggest new product they should buy (Chalit Limpanavech 1992:29). CRM may mean Marketing Event that intends to create a good, long-term relationships and understanding for both parties. (Kitti Siripallop 1997:1). CRM can target to 'organizational customer' (retailers, dealers, or franchisee) and 'consumers'.

Customer decision-making, both organizational and individual consumer, may involve influence of other customers. Decision-Making Unit or DMU are part of target consumer, they consist of 6 roles: users, influencers, deciders, approvers, buyers, and gatekeepers (Peck Payne, Christopher and Clark, 1999: 42).

The idea of 'Public Relations' is quite new for Thai organization. Thais usually mix up this term with 'receptionist'. People still perceive PR is about publicity; however, publicity is merely part of PR. (Dennis L. Wilcox 1998:14). In 1990-1976 Rex F. Harlow (1976: 36 cited by David W. Guth and Charle March, 2000: 5), in his work "Building a public relations definition" he gave more than 500 words that can describe, "What is Public Relations" not just "What Public Relations do?"

PR is executives' task to create and preserve interaction, understanding, acceptance and collaboration between organization and public stakeholders. Therefore, PR involves problem management, communication, and providing respond for public opinion. PR emphasizes social

responsibility. John E. Marston (1978) terms PR as persuasive communications intend to influence public.

Sa-ard Tunsuphapol (cited in Pornthip Pimolsindhu, 1997 : 8) the founder of Public Relations in Thailand coined the term as the practice of institutes with continuous strategy intend to establish good relationships with public, in order to maintain understanding and supportive between both side, which will result in mutual benefits and satisfy the standard of Public Opinion. Public relations tools include:

1. Press Releases/ News Releases)
2. Photo Release
3. Leaflets
4. Newsletters
5. Direct Mail
6. New Media such as Social Network, Blog, E-mail

Customer Segmentation is the practice of grouping customer through their similarity, which will help company to target them effectively (McCarthy & Perrault). Characteristic frequently used to segment customer. The guideline provide in Adrian Payne's Handbook of CRM (2006), B2C customer can be segmented with Geography, Demography and Socio-economy, Psychographic Segmentation, Benefit, Usage, and Occasion. Value is another important indicator. According to Kotler (2003), company cannot take care all existed customer and need segment their customer into 4 group: the most valuable who deserve best attention, the growing group that company should establish long-term relations, the most sensitive group that required special attention to prevent brand shifting, and the problematic group that don't generate any revenue and should be driven away.

There is no absolute form of segmentation and it requires experience, creativity, and judgment of each marketer to seek the new profitable customer that enough to fuel company (Somwong Pongsathaporn and Sunthorn Laohapatanawong, 2008). Marketer may use single or mixed indicators (Veerarat Kijlerdpiroj, 1994)

Customer Satisfaction: Schiffman and Kanuk (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1994) described satisfactions as positive stimulus towards particular achievement or situation. Phillip Kotler (Phillip Kotler, 2000) described it as the result of customer's expectancy versus what product quality and performance. According to Thailand Productivity Institute (2001), Customer Satisfaction originates from customer getting product/service that reaches their expectation. Each segment required different treatment; therefore, organizations need to precisely understand and actively respond to their need especially their main target customers.

In order to survive the highly competitive market; companies must deliver 'more than satisfied' or 'superior customer value'. Companies must sense the 'sign' of customer satisfaction, which help them lay the long-term relationship plan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology can cause a flow or fail CRM. Phapan Chitnusonthi (1993) studied CRM in Private Hospital for obstacle and problem originate from CRM with their long-term customer in the past. The research reveals flaw in service such as staff manners and lacking of technological support. Customers and patients are aware of privacy and not willing to give their personal information. Hospitals then manage to improve their medical services, adopt new technological aids, and carefully train their staff. They also employ more CRM activities that express good will towards

existed customer. Yuvapron Nontpas-Sopon (1993) studied AIS Call Centre's Marketing Communication. AIS use customer database to keep track with patrons. The strategy involve cooperation from several department, taking part in a real time AIS's management. Chanunchida Wangpian (1997)'s study of Customer Service Center of Sahapatanapibul PLC revealed software could delay respond and severe the good attempt of the company. Unilever (Thai) Trading Ltd's CRM attempt also faced an obstacle, it had not yet developed customer database and still on information from retailers (Kiatsupak Sridaromont, 2007).

CRM aims to establish long-term customer relations and loyalty. Chutima Yuvanimi (1994) compared Toyota and Honda's post-purchasing CRM and found that both firms heavily use CRM with their exist customer via various activities; hoping to be the choice for their next care and even target the next generation buyer – their children. Daranee Charttong (1997) study *Customer relationship management strategy of the Food and Beverage Divisions of Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok* reveal Customer Centric approach which being used to cater patron's impression and raise their loyalty. TOT PLC (the former Telephone Organization of Thailand) employ One-Stop Service call center yet it still struggle with technical support, personnel, and the organization structure (Cherdpong Dangsupa, 2007).

To effectively reach out and gain support from customer, company need media as channel to feed information to their patron. However, major Thai cable network provider like True Visions still gain low involvement and relationships with their clients, even their patrons receive news from True Visions' very own channels (Vorrakamol Kosalaphirom, 1997)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research. To answer the first question, insights about how Thai private sectors use CRM in their PR work are collected through in-depth interview with PR practitioners or customer relations offices from 14 private sectors. 13 questions were used to uncover companies' view of CRM, how CRM works in each organization and what is their future plan. Also, the researcher asks each interviewee to assess their organization's overall CRM plan. The 14 private sectors could be divided into 2 categories:

- (1) Merchandise-based businesses
- (2) Service-based businesses

To answer the second question of how customers feel and react to CRM attempt of each companies and what's level of their loyalty; researcher executed a Focus Group with customers who experience or involve with CRM of each company. Samples were selected via a cluster sampling, divided into 2 groups:

- (A) Age 20-25: studying age consist of young undergraduate and graduate students
- (B) Age 26–30: working age

The focus group will discuss about experience they had with customer relation campaign such as how they get information about CRM activities, what they feel towards organizations and their product & service & customer relation activities, what makes them loyal to the company, and what kind of customer activities they want.

RESULTS

PART 1: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW WITH PRIVATE SECTORS

Importance of customer relations & how Thai private sectors practice CRM:

The interview has revealed that all 14 organizations value Customer Relations and include CRM into their policy. All agree that relationship, a bond and affection between them and their

customers, critically affect achievement of business. Some organizations even include CRM into company's main policy and specifically review by CEO.

Customers are 'the heart' of their organization and keeping them happy is simply and fruitful. CRM helps to keep existed customer happy, even change them to *repeat purchasers* and *commitment customers*. Loyal customers are the main source of their revenue and the best new customer recruiter. Even in real estate business that their customers rarely repurchase, they usually influence other prospect to buy product from the same company they did. Customer Relations also helps Thai Private sector handle their customer better. Complain; for example, can be quickly responded and solved through understanding between both sides.

Hence, each organization operates their CRM by putting customer at the center of the plan or Customer Centric. Service-based businesses actively use CRM as their major strategy in order to connect with their customers. Their businesses rely of customers 'feeling' toward service, which is an intangible offering. Customer Relations Department is usually in charge of CRM with main goal of establishing customer *loyalty*, having them *revisit* for another service, and become regulars. However; Customer Relations in some organizations may work as part of Marketing Department. Customer and work closely with PR Department; and prepare customer database for other department.

Merchandise-based business usually put customer relations under Marketing/Sale/ Brand Communication Department. Customer relations support other departments to better handle customer with customer information and insight. CRM can also be part of Post-Purchasing Service. In some companies, Customer Relations is part of PR / Advertising Department. Though not as active in using CRM as service-based business, there are sign of merchandise-based business to pay more attention and invest in CRM, as part of more active business strategy.

The interview reveals that both service-based and merchandise-based businesses segment their customer via their interaction and behavior towards organization such as their use of product/service, benefit that customer seek, and using rate. Customers can be segmented with demography (race, age, occupation, and income), purpose of purchasing (as reseller or for personal / family use), loyalty, purchasing rate or readership, offline customer or online customer. Then, a proper communication plan will be lay out to suit each customer. The goal is the make them happy, well informed, and feel 'privilege'.

Customer database management & employee training:

Not all Thai Private Sector developing customer database; however, most of them carefully train their employee in the art of customer satisfying, how they reach and treat their customer. For company that developed customer database, with the help of effective database program, they can handle customer even better and deliver the exact satisfaction. The insight reveals that service-based businesses invest more on database and employees training than merchandised-based businesses.

Database usually developed by off-organization contractor and tailored to meet company's specification. Data that flow into the system are from purchasing record, record of their visit and access to facilities, and post-purchasing feedback. These are not only useful when the same customer revisit for another service, the next marketing strategy also designed based on information of consumer behavior and their expectation. Employees are expected to master in interpreting and using database.

While some companies are quite new for database system, for some organization such as Siam Commercial Bank and SE-ED Publication, customer database are their long-time best and most valuable asset. Accuracy and updated customer database is the main factor of their success. Database also contains information of competitors; especially, database developed to track retailers.

CRM as part of marketing promotion:

In the tense competitive market, each player cannot rely on a plan to increase their sale but must pay attention to customer relations. This has driven each player to adopt a more sophisticated strategy in order to gain the leading position among competitors as customer's favorite brand. An after-purchasing service, for example, will keep the bond between company and customer.

Service-based businesses, compare to merchandise-based businesses, are more active on using CRM as part of their marketing promotion plan. They have developed tool and all touch point to fulfill customers' expectation, which will increase the chance of customer revisiting.

Merchandise-based, on the other hand, focus on pleasing customer and keep them happy to repurchase / revisit the store. They believe if customers maintain positive feeling towards their brand, they will simply spread their pleasing experience to others, hence, recruit new customers.

In some organization; however, CRM is not part of Marketing Promotion. It's how they satisfy and handle customer's problem. Dealers and retailers, for example, are part of customers and will receive advice or necessary assistance from company to effectively handle their local customers.

Media and activities:

Both business types develop media and customer activities plan based on their target consumers' lifestyles and cultures. Main idea behind this is 'being intimate with consumer as much as possible.

Merchandise-based businesses focus on both B2B customers and B2C customers. For B2B customer, company try to stay connect with each representative. They execute activities such as seminar and training, meeting or dining, and provide assistance when required. B2B customers also receive report and strategy reviews to keep them update with the company's latest move. When target B2C customers or mass public, they use IMC to reach this large scale consumer such as website, radio spot, point-of-purchase ads, and TV commercial. Events and sale promotion are executed year round based on their lifestyle, taste, and region. Customers are granted membership which will provide privilege and discount. Some companies, instead of sale generate-oriented strategy, execute projects that intend to give back to society such as workshop, youth summer camp, CSR activities, donation and charity. Their aim is not profit but to win customers' heart and loyalty.

In service-based businesses, they usually focus on granting privilege through membership to each segment of customers. The more that customer show sign of revisiting or high spending, the better privilege they will receive. They try to emphasize that being their customer will get the best service and special benefits. Privileges usually include discount, complimentary service, and loyalty program like mileage. Membership; however, may not obtain for free, fee are required in some case. For organizational customers, service-based businesses usually offer privilege to person who makes purchasing decision.

They also execute project for community and lifestyle events such as health workshop or encouraging customer to participate in social activities such as donation and tree planting.

To keep customer well informed, service-based businesses, too, use IMC to support communication plan. Newsletter or member magazine are top choices. Apart from traditional communication like TVC, interactive and below-the-line communications are also considered as effective communication tools.

PR VS CRM

Public Relations in most organization focus on improving company's image and support Marketing Promotion via publicity. They manage media to reach customers and make sure they are well informed of new products & services.

In most Private Sectors Public Relation works to support Marketing Department and CRM. Marketing Department will analyze customer database provided by Customer Relations Department, then develop a strategy to capture customer. PR will support by manage publicity and organize events towards target audiences. Also, it's PR task to handle press and provide external / internal communication via IMC.

For service-based businesses, PR work to bridge companies and their patron. They handle consumer communication; inform them of new promotions, packages, and privileges. PR will respond to each level of customer differently, some organizations may have PR personal focus on foreign customers. It's also PR's task to provide information within organization, keeping executives and employees aware of current customer trends + situations.

Assessment:

Assessment of success and failure in CRM in both business orient are slightly different. Though both use customer satisfaction as main indicator, merchandise-based businesses also assess revenue or market share after the CRM campaign.

Merchandise-based rely on return of investment indicators such as media publicity, customer feedback, and revenue that generated after CRM campaign is launched. Revenue is also identified whether it comes from new customer, old customer, or customer who purchase via recommendation from old customers. Feedback and complain will be reviewed and plan to prevent more problem will be developed.

Service-based businesses only count their customer satisfaction via immediate feedback or some may perform Customer Satisfaction Index regularly. They listen to consumer's complain and try to respond immediately. They also assess customer engage and loyalty.

CRM Activities:

CRM carry activities that aim to establish a long and lasting relationship between companies and their patron. Company usually found that event is the best solution for CRM, as it reflects company's concern of their patron and increase media publicity. Charity; for example, that involve customer participations usually get high publicity and generate positive respond from public. Businesses with B2B customer stay close to their representative and provide event that can generate mutual gain such as training seminar, and paying visit to each store. Private Sectors also realize customers expect privilege: special treatment and discount.

Some give away, with a little gimmick twist, also get high attention from customer. Kasikorn Bank; for example, apart from water, candy and wet tissue to freshen up their patrons, they also offers condom – reflect "safety" customer will get when use its financial services.

Strength and key to success:

For most Thai private sectors, 'human power' is the strength of their CRM practices. Top Management; especially, CEOs are credited as being very supportive of CRM. Strong CRM Team work closely together and lay out the effective CRM strategy. And the highly trained employees such as sale personals, who directly serve client, are another key of their success CRM. The corporate image, trustworthiness, and updated customer database are also important as well.

For service-based businesses, they also emphasize reputation and specialty. Service mind culture is highly value and employees are specifically selected and trained to deliver premium service. Thainess also indentified as another spice of uniqueness and success.

Weaknesses, obstacle, and how to handle:

Sometimes it's difficult to serve or please every client and CRM may not reach every soul. Merchandise-based found themselves struggle with too many patron wish to get privilege or join events; while service-based usually tangle with budget, personnel, and technologies. Customers also do not as cooperative; especially, grown-ups.

Merchandise-based businesses sort customers in term of priority and try to respond to each requirement. They have Call Center to receive complain or suggestion. Staffs are trained to conciliate and solve conflict. Also, they need to follow up whether the issue is handled or settled. Call Center helps companies stays connect with customers. They can find and solve threat to its reputation. Complains are analyzed and review by executives.

Service-based businesses usually find managing and training personnel difficult. They have launched several attempts to solve this problem such as providing training and supervisor for new recruits. Risk management is another critical strategy. The quick and effective counter crisis plans have been prepared for various situations. Back up and training also keep employee fresh and ready for unexpected crisis. Online community is what some organization pay attention to. Pantip.com; which is the most popular Thai forum, has high viewer traffic per day as well as holding a critical influence among Thai mainstream public opinions. This forum is carefully monitored for any sign of dissatisfaction customer post any complaint. A complaint thread can send negative message about an organization to thousands of reader.

Language is another obstacle for effective CRM. Even in firms that target foreign customers, they still recognize their staff low English proficiency and often struggle when communicate with customer. Moreover; they have problem with English version of newsletter, which required by both Thai and foreign customers.

Some firm recognizes that customers are bonded with specific personnel rather than to the brand. Relationship may end, change or switch when that very person is rotated or quit. Therefore, the firm has to employ a customer database and information sharing system to solve this problem.

Do they think their CRM are successful? What's coming next?

14 Companies rate their CRM performance as a success. ROI and revisit rate are high while customer are happy. Customers are loyal and recruit new customers through word-of-mouth. Some companies expect changing of their organizational structure and strategy to be more active on CRM and expect the higher achievement. They also expect to reach for new target customers.

PART 2: FOCUS GROUP WITH CUSTOMERS

Channel to get information:

Most information that customers can recall was through highly private channel such as SMS or E-Mail. Advertising via mainstream media and Public Relations are also recognized as well as Word-of-Mouth from family and friends. News about promotion and sales are better remembered and responded.

Experience with CRM:

Both group of participants recalled using membership privilege, getting discount or premium, and attending workshop. However, Group B will selectively participate in any CRM activities due to their limited time. They will attend only when their schedule open or it's product they are using.

Favorite customer relation activities: What they love and hate?

Both groups agree on the same thing, 'anything PRICE-related'. Discount, premium, or buy 1 get 1 campaign can always get them excited. Membership offers a feeling of privilege and benefits. However, it must not be too complicated to get one.

Customers hate activities with hidden condition or what that advertise as "free of charge" but later charge them. Any company appears to be dishonest will lost favor immediately. Some customers feel uncomfortable when company take advantage of their personal information such as phone number, as it is violating their privacy and irritating.

Post-Participation: Feeling?

Customer Relation activities relatively raise positive feeling towards brand/organization. Customers are touched by organization's concern and special treatment. Some customers develop jealousy towards customer of competitive brand after comparing benefit that person is rewarded, and question why their loyalty deserve less than expectation.

Don't care. Distrust—know that it's just a marketing promotion.

However, most customers aware that customer relation activity is part of marketing promotion and not granted without hidden intention. They have little or none influence upon product selection. They claim if product is really good, they will purchase without gazing at the promotion.

Influence of repurchasing/ revisiting:

Customers said it depends on what kind of activities and what's benefit. Price-related activities from their favorite brand will get better attention; however, it's not guarantee the next purchasing or revisiting. Discount promotion may serve as a motivation that urges them to try new product, not really make them shift their loyalty.

How did they become a repeat customer?

Group A (age 20-25) put product utilitarian and benefit that fit their need at the top factor for them to repeat purchasing; price is their secondary concern as family sponsors them. Group B Age 26-30 is more concern of price; they are quite price-sensitive. Quality of product is their secondary concern. Both groups put customer care and service as third factors.

What kind of customer relation activities that they want?

Both groups of participants want activities that simple and easy to access. They should suite customers' lifestyle and entertain them. They top choice is price-oriented and membership, which will give a privilege of getting product cheaper than non-member. They also want to get tester of new product, coupon, workshop, and a disposal program like discount if they turn over empty product containers.

CONCLUSION

Friendship, caring and intimacy are part of Thai culture and business practice. Customer Relation Management evolves from a simply happy grocer keeper treats his client like his family member to be a sophisticate, complex strategy. CRM usually involve various departments working together. Each company has a department to manage customer relations. They carefully carry out a segmentation of target market, design and maintain customer database, strategic planning, and the assessment of their campaign.

CRM in service-based businesses is overseen by Marketing Department / Sale Department or Public Relations and Advertising Department. For service-based businesses, CRM will be carried out by their Customer Relation Department and Marketing Communication Department.

Segmentation, also, is very crucial. Companies segment their customer through purchasing behavior and demography (race, age, occupation). Each company has developed customer database and provide training for their employees to effectively use information to impress and satisfy customers.

Service-based businesses highly value CRM, usually include CRM into as one of their main policies. Since service is an intangible offering, CRM helps their customer to “feel” that service better. For merchandise-based businesses, CRM helps promote sale as well as customer favor towards organization. They can handle customers better and effectively gain their trust.

Every company develops a Customer Centric communication strategy. They carefully choose media and activities that suite their customers’ lifestyle. Promotion and privilege are offered occasionally to generate customer favor. It involves several sectors within each organization in order to achieve an effective CRM, especially, PR Department. Marketing Department will develop a communication strategy based on customer database, which provided by Customer Relation Department. Then, PR team will manage the publicity that will ensure public knowledge of each campaign and action carry by organization.

Evaluation is a crucial part of CRM. Success or failure must be assessed. Some companies; apart from customer satisfaction, include ROI, media publicity, revenue, and market share as indicators.

Even though all 14 firms believe their CRM is success and intend to invest more on CRM; their customers are not really concern of these attempt. Price and quality are still the main influence of their repurchasing. Companies will gain long-term relationship through trustworthiness, transparency, and affordable price.

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