

The Effect of Relationship Marketing Practices on Customer Loyalty in the Food Service Industry: A Qualitative Study on Senior Sales and Marketing Professionals

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the effect of relationship marketing practices in food service businesses on customer loyalty. In the study, focus group interviews were conducted with seven senior sales and marketing professionals representing food service businesses. Content analysis was applied to the data obtained from the interview and categorized according to the themes. As a result of the analysis of the focus group interview data, the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty in the food service industry has four main themes: (1) customer relationship management; (2) a customer-oriented approach; (3) creating loyal customers; and (4) creating marketing strategies, with eight sub-themes. The themes revealed the importance of communicating and interacting with customers, determining and meeting their expectations, creating stakeholder awareness, and developing sales strategies focused on customer satisfaction. Overall, relationship marketing practices, which are the strategy used to establish lasting relationships by developing an environment of mutual trust, sincerity, and loyalty, where interactive communication with customers is ensured, have a positive effect on the customer loyalty of businesses that provide food service.

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INTRODUCTION

Developments such as the dizzying progress of globalization and technology and all forms of communication overcoming barriers mean new business opportunities for businesses (Georgescu, Bulacu & Istratie, 2019). In addition to this, the competition they face has intensified even more. In this ruthless competitive environment, the marketing mix created by enterprises can easily be copied by rival enterprises (Usta, 2023). For this reason, businesses need to establish and maintain long-term relationships with their customers to gain a competitive advantage (Kim, Yin & Lee, 2020).

Relationship marketing includes all strategies used to establish lasting relationships by developing an atmosphere of mutual trust, sincerity, and loyalty through interactive communication with customers. The concept of relationship marketing is an advanced marketing approach within the concept of service marketing; It is a marketing approach that requires one-on-one dialogue with customers and establishing long-term relationships (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2013). The relationship marketing approach has become an important competitive strategy with the establishment of long-term customer loyalty and is different from all other marketing approaches. In addition to dealing with customer relationships, relationship marketing further focuses on the characteristics of the relationship formed during this operational phase (Gilboa, Seger-Guttmann & Mimran, 2019).

Developments in the food and beverage sector, changing working conditions, and the inclusion of more women in the workforce have led to an increase in people's nutritional needs outside the home (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2013). The sector formed by the most important enterprises that meet this need in an industrial sense is food services. They are included in the group of businesses that provide food and beverage services, along with organizations that carry out mass nutrition services while considering public health (Paul, 2019).

Today's food service industries have focused on the traditional marketing approach focused on continuous sales and finding new customers, and they have ignored after-sales customer satisfaction (Voipio et al., 2023). Contrary to this approach, relationship marketing aims to create customer loyalty through relationships by creating long-term customer satisfaction (Putra & Putri, 2019). Understanding the importance of developing long-term relationships with their customers, suppliers, employees, and other environmental factors in today's intensely competitive environment, some food service businesses have begun to attach more importance to relationship marketing practices (Bhattacharya, Zutshi & Bavik, 2021). In this context, it can be said that relationship marketing is the most appropriate strategy due to the nature of food service businesses. The reason for this is the abundance of alternative businesses and the ease of changing suppliers (Firdaus & Kanyan, 2014). Relationship marketing can positively affect the performance, profitability, customer portfolio, and cost of food service businesses. The interaction to be created between food service industries and customers enables them to share more information using this information and to develop services that meet customer demands and expectations (Christou, 2010). This study aimed to determine the effect of relationship marketing practices, which is the strategy used to establish lasting relationships by improving the environment of mutual trust, sincerity, and loyalty provided by interactive communication with customers, on the customer loyalty of businesses in the food service industry.

Conceptual Framework

In the market, businesses are in intense competition, and due to the effort to increase the number of customers as

well as create customer loyalty, the necessity of accepting a new marketing approach different from traditional marketing activities has emerged. This approach is called relationship marketing (Tadajewski & Saren, 2009).

Relationship Marketing

The relationship marketing approach is a marketing perspective that first emerged within the concept of service marketing and is based on establishing relationships that will last for many years by entering into a one-on-one dialogue with customers (Berry, 1995). Relationship marketing, which has been defined in different ways since its emergence in the 1980s, is based on establishing long-term relationships with customers by entering into a one-on-one dialogue. According to Leonard L. Berry's first definition, the purpose of relationship marketing is to attract customers to businesses and to develop and maintain relationships between them. In other words, relationship marketing aims to provide profit to the business by establishing good relations with its existing and potential customers and then developing and maintaining these relationships (Berry, 2002).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the importance of relationship marketing was recognized by three events (Grönroos, 1997). The first important event was the energy crisis that started in the 1970s, resulting in a high increase in raw material costs and fierce competition in the market. Companies that can survive by fighting this competition have focused on retaining their customers in order not to lose them. The second important event is the emerging understanding of quality, which emerged in the 1980s, focusing on developing quality products or services at a lower cost. As a result of this development, a producer partnership was formed. The burgeoning partnership of manufacturers in the auto industry made Japan successful and set an example for the American industry. The collaborative approach to manufacturers paved the way for an interactive relationship with the customer in production and sales. This situation initiated the transition to the relationship marketing approach. The third important event is the development of relationship marketing in the field of service marketing (Sheth, 2002).

In an intensely competitive environment, businesses that want to gain a competitive advantage over their competitors are turning to various marketing strategies (Leonidou et al., 2013). In this context, businesses aim to transform their products and services into loyal customers by developing and maintaining relationships with their existing customers (Juanamasta, 2019). The fact that the cost of acquiring new customers is higher than the cost of retaining existing customers has made relationship marketing even more important. The effectiveness of relationship marketing in creating customer loyalty is that it contributes to reducing costs by enabling existing customers to buy more and more frequently (Salem, 2021).

Customer Loyalty Concept

Indispensable assets of businesses are customers, and companies without customers cannot sell. The customer has purchased or decided to purchase, use, or decide to use the company's product or service by paying a certain fee. These are the people or institutions that indirectly took part in the communication and promotion of the company or decided to be involved. In other words, the customer is the person or institution that uses the products or services as the final consumer (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). In addition to creating a loyal customer base, scientific research has proven how important it is for companies to maintain customer loyalty in terms of profitability and competitive advantage (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2003). Accordingly, it turns out that acquiring new customers is ten times more expensive than serving existing ones (Coyles & Gokey, 2005). When the developments are evaluated in terms

of customer loyalty, the increase in communication between the customer and the company and the efforts of the companies to communicate more with the consumer has brought relationship marketing, which is a different approach to marketing, to the literature (Gilaninia et al., 2011). This new marketing approach, which is based on correct and effective communication with customers, is aimed at creating customer satisfaction and, by this means, gaining loyal customers (Krizanova et al., 2019).

The Transition from Traditional Marketing to Relationship Marketing

When the historical development of the marketing concept is examined, it is seen that it is shaped according to the objectives of the company (Abiodun & Kolade, 2020). There has been a shift from a product orientation to a sales orientation, then to a marketing orientation, and finally to relationship marketing (Gilaninia et al., 2011). The emergence of marketing as a discipline coincides with the first quarter of the 20th century. This period was mainly focused on commercial transactions and exchanges (Czinkota & Coskun Samli, 2007). However, the development of marketing as an application and research area has been possible with the transition from commercial transactions to relational ones (Chen, Kumara & Sivakumar, 2021). In addition, it has been understood that although mass marketing provides various advantages to companies, one-time sales costs are high. By establishing relationships with customers, the importance of reselling to them has been understood. For this reason, it has pushed companies to be more knowledgeable about their customers and to establish close relationships with them (Wakabayashi, 2012). As some researchers have stated, relationship marketing is a return to the relationships seen before the industrial revolution (Edwards & Baker, 2020). Sheth & Parvatiyar (1995) argued that although it gained a different dimension, direct marketing became popular again as it was in the pre-industrial period, and as a result, marketers tended towards relationship marketing.

Due to new developments in technology and increasing competition, traditional marketing strategies have been insufficient to meet the needs and demands of customers (Dredge et al., 2019). For this reason, the importance of relationship marketing, based on long-term customer relations instead of short-term gain, has been understood by businesses. Businesses have realized the difficulty of acquiring new customers in an intensely competitive environment and have grasped the importance of retaining existing customers. As a result, a new approach has emerged called relationship marketing, which aims to develop a lasting business relationship with businesses by giving them the ability to treat each customer individually (Gilboa, Seger-Guttmann & Mimran, 2019).

Until the concept of relationship marketing emerged, the customer was not given the necessary importance in understanding traditional marketing concepts such as sales, production, and product. Unlike traditional marketing, relationship marketing is a strategic approach that creates and develops beneficial relationships with existing customers (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2013). According to the traditional marketing approach, businesses retain their customers with their campaigns. Influencing customer retention rates positively is one of the important goals of relationship marketing. In traditional marketing, sales values and profit margins are derived from a single sale, whereas in relationship marketing, revenues and profits are derived from a long-term relationship with customers. In traditional marketing, the relationship between the buyer and the seller lasts until the moment of sale, while in relationship marketing, the beginning of the relationship is considered the moment of sale. Relationship marketing has emerged as a result of deficiencies and inadequacies in the marketing mix, and this situation remains up-to-date (Năstase-Anysz & Baba, 2020; Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche, & Assarut, 2020).

Relationship Marketing in Service Industries

Understanding the importance of developing long-term relationships with their customers, suppliers, employees, and other environmental factors in today's intensely competitive conditions, many service industries have begun to attach more importance to relationship marketing practices (Aburumman, 2023). It is argued that relationship marketing is a more appropriate strategy for service industries. Accordingly, if there is a periodic and continuous service demand by the customer, if customers control the choice of businesses, if there are business options to create alternatives, if brand switching is a general phenomenon, if word-of-mouth advertising is an effective communication type, and if there is product power suitable for cross-selling, relationship marketing strategies can be used (Sousa, Magalhães & Soares, 2021). Berry (2002) examined how relationship marketing can be applied to service industries and concluded that relationship marketing is a suitable strategy, especially for services, since it covers the situations mentioned above. In this respect, it can be said that relationship marketing has an important role, especially in service industries, and will positively affect the performance, profitability, customer portfolio, and costs of businesses.

Service marketing is one of the first areas in which relationship marketing studies begin, and services, which are intangible products, cannot be evaluated without experience. Relationship marketing has been adopted by service industries as a method used to build customer loyalty, leading to positive outcomes for customers and marketers (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Dam & Dam (2021) reports that close relationships between the business and its customers are particularly important in increasing business success in service industries where risk is high. Tzokas & Saren (2004) stated that relationship marketing is the most appropriate strategy in situations where high risk is perceived. In such high-risk situations, it becomes a necessity to carry out relationship marketing activities, and obtain and use customer information to build trust and loyalty. From a service perspective, customers and service companies need to be in constant communication. In this context, relationship marketing has the potential to create this collaboration. Keith et al. (2004) argue that the exchange of relationships between service industries and customers increases the customer's perception of value in two ways: first, the relationship between the service business and the customer provides an opportunity to share more information. Using this information, the business can develop services that meet customer demands and expectations. From the customer's point of view, this information process allows the customer to learn about the capabilities of the business so that they can have more realistic expectations of the business. Second, this relationship reduces the customer's costs and opportunistic behavior. In summary, relational shopping has a positive effect on the customer's perception of value by increasing the benefit and reducing the cost incurred. Ju Rebecca Yen & Gwinner (2003) reports that some recent studies in the service sector present various findings that businesses can provide benefits such as customer loyalty, positive word of mouth, loyalty, and satisfaction relationally.

The economic benefits of relationship marketing for businesses are highlighted. From the customer's perspective, service customers expect a long-term relationship to fulfill their desires for trust, intimacy, and cost reduction. However, customers do not want to make hasty decisions when purchasing services, as it is very difficult to compensate for the consequences of a wrong decision. While they can easily return or exchange a product they are not satisfied with, changing the service will always be much more difficult than returning a product (Utami, Alamanda & Ramdani, 2022). Customers sold through relationship marketing tend to be loyal and provide long-term profitability to the company (Arslan, 2020). It encourages word-of-mouth promotions for new customers to choose

this firm, and as a result, the firm's marketing costs are reduced. Thus, long-term customer relationships provide a good environment for companies to carry out profitable transactions (Ngoma & Ntale, 2019). Vatawala et al. (2022) stated that customers who are in a relationship will bargain less with the company. From this point of view, it can be said that customers who have a relationship with the business will be less sensitive to price. In other words, they will focus on the relationship and the quality of the service, rather than the financial dimension of shopping. In summary, in today's marketing, it is more critical how the business can maintain a relationship than what kind of product or service it offers. In line with these explanations, it is thought that service industries that carry out relationship marketing activities reduce their operational costs, improve their financial performance, and increase their marketing activities.

Methodology

In the study, a qualitative research design was preferred, and it was aimed at investigating the reflection of the relationship marketing issue on customer loyalty, which the food service industry does not focus on much. In addition, this study aims to contribute to the food service sector by determining the effect of relationship marketing, which has found a new application area in the food service sector, on the loyalty of its customers. Qualitative analyses were preferred to examine the subject in depth because it concerns human relations too much. In this context, conducting focus group interviews to deepen the results of studies investigating the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty and to reveal their differences strengthens the research. Focus group interviews, one of the qualitative research methods in the study, are conducted by using the effect of group dynamics to obtain in-depth information and generate ideas through discussions between a small group and the moderator (Mutlu & Doğan, 2021). In this context, the effect of relationship marketing on customers' loyalty was examined through the data obtained from the focus group interview. In this method, researchers can use focus groups to develop pre-existing knowledge about a known topic, or they can also use them to gain new ideas and information by focusing on the topic from another angle (Robinson, 2020). In our study, content analysis, which is an analysis method that enables the data obtained from the focus group interview to be analyzed systematically, was used. Content analysis has many advantages in the analysis of qualitative data, and it enables the analysis of complex and large data sets in a systematic way and within the framework of determined themes. Thus, the entire data set can be made understandable and manageable. In addition, it provides a deeper understanding and offers the opportunity to better understand the content, meaning, and context of the data. One of the most important aspects of content analysis is that it paves the way for a more objective evaluation through the use of certain themes and categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

The Population of the Study

The population of the research consisted of companies providing food service in Turkey and senior sales and marketing professionals working for them. Food service establishments that do not apply fabrication systems to their production but produce and serve mass meals daily are considered food service providers (Doğan, 2022). The research sample was created using the highest diversity method, and the participants were optimally selected (McKercher et al., 2023). Due to the difficulty of accessing the relevant professional group, the snowball technique, which is an easy sampling method, was used in the selection of the sample, and twenty food service establishments were determined by telephone interviews, taking into account the websites (Bhardwaj, 2019). Considering the common characteristics related to the research subject, a homogeneous participant group was formed with the senior

sales and marketing managers of the food service industries. In this way, it was ensured that the data obtained from the study were more inclusive and useful in terms of content. Seven participants who agreed to participate in the interview were interviewed on an online platform. To protect the personal data that emerged during the interviews, that data was coded and processed while deciphering the interview. In the research, interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire to evaluate the effect of relationship marketing practices on the loyalty of their customers in the sectors of senior sales and marketing managers (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). Focus group interview participants were selected among senior sales and marketing professionals who are effective in determining the sales policies of their businesses due to the scope and content of the interview questions.

Focus Group Interview

The research questions were created using demographic information, Oly Ndubisi & Kok Wah's (2005) relationship marketing scale, Bobâlcă, Gătej & Ciobanu's (2012) loyalty scale, and literature information, and used in the interview. During the interview, questions revealing the general marketing strategies of the companies, their perspectives on the concept and practices of relationship marketing, the importance of customer loyalty for their companies, and the effect of relationship marketing understanding on customer loyalty were prepared. Thus, the volunteer participants were asked to answer ten questions on the subject, and the framework of the research was formed by evaluating their answers. The questions were designed in the form of a mutual question-answer to obtain findings for this study. These questions have been prepared in light of theoretical knowledge about creating customer loyalty through relationship marketing with the selected food service companies, and care has been taken not to be as sharp and direct as possible. The questions asked of the participants are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus Group Interview Questions

No	Questions
1	Can you summarize your business' marketing strategies?
2	Can you define the customer loyalty of your business?
3	How important is customer loyalty to your business? What activities do you have to ensure customer loyalty?
4	Do you consider the demands and expectations of your customers when planning your services?
5	If the expectations and demands of your customers are important to your business, what strategy do you follow to learn these expectations?
6	Do you report and keep track of customer complaints, suggestions, and opinions coming from your relationships with your customers?
7	As a caterer, are you proficient in customer service? Can you find quick solutions to customers' problems?
8	What advantages do you provide to your loyal customers as a caterer?
9	What elements do you think should be included in the definition of relationship marketing, also known as all customer satisfaction efforts?
10	What does your business do to communicate with customers? Do these efforts reflect positively on your relationships with your customers?

The focus group interview was held in Google Meet, one of the online meeting platforms, with the participation of all participants, and in the first stage of the interview, the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. Respondents were assured that neither the names of the interviewees nor the names of their businesses, nor any information that could imply them, would ever be disclosed without their consent. In the second stage, written consent was obtained from the participants, the questions in the semi-structured questionnaire were recorded online, and the interview lasted for 80 minutes. After that, the recorded interview was re-watched, deciphered, and transcribed. Finally, revision and approval were requested for the interview text sent to each participant.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data used the content analysis method, supported by the opinions of two experts. Firstly, the data gathered from the participants' interviews was examined and reviewed. Content analysis is a systematic method for categorizing data from text. In other words, it searches for and discovers certain themes within the qualitative data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the accuracy of the research findings at an acceptable level, both validity and reliability were ensured. The study was objectively evaluated as a whole to validate the themes revealed by content analysis, ensuring that the themes and results obtained from the data reflect each other. Additional feedback was sought from the participants to ensure validity; the deciphered interview text was given to them for corrections and approvals. Reliability refers to the study's reproducibility, which means that the same analysis can be performed under different conditions and still achieve the same results. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the interview content was given to three different researchers, and similar inferences were drawn (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen, & Elo, 2020). Furthermore, the study received ethical approval from the Istanbul Gelişim University Ethics Committee (2022–16).

Results and Discussion

Results of the Focus Group Interview

The interview records were deciphered as text, and the texts were subjected to content analysis. The obtained data were then categorized according to their themes. As a result of the analysis of the focus group interview data, the effect of relationship marketing practices in the food service industry on customer loyalty has been categorized under four main themes and eight sub-themes, as shown in Figure 2.

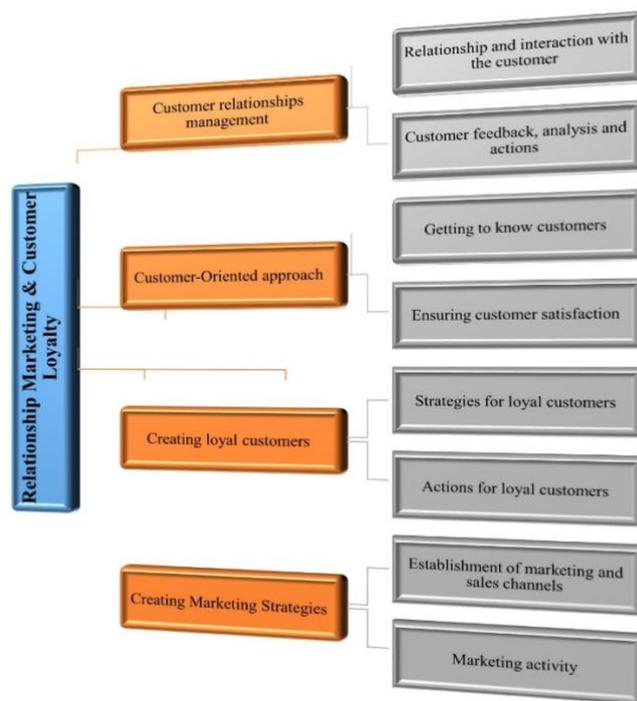


Figure 1. Themes of the effect of relationship marketing practices in the food service industry on customer loyalty

The interaction to be created between food service businesses and customers enables them to share more information and develop services that will meet customer demands and expectations. It has been tried to determine the effect of relationship marketing practices, which is the strategy used to establish lasting relationships by developing the mutual trust environment, sincerity, and loyalty provided by the interactive communication created with the customers, on customer loyalty.

The main themes of the effect of relationship marketing practices in the food service sector on customer loyalty are (1) customer relationship management; (2) a customer-oriented approach; (3) creating loyal customers; and (4) the creation of marketing strategies.

Customer Relationship Management

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked questions about the relationship marketing practices and customer loyalty of the food service businesses, and they were asked to elaborate. Participants emphasized the importance of customer relationship management in the context of relationship marketing and customer loyalty.

Two sub-themes of the theme of “customer relationship management”, one of the main themes of the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty, were determined. The sub-themes and explanations of the customer relationship management theme are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Sub-themes and explanations of the theme of customer relationship management

Main theme	Sub themes	Descriptions
Customer relationship management	Relationship and interaction with the customer	Regular customers' visits
		Face-to-face interaction with customers
		Interacting with customers frequently, listening, and identifying solutions for their needs
		Establishing good one-to-one relationships with customers, long-term communication, and interaction
		Strong relationships with customers based on trust and sincerity
	Customer feedback, analysis and actions	Customer complaints, suggestions, and opinion reports
		Recording, evaluation, and archiving of customer complaints, suggestions, and opinions within the scope of management systems
		Developing an innovative system for reporting and tracking customer complaints, suggestions, and opinions
		Customer Feedback Listening to customer feedback so that customers' expectations can be understood
		Customer satisfaction surveys
		Conducting regular customer surveys, collecting feedback, and analyzing customer data Follow up on customer feedback.
		Active use of communication channels with the customer (websites, social media accounts, customer service lines, e-mail, etc.)
		A customer- and solution-oriented strategy Solving any problem before it grows
		Customer complaints, suggestions, and opinion reports
		Recording, evaluation, and archiving of customer complaints, suggestions, and opinions within the scope of management systems
		Developing an innovative system for reporting and tracking customer complaints, suggestions, and opinions

Two sub-themes were determined: (1) customer feedback, analysis, and actions, and (2) customer feedback, analysis, and actions, whose content analysis was applied to the data of the focus group interview. In this context, the success of customer relationship management lies in analyzing the feedback provided by one-to-one communication and interaction with customers and maintaining the necessary activities.

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked, “Do you consider the demands and expectations of your customers when planning your services?” and “If the expectations and demands of your customers are important to your business, what strategy do you follow to learn these expectations?” questions were posed. When the answers given to the questions are examined, it is understood that the participants have a management understanding and strategy related to customer relations in the companies they work for. One of the participants expressed their understanding of customer relationship management as follows:

“Yes, we take into account the expectations of our customers when planning our services. For example, some of our customers may be flavor-oriented. Some may ask for large portions of food. We try to take them all into account. The expectations and demands of your customers are very important to our business, so the strategies we follow to learn about the expectations are:

- Regular customer visits are made. Customer requests are heard.
- The pulse of all personnel who come to the cafeteria during the visit and at mealtime regarding the food service provided is checked.
- Customer satisfaction surveys are conducted at regular intervals.”

Another participant said about customer relations management, “We are always in contact with routine visits and learn what the demands and expectations are.” and “Routine visits are made and requests and complaints are determined. As a result, if there is any problem, it is solved before it grows. This increases customer satisfaction and ensures loyalty.” expressed as.

One participant stated the following about customer relationship management: “By communicating with our customers, we learn about their demands and expectations. In addition, we meet with our customers regularly and follow their changing needs. In this way, we establish a stronger bond with our customers and shape our services according to these expectations.

Research (Mato-Santiso, Rey-García & Sanzo-Pérez, 2021; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022; Fiiwe et al., 2023) requires effective and continuous communication with customers, creating and increasing customer value, and systematically managing customer relations for relationship marketing activities to be successful. In addition, Delpechitre, Rutherford & Comer (2019) found that communicating directly with customers improves the salesperson's ability to empathize. Thus, customer relations continue positively in the long term, and thus customer satisfaction is ensured.

When the main theme of customer relationship management is examined, the importance of interacting with and listening to customers frequently emerges. Face-to-face interaction with regular visits to customers ensures the creation of strong relationships based on trust and sincerity. Thanks to the feedback received as a result of the interaction with the customers, the way for customer- and solution-oriented strategies has been opened. Thus, it is ensured that any problem is solved before it grows.

Customer-Oriented Approach

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked questions about the relationship marketing practices and customer loyalty of the food service businesses, and they were asked to elaborate. Participants emphasized the importance of a customer-oriented approach in the context of relationship marketing and customer loyalty.

It has been seen that the theme of the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty, the second of the main themes, "customer-oriented approach," has two sub-themes. The sub-themes and explanations of the customer-oriented approach theme are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Sub-themes and explanations of the theme of customer-oriented approach

Main theme	Sub themes	Descriptions
Customer-Oriented Approach	Getting to know customers	Determining the needs, requests, and demands of customers
		Designing healthy and quality menus and meals
		Keeping up with the latest trends in the food services industry
		Continuously improving services
		Producing value-added services
	Ensuring customer satisfaction	Being in constant communication with the customer
		Show personal attention
		Listening to the customer
		Respond to feedback and complaints in a timely and respectful manner
		Providing benefits to loyal customers

Content analysis was applied to the data from the focus group interview, and two sub-themes were determined: (1) getting to know customers and (2) ensuring customer satisfaction. In this context, customer satisfaction will be ensured by determining the needs, wishes, and demands of the customer and continuously improving the services thanks to a customer-oriented approach.

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked, "As a caterer, are you proficient in customer service? Can you find quick solutions to customers' problems?" and "What elements do you think should be included in the definition of relationship marketing, also known as all customer satisfaction efforts?" questions were posed. When the answers given to the questions are examined, it is understood that the companies they work with have a customer-oriented approach. One of the participants expressed their customer focus as follows:

"I think we are adequate in terms of customer service. The reason for this is that we are customer-oriented and follow a solution-oriented strategy to solve problems."

Another participant said that for a customer-focused approach, "As X Catering, customer focus, and relationship marketing are at the core of our marketing strategies. With the trust and sincerity, we have established with our customers, we aim to provide the most appropriate services to meet their expectations and needs." expressed as.

Research (Uğurlu, 2020; Grönroos, 2017; Durmaz, Güvenç & Kaymaz, 2020) shows that traditional marketing has a product-oriented approach, whereas relationship marketing has a customer-oriented structure. However, while the traditional understanding focuses on individual sales, the relational understanding focuses on creating customer loyalty through customer focus. In addition, according to Ferguson, Paramita & Ratnasari (2021), customer-oriented activities ensure success in relationship marketing activities. Mihailović & Popović (2022), on the other hand, argue that a customer-oriented structure in businesses constitutes the essence of relationship marketing.

When the main theme of the customer-oriented approach is examined, the importance of determining and meeting the expectations of the customers emerges. In this context, with the recognition of customers, healthy and quality meals are designed, and services are continuously improved. The customer-oriented approach requires constant

communication, personal attention, listening to the customer, responding to feedback and complaints in a timely and respectful manner, and providing advantages to loyal customers. Thus, the customer satisfaction targeted by the businesses is achieved.

Creating Loyal Customers

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked questions about the relationship marketing practices and customer loyalty of the food service businesses, and they were asked to elaborate. Participants emphasized the importance of creating loyal customers in the context of relationship marketing and customer loyalty.

It has been observed that the third main theme of the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty, the theme of “creating loyal customers,” has two sub-themes. The sub-themes and explanations of the theme of creating loyal customers are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Sub-themes and explanations of the theme of creating loyal customers

Main theme	Sub themes	Descriptions
Creating loyal customers	Strategies for loyal customers	Meeting customers' expectations
		A long-term and trusting relationship
		Customer focus and empathy
		Leading and retaining customers in a positive way
		Formation of the majority of the customer portfolio from old and loyal customers
	Actions for loyal customers	Making them feel valued (stakeholder awareness)
		The value provided to customers builds trust
		Development and customization of services
		Making one-to-one meetings with customers and offering special solutions to their needs and wishes
		Enabling interaction with customers at events and face-to-face meetings
		Establishing a one-to-one relationship
		Long-term communication with the customer
		Providing customers with different menu options, different service options, and customized services
		A positive customer experience that meets or exceeds their expectations
		To differentiate with exceptional customer experiences
		Giving priority and advantage to loyal customers
		Providing customers with special offers and discounts
		Making them feel valued (stakeholder awareness)

The theme of creating loyal customers, whose content analysis was applied to the data of the focus group interview, was identified as (1) strategies for loyal customers and (2) actions for loyal customers. In this context, thanks to the creation of loyal customers, a long-term trust-based relationship will become permanent, and thus customers will be retained.

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked, “How important is customer loyalty for your business? What activities do you have to ensure customer loyalty?” and “What advantages do you provide to your loyal customers as a caterer?” questions were posed. When the answers given to the questions are examined, it is understood that the participants focus on customer loyalty in the companies they work for and understand the importance of creating loyal customers. One of the participants stated the following about creating loyal customers.

“Customer loyalty is very important to our business. We visit our customers regularly to ensure customer loyalty. We listen to our customers' requests and complaints during our visits. We try to resolve complaints as soon as

possible. Requests are tried to be fulfilled by considering the contract and meal price. In addition, it is tried to establish a one-on-one relationship with the customer. We also organize special days for some of our customers. Among these, there may be international cuisine dishes or local food days.”

Another participant stated that “Customer loyalty is very important. For this, menus are created in line with customers' requests and needs, problems are solved immediately, and customers are visited at regular intervals. In addition, meal pricing for loyal customers is lower than others.” regarding creating loyal customers.

Research (Ćurčić, Grubor & Muhović, 2021; Arslan, 2020; Rizan, Warokka & Listyawati, 2014) shows that it will make a great contribution to creating customer loyalty thanks to the long-term and trust-based relationships established with customers through relationship marketing. In addition, the good relations businesses have with their customers cannot be easily imitated by their competitors. It is one of the advantages of creating loyal customers that customers make positive suggestions about the business to their environment, voluntarily become a reference, and easily stop being customers even in negative situations. Auruskeviciene, Salciuviene & Skudiene, (2010), on the other hand, according to their research, the quality of the relationship with the customers positively affects the loyalty of the customers towards the business, and this positive interaction can result in customer loyalty. Such customers are very likely to become loyal customers of businesses. Customers who start recommending businesses to others tend to be loyal.

When the main theme of creating loyal customers is examined, the importance of meeting customer expectations with the empathy envisaged by the customer-oriented approach as well as creating stakeholder awareness in them becomes evident. Creating loyal customers requires a long-term and trusting relationship. This process, on the other hand, will be successful by establishing one-to-one relationships with customers, providing a positive customer experience that meets and exceeds expectations, and providing value to the customer.

Creating Marketing Strategies

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked questions about the relationship marketing practices and customer loyalty of the food service businesses, and they were asked to elaborate. Participants emphasized the importance of creating marketing strategies in the context of relationship marketing and customer loyalty.

It has been observed that the fourth of the main themes of the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty, the theme of “creating marketing strategies,” has two sub-themes. The sub-themes and explanations of the theme of creating marketing strategies are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Sub-themes and explanations of the theme of creating marketing strategies

Main theme	Sub themes	Descriptions
Creating marketing strategies	Establishment of sales and marketing channels	Social media-supported digital marketing activities
		Implementation of a mix of traditional and digital marketing channels
		Recommendation of the business to other customers by existing customers thanks to customer satisfaction
	Activity of marketing	Sales strategies focused on customer satisfaction
		Lower meal pricing for loyal customers

Content analysis was applied to the data of the focus group interview, and two sub-themes were determined: (1) establishment of sales and marketing channels and (2) marketing activities of the theme of creating marketing

strategies. In this context, by creating marketing strategies, it will be possible to obtain new and loyal customers much more easily.

In the focus group interview, the participants were asked, “Can you summarize your business' marketing strategies?” When the answers given to the stated question are examined, it is understood that the participants understand the importance of creating marketing strategies for the companies they work for. One of the participants stated the following regarding the creation of marketing strategies:

“At Y Catering, customer focus and relationship marketing are at the core of our marketing strategies. With the trust and sincerity, we have established with our customers, we aim to provide the most appropriate services to meet their expectations and needs.

In this direction, we constantly monitor customer feedback and use it as a factor that guides the development of our business. In addition, we interact with our customers frequently, listen to them, and offer solutions tailored to their needs.

Among our marketing strategies, the use of digital marketing and social media also takes an important place. We actively use social media channels to interact more easily with our customers and increase the recognition of our business.

Finally, with the awareness that the quality of our services is of great importance in terms of customer satisfaction and loyalty, we aim to provide the best service to our customers by constantly conducting quality control and improvement studies.

It is to be a reference for our business by providing the highest level of customer satisfaction by producing reliable and quality food with balanced menus containing the energy and nutritional elements that customers need.”

Another participant expressed the creation of marketing strategies as “to be a reference for our business by providing the highest level of customer satisfaction by producing reliable and quality food with balanced menus containing the energy and nutritional elements that customers need.”

One participant stated the following about the creation of marketing strategies: “As a caterer, our marketing strategy revolves around building strong relationships with our customers by providing high quality services, showing personal attention, and getting continuous feedback to improve our offerings. We also use a mix of traditional and digital marketing channels to reach potential customers and build brand awareness. Our goal is to differentiate ourselves from our competitors by delivering exceptional customer experiences and building a loyal customer base.”

In the interview question about marketing strategies, there was one participant who spoke of aggressive marketing strategies with a different view from all the others. S(he) expressed his participatory marketing strategies as follows:

“An aggressive marketing strategy is implemented in our business. This marketing approach is focused on selling in large numbers. For this reason, a more competitive price policy is followed by considering the market price. “

Research shows (Ulusoy & Akyürek, 2022; Mutlu, Demirçakmak & Doğan, 2022; Trivedi, Trivedi & Goswami, 2018) that when customer requests and requirements are kept at the forefront within the scope of marketing practices, it will contribute to customer satisfaction. In this context, businesses have to create their marketing strategies according to their customers' needs. Adopting a relationship-oriented understanding with customers and establishing,

maintaining, and developing customer relations to achieve the expected goals of both parties has now become the main purpose of marketing.

Dandis et al. (2023) argue that the main backbone of relationship marketing consists of strategies that encourage customers to remain customers, that is, to create loyal customers. These incentives include extra services and price reductions, namely relational pricing, etc. The success of businesses that implement relationship marketing strategies is possible by offering their customer's customized services that rival businesses cannot offer.

When the main theme of the creation of marketing strategies is examined, in addition to the application of a mixture of traditional and digital marketing channels, the importance of implementing sales strategies focused on customer satisfaction emerges. Today, thanks to the platform created by social media-supported marketing activities, it is a very important trending marketing strategy to enable existing customers, or, in other words, loyal customers, to recommend the business to potential customers.

Conclusion

In today's business world, marketing strategies can be copied very easily. For this reason, he states that businesses should focus on customer relations. Food service businesses have just begun to grasp the importance of relationship marketing, which focuses on customer relations, in gaining a competitive advantage. Relationship marketing includes strategies that aim to establish lasting relationships with customers using interactive communication built on trust, sincerity, and loyalty. While the traditional approach of food service businesses focuses on making continuous sales and finding new customers, relationship marketing aims to create long-term customer loyalty by giving importance to customer satisfaction. In an environment where competition is intense, food service businesses need to give more importance to relationship marketing strategies by realizing the importance of establishing long-term relationships. In this context, it can be argued that relationship marketing is the most appropriate strategy due to the nature of food service businesses. It is emphasized that relationship marketing can positively affect performance, profitability, customer portfolio, and costs in food service businesses. The interaction created with customer's increases information sharing and enables the development of services that will meet customer demands. In our study, it was aimed to investigate the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty, and it was concluded that this effect was positive.

In our study, interviews were conducted with a group of senior sales and marketing professionals from food service companies using a semi-structured questionnaire to evaluate the effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty. Content analysis was applied to the data obtained through the interviews, they were categorized according to their themes, and four main themes and eight sub-themes were determined. The main themes are (1) customer relationship management; (2) a customer-oriented approach; (3) creating loyal customers; and (4) creating marketing strategies. The main theme of relationship and interaction with the customer was categorized into (1) relationship and interaction with the customer and (2) customer feedback, analysis, and actions sub-themes. The main theme of a customer-oriented approach was categorized into (1) getting to know customers and (2) ensuring customer satisfaction sub-themes. The main theme of creating loyal customers was categorized into (1) strategies for loyal customers (2) actions for loyal customer's sub-themes The main theme of creating marketing strategies was categorized into (1) establishment of sales and marketing channels and (2) marketing activities sub-themes.

Relationship marketing strategies, particularly, emphasize the significance of frequent interaction and attentive listening to customers in order to establish strong relationships based on trust and sincerity within customer-focused approaches. Food service businesses can develop customer- and solution-oriented strategies by obtaining feedback from customers and resolving issues before they escalate. The customer-focused approach highlights the importance of comprehending and meeting customer expectations. This encompasses understanding customers, designing high-quality services, and continuously improving them. Effective customer-focused strategies necessitate constant communication, personalized attention, responsiveness to feedback and complaints, and offering incentives to loyal customers, ultimately resulting in customer satisfaction. Building loyal customers entails meeting their expectations through empathy and fostering stakeholder awareness. It requires fostering long-term and trustworthy relationships by fostering one-on-one connections, delivering exceptional customer experiences that surpass expectations, and delivering value to customers. Concerning marketing strategies, it is crucial to employ a combination of traditional and digital marketing channels. Additionally, sales strategies oriented toward customer satisfaction are vital. In today's social media-driven landscape, harnessing existing customers (particularly loyal ones) to recommend a business to potential customers has emerged as a prominent marketing trend.

Based on the results of our study, it is recommended that more research be conducted on this subject for food service businesses in the future. In particular, loyalty measurements can be made to further support the positive effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty for food service businesses. Customer loyalty levels can be evaluated with surveys and customer feedback supported by quantitative research. Thus, it will be possible to understand more specifically how relationship marketing practices affect this level. Apart from these, the effect of different marketing strategies and relational marketing strategies on customer loyalty can be investigated comparatively.

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Appendix 1. Ethics Committee Permission

T.C.
İSTANBUL GELİŞİM ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Etik Kurul Başkanlığı

ETİK KURUL KARAR ÖRNEĞİ

Toplantı No	Toplantı Tarihi	Toplantı Saati	Toplantı Yeri
2022 – 16	04.11.2022	14.00	Online

KARAR NO: 2022-16-58: Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi, Gastronomi ve Mutfak Sanatları Bölümü Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Murat DOĐAN' ın "Catering Sektörü İlişkisel Pazarlama Uygulamalarının Müşteri Sadakatine Etkisi" konulu çalışması hakkında yapacağı anket sorularının, etik kurallara uygun olup olmadığını tespit etmek üzere, İGÜ Etik Kurulumuzun 05.09.2022 tarih ve 2022-14 sayılı toplantısında, İGÜ Etik Kurul Yönergesinin 12(1) maddesine göre değerlendirme yapmak üzere görevlendirilen öğretim elemanlarının raporları incelenmiş olup, ilgili çalışmada yer alan bilimsel araştırmanın etik kurallara uygun olduğuna oy birliği ile karar verildi.

ASLI GİBİDİR

Rektör Yardımcısı
 Prof. Dr. Nuri KURUOĐLI

04.11.2022

BİRİM Etik Kurul Başkanlığı 04.11.2022 TARİH 2022 – 16 ETİK KURUL TOPLANTI TUTANAĞI KARAR ÖRNEĞİ

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