



Identifying factors that predict business-to-business customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions

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ABSTRACT

Crop protection refers to the science and practice of managing pests, plant diseases, weeds and other pest organisms that damage agricultural crops. Crop protection solutions will play an ever-increasing role in the attempt to feed a growing population with limited land resources. The competition between the suppliers of crop protection products is fierce and they are dependent on the loyalty of the distributor's independent sales agents (ISAs) to recommend and subscribe their products to the farming community. Although, the crop protection industry recognises that strong relationships between the ISA and his preferred supplier is important, the discipline of relationship marketing and customer loyalty is not well defined in this regard.

The primary objective of the study is to investigate factors predicting business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions.

A literature review revealed that B2B customer loyalty is the holy grail pursued by every supplier and attainable through the disciplines and practices of relationship marketing. B2B customer loyalty depends also on the quality of the relationship as well as the value attached to the relationship.

Relationship quality and relationship value factors were therefore further explored to determine their impact on the loyalty of the ISAs working for the distributors of crop protection products. A structured questionnaire was administered to measure eight constructs of that may impact B2B customer loyalty. The eight constructs include trust and commitment as relationship quality factors as well as product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market (as relationship value factors).

The data of 121 ISAs, including their demographic information, were collected through a non-probability purposive (judgement) sampling process. The data analysis strategy included calculating frequencies and descriptive statistics, evaluating the reliability and validity of the measures, performing correlation analysis and lastly conducting a standard multiple regression modelling to test the theoretical model of the study.

From the empirical results attained in the study it became clear that the vast majority of participants who took part in this research can be characterised as a 47½ year old Afrikaans speaking married male, with more than 10 years' sales experience and annual sales of more than R3 m.

All the measurement scales measuring the constructs of customer loyalty, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how

and time-to-market can be considered as highly reliable as they all exhibit very good internal consistency, face validity and content validity.

The correlation analysis indicated that there is a statistically significant and relative strong positive relationship between the relationship quality and relationship value independent variables investigated with the exception of commitment that tested weak positive in regard with all the relationship value constructs. All the independent variables considered in this research also correlate statistically significant with B2B customer loyalty, suggesting a relative moderate-strong positive effect in all instances.

Following the preliminary analysis of the research results, it was decided to exclude the supplier know-how construct from further investigation, regarding multi-collinearity concerns. Ultimately, the results obtained from the multiple regression analysis suggests that only the independent variables trust, commitment and personal interaction are the predictor variables that demonstrate a significant statistical relationship with B2B customer loyalty. The multiple regression model furthermore significantly improves the prediction of B2B customer loyalty and explains 42.7% of the variation in B2B customer loyalty.

The recommendations of this research study mainly explore marketing strategies to improve B2B customer loyalty of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection products. More specifically, strategies are recommended that have the potential to advance customer loyalty and gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive market.

Budget, time, and geographical challenges were the main limitations faced by the researcher. Hence, the study ends with a number of strategic recommendations for further research.

Ultimately, the results of this study is important and can be viewed as a move to fill a gap in marketing research of B2B customer loyalty in the South African crop protection industry. The study offers the foundation for future research in the field of B2B customer loyalty in the crop protection industry.

Key terms: B2B customer loyalty, crop protection industry, independent sales agent, buyer-supplier, trust, commitment, relationship value.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This research study concerns the investigation of factors that predict business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions. The research process entails the identification of antecedents that may lead towards ISAs (ISAs) being loyal towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions. ISAs are responsible for marketing and selling suppliers' crop protection solutions to farmers. In an overtraded crop protection industry, with multiple crop protection solutions and generic offerings to the agricultural growers, it is imperative for suppliers to have a group of loyal ISAs that will promote their products to the farming community. Knowledge of the factors that may lead to B2B customer loyalty may assist in this regard.

In the sections that follow, more insight is provided into the research context of the study as well as the planned outline of the dissertation. The chapter commences with a background discussion and the formulation of the research problem. The subsequent section offers more insight into the crop protection environment and the ISAs servicing the industry. Following this discussion, a literature review of the study's research constructs is conducted that leads to the development of the research hypotheses and conceptual model to be further explored. The final part of this chapter is devoted to the formulation of the research objectives as well as a brief description of the research methodology, contribution of the study and an overview of the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Crop protection refers to the science and practice of managing pests, plant diseases, weeds and other pest organisms that damage crops. Farmers growing the crop, such as wheat, rice, maize, potatoes, soybeans and cotton are reliant on crop protection solutions to prevent and curb crop losses due to pests in the field (pre-harvest) and during storage (post-harvest) (Oerke, 2006:31). Harmful organisms such as animal pests, insects, plant pathogens and weeds are collectively known as crop pests may lead to significant losses for the farmer and could threaten food security. Considering the estimated growth in the South African population from a current 55 million to 65 million in 2050 (Population Reference Bureau, 2015:11-12), the effective management of crop protection solutions may become even more important in future. Crop protection solutions will play an ever-increasing role in the attempt to feed a growing population with finite land resources (Schreuder, 2002:4).

Competition between original and generic suppliers of crop protection solutions, however, has become fierce and these suppliers are often in a battle to win the loyalty of ISAs that must ensure their product selection is presented and sold to the farmers. More specifically, until the early 1990s multi-national companies manufacturing crop protection solutions employed their own dedicated sales agents to sell their products to the farming community, which was a Business-to-Customer (B2C) distribution model. The customer relationship was owned by the multi-national company, who focused their marketing approach on farmer needs and satisfaction, by supplying crop protection solutions. These agents were salaried employees and were managed and controlled to market and service the company's products (Myburgh, 2014:11). Since 1991, these manufacturers and registration holders then assisted in setting up independent distribution businesses which started to employ their salespeople on a commission only basis. The ISA would typically prescribe and sell the pesticide to the farmer on the invoice of the intermediate distributor business. The gross profit of the sale is shared between the two parties in a 40:60 or 30:70 split with the major share going to the ISA after the farmer settled the invoice. A Business-to-Business-to-Customer (B2B2C) triad distribution model was subsequently introduced, and various new organisations like Unieko, Lowveld Agrochem, Wenkem, Qwemico, Viking, Terason and Nexus acted as intermediaries between farmers and the manufacturers. To expand their offering to the farmers and fill the shortcomings in their product portfolios, however, distributor organisations in recent years have started marketing generic products and products from competing manufacturers (Greyling, 2015). As a consequence of this model, both original, as well as generic suppliers, are now competing in the same market environment, and their success is to a large extent dependent on whether they can convince the ISA to market and sell their product offerings, to the farmers. In the new business model, suppliers of both original and generic crop protection solutions are therefore compelled to compete for the loyalty of ISAs that have become powerful and who have the potential to have a great impact on the crop protection selection choice of farmers. In most cases, the ISA fulfils an integral part of the farming operation in the provision of advice and in influencing the decisions made by the farmer regarding crop protection. The ISA acts as a "consultant" for the farmer, and his services are not only restricted to the selling of a portfolio (Greyling, 2015).

While several approaches may be followed to foster customer loyalty, it further appears that suppliers could in particular benefit from building solid relationships with ISAs. The benefits of relationship marketing practices have been well documented across different forms of B2B relationship categories. For example, it has been stated that a unique trading advantage arises for both a manufacturer and distributor by working together in a relationship. This can reduce the cost of doing business and offers a unique competitive cost advantage for the whole supply

channel (Hollensen, 2015:475). Opportunities can be exploited by relationship partners when pooling their unique competencies to increase customer value (Hollensen, 2015:363). Relationship marketing creates or enhances mutual economic, a social and psychological value between the buyer and the supplier (Sheth et al. 2012:5). Good relationships between buyers and sellers represent continuous cooperation to create the value customers want, for the whole channel including stakeholders, shareholders, suppliers and intermediaries. (Eagan, 2011:38). Research further proposes that relationships may have a great impact on customer loyalty (Eagan, 2011:50). Customer loyalty is based on dedication, which is value driven with an appreciation for the relationship (Yang, 2015:118). The more the parties appreciate the business relationship, the more the likelihood for sales, loyalty and repeat custom. This manifests in the parties accepting and understanding each other, good communication, the transfer of expertise, mutual need satisfaction and a common vision of future business (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009:4). Customer loyalty is, therefore, the fundamental assumption that the value of the relationship is greater than the value of the transactional exchange. Outstanding customer relationships combined with longstanding customer loyalty and competitive advantage can be considered as an intangible asset of a business (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009:16).

Essentially, suppliers of crop protection solutions may experience similar advantages from relationship marketing practices than what has commonly been obtained in other types of B2B relationships categories. The possibility exists that within a B2B context, the relationship marketing practices directed towards ISAs may contribute to them becoming more loyal towards a supplier of crop protection solutions and only recommending and selling the supplier's products to the farmer. At this stage, however, it is still unclear, which relationship marketing practices or factors may specifically lead to ISAs becoming more loyal towards suppliers of crop protection solutions. Considering the work of key scholars in the field of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and also within a business-to-business context (Gil-Saura et al. 2009:605; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006b:313; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:130, 134), the suppliers of crop protection solutions may benefit over the long term should they focus on the relationship quality dimensions trust and commitment as well as selected relationship value factors.

According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), the foundational premises of the relationship marketing theory is grounded in the trust and commitment concept. Both trust and commitment are required in establishing long-term relationships between organisations (Gil-Saura et al. 2009:605). Trust is essential for the building of successful business relationships and has also been acknowledged as an important concept within the inter-organisational research

environment (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994:23), relationship commitment is shown where partners believe that a continuing relationship with another is so important that it necessitates all efforts to maintain it. The parties believe the relationship is worth working on for endurance and benefit. Commitment, therefore, can be regarded as a vital “investment” for ensuring a successful, long-term business relationship (Walter et al. 2003:161).

Ulaga and Eggert (2006b:313) further believe that in addition to the “soft factors” of trust and commitment, it is also essential for organisations to focus on relationship value factors that are regarded as performance variables. They identified some underlying relationship value drivers within the B2B context, including product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time to market and personal interaction (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:130, 134). Other researchers are also in support of relationship value within a B2B context and argue that suppliers can achieve differentiation advantages by adding “soft” relationship value elements to their offering, which seems to influence customer loyalty much more than the “hard” product quality and direct product cost price. Therefore, suppliers can build strong strategic partnerships with customers without the problem of “selling on price” in a market under intense price pressure (Čater & Čater, 2009:593). When customers perceive supplier’s relationship efforts as valuable, they will be more loyal (Čater & Čater, 2010:37). Thus, suppliers should appreciate the role of measuring and building relationship value with partners as it impacts on the intention to stay in a sustainable relationship, contributing towards increased sales, profits, communication and opportunities for innovation and growth (Gil-Saura et al. 2009:605).

The relationship between Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) trust and commitment factors as well as Ulaga and Eggert’s (2006a:130, 134) value factors and B2B customer loyalty towards suppliers, however, have not been formally investigated before within the crop protection environment. There appears to be a lack of research on their applicability to the unique distribution model of ISAs in South Africa. Considering the potential contribution of these factors to the prosperity of suppliers in the crop protection industry, however, it seems to be necessary to explore them further and examine their relationship to B2B customer loyalty towards suppliers. Insight into these matters may contribute to addressing the research gap about B2B customer loyalty that currently exists within the crop protection industry.

The following section provides more insight into the crop protection industry in South Africa.

1.3 THE CROP PROTECTION INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The crop protection market is investigated first.

1.3.1 The crop protection market

The global crop protection market grew on average 7% per year, from \$33 billion in 2007 to a current \$60 billion. However, information about the market size is mere estimates, as reliable information is not available. The South African market size is estimated around R7.4 billion which is less than 0.5% of the global market. The growth projection for this market in South Africa is just above 2.5%. However, single digit negative growth was experienced the past three years as a result of drought and a fluctuation in the South African Rand (ZAR) exchange rate (Greyling, 2015; Greyling, 2017). According to Uttley (2013:8), it is expected that the global population will grow even further from 3.2 billion in 1965 to a projected 8.3 billion in 2030, and the arable land per capita will decrease from 4,300m² to 1800m² by 2030. Greater use of agrochemicals is therefore foreseen.

It is further noted that to recuperate the research and development costs incurred to bring the active ingredient to the market, crop protection products are usually patented and protected by Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). The cost to deliver a product to the market is more than \$250 million (Phillips McDougall, 2015). Based on the IPR of the active ingredient Nishimoto (2014) and Uttley (2013:8) split the market into three product types:

- Proprietary or patented products (23% market share) where the active ingredient is protected and defended by a granted patent.
- Proprietary off-patent products (18% market share) are products with active ingredients which are off-patent, but the final formulated product contains some proprietary technology or data protection, that restrict generic manufacturers of entering the market.
- Generic Products (59% market share) is where the true competition in the market takes place and where generic companies developed their data.

The challenge for innovator suppliers then is a loss in profit margins and customer loyalty, once the patent expires and a generic product is introduced into the market. One strategy for patented suppliers is to introduce new formulation additives, mix it with other products, and improve the delivery systems to extend the IPR beyond the original active ingredient (Uttley, 2013:8). It is well worth mentioning that 48 pesticides will lose their patent protection in the next decade (WBISS, 2016). However, it also appears to be necessary to persuade targeted

customers that meaningful differences exist in the marketplace and that the unique benefits of the supplier's offering are worth a premium (Kotler & Keller, 2016:212).

1.3.2 Regulation of the crop protection industry

The trade and use of agrochemicals in South Africa are regulated by Act 36 of 1947, Fertilisers, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies (AR) and Stock Remedies Act. The act defines agricultural remedies as any chemical substance or biological remedy intended, offered or used to destruct, control, repel, attract or prevent any undesired microbe, algae, nematode, fungus, insect, plant, vertebrate, invertebrate, or any product thereof. Plant growth regulators, defoliants, desiccants or legume inoculant are also classified by the Act as agricultural remedies. This act requires that all AR should be registered with the registrar of this act and issued with a unique number.

The crop protection industry in South Africa is further self-regulated by CropLife SA (CLSA) for original suppliers, generic suppliers and an affiliate for distributors, the Association of Veterinary and Crop Associations of South Africa (AVCASA). These associations are representative of the plant science industry, including the majority of responsible manufacturers and suppliers of crop protection products. CLSA train and give accreditation to member's sales agents (ISAs) also known as independent agents. This is done to ensure that farmers and end-users needs are satisfied through professional and efficient service.

1.3.3 Manufacturers and importers of chemicals in South Africa and the distribution channel

The 49 members of Crop Life SA include original suppliers, generic suppliers and holders of crop protection registrations (CropLife South Africa, 2015). This account for approximately 95% of role players in this sector of the industry (Dreyer, 2017). The most popular manufacturing and supply brand names within the South African market include Adama SA, Arysta Lifescience, BASF, Bayer Cropscience, Dow Agrosience, Du Pont De Nemours, Monsanto, Nulandis Philagro SA, Syngenta SA, Villa Crop Protection, and Oro Agri.

There are further about 28 distribution organisations that are affiliated through AVCASA to CLSA (CropLife South Africa, 2015) and who mostly rely on ISAs to sell the products to farmers. The main distributor role-players regarding the number of agents listed by size are Nulandis, Inteligro, Lowveld Agrochem, Wenkem, NexusAG, Novon Protecta, Farmers Agri-Care, BayAgro and Novon NRC. They represent about 85% of all ISAs. Viking. During the time this research was conducted Terrason and Technichem merged into a new major distributor namely Inteligro. Not all distributors have a national footprint. Geographical or niche

role players are Novon Retail, Novon Protecta, Bayagro and Farmers Agricare. There are also strong, independent and localised players like Provento, Loskop Kunsmis, Wilgechem, Destrimix and Oosvaal Landbou that intensifies the competition in the market.

There are approximately 1000 ISAs in South Africa. The ISA sales force in South Africa is on average 47 years old and usually lives in the community in which they operate. In many cases, the ISA is also a friend of the farmers and spend time outside the business context with the farmers, like going to theatre, fishing or holidaying together. It can be best concluded that most of these ISAs maintain a close and profitable business friendship with the farmer (Greyling, 2015). ISAs on average are therefore very sociable and entertainment is a core activity in the industry.

Although ISAs are distributed over the country, regional meetings are further held, where market-related information is shared, and different manufacturers are invited to give training on their products. In some instances, there is also a close friendship between the ISAs. The ISAs can subsequently influence each other and would scale down or even boycott a particular supplier's product range if found out to act unethical or inconsiderate (Grobbelaar, 2016; Van Wyk, 2016; Wolmarans, 2016; Pretorius, 2016).

ISAs are geographically distributed over South Africa, with the highest numbers in the Western Cape and Free State provinces known for their production of export fruit and maize production respectively. Table 1.1 lists the number of ISAs by province.

Table 1.1: Geographical distribution of ISAs over SA

Province	No of ISAs
Western Cape	242
Free State	152
North West	97
Mpumalanga	85
Limpopo	81
KZN	66
Unknown	63
Eastern Cape	49
Northern Cape	48
Gauteng	35
Namibia	1

Source: AVCASA (2016)

Finally, the distributor-agent relationship is based on agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989:58) which has been widely embraced in the field of commission and sales compensation (Tremblay et al. 2003:1652). The theory can be summarised as an agreement between two parties, the principal (supplier) and the agent (ISA). Two issues arise in this agreement. First the so-called agency problem, which presumes a conflict of interest between the principal and agent in assessing the ISA's actual performance. Secondly, the problem of risk sharing, which presumes a different attitude to risk from the parties. The supplier's objective is to maximise profits, while ISAs strive to maximise their utility. Hence the supplier must ensure that the ISA will act in the best interest of the firm by linking the ISA's compensation to sales results and outcomes. However, this increases the uncertainty of ISAs and their perceived risk, as their efforts may not necessarily lead to actual sales. A premium, in the form of the higher commission, is offered to counter this financial risk (Tremblay et al. 2003:1653).

1.3.4 Competition within the crop protection industry

The South African crop protection industry is very competitive with more than 3,000 products registered for use (South Africa, 2010:40). This competition will deepen even more as 28 active ingredients will lose their patent protection from 2014 to 2020 (Uttley, 2014:8). Many product solutions are available to solve the same problem. For example, to control a pest such as the African Bollworm (*Helicoverpa amigera*), the farmer has 30 active ingredients in 43 different formulations registered to kill bollworm (Crop Life South Africa, 2013:182). If these active ingredients are broken down in trade names, the farmer will have around 150 choices available to control bollworm on tomatoes. A further example of competition is an old (1975) widely used insecticide with the active ingredient *cypermethrin 200g/L* from the chemical class pyrethroids which can be applied in more than 60 situations on multiple crops with at least 16 registrations and corresponding trade names for this active ingredient by 2013. To add further complexity, there are not less than ten other pyrethroids registered under approximately 70 trade names in South Africa which directly competes with cypermethrin (Crop Life South Africa, 2013:207-259).

The wide variety of brands, trade names, formulations and active ingredients, subsequently creates an increasingly complex challenge for the industry because they are all competing for the same type of customer, the same crop and the same problem. Price competition is fierce under suppliers that only produce technical active ingredients because once quality standards are met, the only main differentiation is price, which is passed on to the marketing channel (Agrow Pages, 2013).

The next section offers more insight into the study's research constructs as well as the research hypotheses that will be further explored in the empirical part of the study.

1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of the literature review discussion in this section is to provide more insight into customer loyalty from a business-to-business perspective. It is also the intention of this section to offer a greater understanding of relationship marketing and the relationship marketing constructs that will be further investigated in the empirical part of the study.

1.4.1 Business to business (B2B) customer loyalty

Dick and Basu (1994:99) view customer loyalty as the strength of the connection between attitude and recurring purchase of the customer. According to Oliver (1999:34), customer loyalty can be defined as *“a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour”*. Hayes (2015) believes *“customer loyalty is the degree to which customers experience positive feelings for and exhibit positive behaviours toward a company or brand.”*

Kotler and Armstrong (2014:49) argue that it makes economic sense to keep customers loyal. A loyal customer spends more and stays around longer. It is five times cheaper to keep a customer than to prospect a new one. Losing a customer can also be costly, as it is not only the loss of a sale but losing a whole revenue stream, or so-called future customer lifetime value.

Dickson (2014:7) further notes that the construct of loyalty in the business setting has been extensively researched over time, but there still appears to be no agreement in the understanding of customer loyalty. For example, B2B customer loyalty has been defined by Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2015:10) as the customer's loyalty to choose the same supplier notwithstanding the need or product in question. It has also been noted that B2B customer loyalty can be defined as a buyer's intent to repurchase from a given supplier (Russo et al. 2016:2). Jambulingam et al. (2011:40) define loyalty as repeat episodes of intent to rebuy from a supplier.

Considering the various definitions provided, B2B customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions may then collectively relate to the unwavering and continuous recommendation, prescription and sales, by the ISA, of the preferred supplier's product range

to the farmer notwithstanding the counter offers, lower prices and shenanigans in an overtraded generic market.

1.4.2 Relationship marketing

Grönroos (1990:5) defines relationship marketing as the establishment, maintenance, enhancement and commercialisation of customer relationships in such a way that the goals of the parties are achieved by synergistic exchanges and fulfilment of pledges. Sheth, Parvatiyar and Sinha (2012:5) refer to relationship marketing as a one-to-one long-term mutually beneficial relationship between supplier and customer, which suggests an involved and customised approach for individual accounts. According to them, relationship marketing is defined as:

“...the ongoing process of engaging in collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic, social and psychological value, profitably.

Morgan and Hunt (1994:22) believe relationship marketing relates to those marketing activities instituted to establish, develop and maintain successful relationship encounters.

In addition to the above key contributions, a number of additional studies have been conducted over the years to obtain more insight into the relationship marketing concept within a B2B context. Table 1.2 below offers a summary of some of the findings from previous studies.

Table 1.2: Perspective and findings of relationship marketing studies

Authors	Adopted perspectives of relationship marketing	Key findings or outcomes of relationship marketing
(Grönroos, 1990)	The common perception of marketing as a function of planning and executing a marketing mix, may not be the full perspective when a service component is included. Marketing revolves around a transactional relationship with little social interaction.	Relationship marketing is broader in scope and involve substantial social contact, interaction, and collaboration and is of a continuous and lasting nature.
(Doney & Cannon, 1997)	The integration of different fields to establish the cognitive processes through which industrial buyers can develop the trust of a supplying organisation and its salesperson, to identify antecedents of trust.	Several variables are influencing the development of trust and in the supplier company and his salesperson. Trust in the supplier and salesperson influence the buyer's future interaction with the supplier.

Authors	Adopted perspectives of relationship marketing	Key findings or outcomes of relationship marketing
(Weitz & Bradford, 1999)	The changing role of salespeople in the buyer-supplier dyad, from traditional personal selling and sales management to the partnering role for salespeople.	Salespeople who are customer-centred are ideally placed and focus on long-term customer relationships rather than products and services: Creating and maintaining relationships, managing conflict, creating value, teamwork and personal interaction.
(Buttle & Biggeman, 2003)	A theoretical model of the antecedents, attributes and consequences of relationship quality in the business-to-business context.	Identified the key dimension of relationship quality as satisfaction, trust and commitment. Other components that may affect relationship quality are common goals, communication interaction, investments, customisation, mutual understanding, profit, high product quality, joint problem-solving, shared values, power and systems integration.
(Lam et al. 2004)	Extended prior B2C cognitive-affect behaviour constructs to the B2B courier service setting, that customer satisfaction intermediates the relationship between customer value and customer loyalty.	Customer value positively predicts customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on the two loyalty dimensions, patronage and recommendation. Switching cost has a positive effect on recommendation loyalty.
(Ulaga & Eggert, 2006)	The researchers pursue alternative forms of differentiation than product and price, through value creation in B2B relationships.	Relationship benefits have better capability for differentiation in supplier relationships than cost concerns. Service support and personal interaction are primary differentiators. Other factors are supplier's know-how, time-to-market, product quality, delivery performance. Procurement costs and operation costs have a moderate potential to maintain key supplier status. Product price has the weakest potential for differentiation.
(Sezen & Yilmaz, 2007)	The exploration in the relational behaviour of channel partners (B2B) inter-dependence and trust on the relational behaviour forms of flexibility, information exchange, and solidarity.	Partner flexibility is driven by the perceived level of dependence (calculative commitment) on the channel partner, information sharing (know-how) is influenced by trust in the partner, and channel member solidarity (congruent goals) with the partner is affected by dependence and trust.
(Čater & Čater, 2010)	The study explores how product quality and relationship quality can influence customer commitment and the effect thereof on customer loyalty in a B2B manufacturing setting.	Customer loyalty depends more on "emotional" (affective commitment) than on "rational" (calculative commitment and product quality) motivation to continue the relationship. Relationship quality is influenced more by social aspects than technical aspects.

Authors	Adopted perspectives of relationship marketing	Key findings or outcomes of relationship marketing
(Sheth et al. 2012)	Relationship marketing started off as the conceptually narrow phenomenon of customer loyalty and marketing relationships	With cooperation and collaboration between buyers and sellers' relationship marketing has become the forceful standard of marketing practice and research. Relationship marketing is evolving into the principal point of view in marketing.
(Haas et al. 2012)	The study dealt with the relational perspective on value creation by salespeople in supplier-buyer relationships.	The sales function has a role as co-creator of business relationship value regarding linking and interfacing the partners (jointness), balancing the interests of the parties (balanced initiative), continuous interactions (interacted value) and sense-making or context seeking (socio-cognitive value).
(Ashnai et al. 2016)	This study contributes to understanding the role of trust in business-to-business relationships at two different levels of operation: the interpersonal and inter-organisational levels.	By establishing interpersonal and inter-organisational trust, commitment, relational investment and information sharing are influencers of company performance such as profitability, competitiveness and innovation.

From the research findings listed in Table 1.2, it can be derived that there is a general agreement that relationship marketing practices are aimed at establishing long-term relationships. Secondly, relationship marketing requires social contact, interaction, and collaboration between stakeholders. Thirdly, trust and commitment are important elements of the relationship marketing domain. Fourthly, relationship marketing practices may have an impact on the performance of the organisation. Finally, the sales function of the organisation plays a pivotal role in establishing, nurturing and maintaining B2B relationships. This also has a downside as some scholars believe that this relationship loyalty is owned by the salesperson and can be at risk when the salesperson defects (Palmatier et al. 2007:195).

Within the relationship marketing domain, relationship quality and relationship value have also been noted as important in establishing relationships in the business-to-business context (Gil-Saura et al., 2009:594, 605). These concepts and their underlying dimensions are subsequently further explored next.

1.4.3 Relationship quality

Relationship quality expresses the overall climate and depth of the interfirm relationship (Johnson, 1999:11). Lahiri and Kedai (2011:12) define relationship quality as the evaluation of various attributes of interfirm relationships maintained by buyers and sellers, which can be referred to as the nature of cooperation and the health of the ongoing B2B relationship.

Relationship quality, therefore, relates to the quality of the interaction between a customer and an organisation (Naudé & Buttle, 2000:352). In a highly regulated and contractual B2B setting relationship quality is even more important for a successful long-term relationship (Beatson et al. 2011:5). The quality of the relationship between the parties involved determine the longevity and strength of the B2B relationship (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007:857)

Seminal contributors to the field of relationship quality include Dwyer and Oh in 1987 as well as Crosby et al. in 1990. These studies generated a stream of research on the concept of relationship quality (Athanasopoulou, 2009:586), and a number of relationship quality dimensions have been identified over the past few decades. They are relationship satisfaction, cooperation, opportunism, power, adaptation, atmosphere, social bonds and structural bonds as well as trust and commitment (Athanasopoulou, 2009:604). It is the aim of this research study to explore further the relationship quality dimensions trust and commitment that has been accepted as core attributes of high-quality relationships (Buttle & Maklan, 2015:28).

1.4.3.1 Dimensions of relationship quality

The dimensions of trust and commitment is discussed in this section.

1.4.3.1.1 Trust

Various definitions have been formulated to define the concept of trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994:23) define trust as the belief of one exchange partner in the reliability and integrity of the other. According to Hollensen (2015:210) trust relates to the fact that the one alliance partner will act predictably, keep his word and not act in a way that negatively affects the other. This is especially important under conditions where a partner feels vulnerable due to over-dependence on the other. Sensitive trading information and knowledge are shared between the partners. The fear that such knowledge can be used later to compete against the former partner will diminish trust, especially in an asymmetrical power relationship. Naude and Buttle (2000:353) postulate that trust brings about a secure feeling eases uncertainty and establish a supportive environment. Doney et al. (2007:1099) believe that trust in a partner's credibility:

“is based on the belief that one's partner stands by its word, fulfils promised role obligations, and is sincere. Trust in a partner's benevolence is a belief that one's partner is interested in the firm's welfare and will not take unexpected actions that would have a negative impact on the firm.”

Tirpitz and Zhu (2015:167) offer more insight into the matter by stating that trust relates to credibility (honesty/integrity), benevolence (kindness/compassion) and reliability (dependable) (McAllister, 1995). Credibility is the belief that the other partner's promises are reliable. Benevolence signifies the extent to which the parties are interested in the other's welfare and

motivated to pursue mutual gain. Reliability can be seen as the future rational behaviour of a relationship partner (Blomqvist, 1997:279).

Trust develops during the expansion phase of the relationship where there is increasing interdependence. As more successful transactions are taking place, trust begins to develop. The development of trust is an investment in the relationship with long-term benefits. Trust develops as the parties share experiences, learn about each other and minimising risk and doubt. Trust can, therefore, be described as the glue that bonds the relationship across time and differences (Buttle & Maklan, 2015:27).

Consequently, trust within the context of the study may relate to the ISA believing that the supplier is kind, honest and competent and could be viewed as the glue that bonds the relationship between the supplier and the ISA.

1.4.3.1.2 Commitment

Morgan and Hunt (1994:23) define commitment as “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum effort at maintaining it”. Commitment evolves from the trust, shared values and the belief that partners are not easily replaced. Commitment motivates the partnering B2B members to cooperate to preserve the relational “investment”. Investments include time, money, energy and the sacrifice of alternative relationships. When given a choice, businesses will only commit to trustworthy partners because it is leaving them vulnerable to abuse and opportunism (Buttle & Maklan, 2015:27).

Meyer and Allen's Three-Component Model of Commitment (1991) further distinguishes between affective, continuance and normative commitment. Affective commitment indicates an emotional bond and includes the longing to develop and maintain a deep relationship with an entity as a result of familiarity, friendship and comfort, established through interpersonal exchanges over time. Affectively committed customers maintain relationships because they like their suppliers and enjoy working with them. Continuance commitment denotes the calculation of the cost of absolving the relationship (switching cost). It can be the result of a lack of alternative suppliers (negative) or a rational value-based commitment (positive) with benefits resulting from the relationship. Normative commitment refers to the moral obligation to remain in the relationship (indebtedness or gratitude). Normatively committed customers continue the relationship because they feel they have to and are morally obliged to keep it intact (Čater & Čater, 2010:1325).

Commitment, therefore, can be expressed at different levels to indicate the customer wanting to remain in relationship, having the motivation to make short-term forfeits, the confidence in the strength of the relationship and the investments made in the relationship (Stanko et al., 2007:1096).

Within the context of the study, commitment may then relate to the ISA having the passion to continue the relationship with the supplier and being willing to make short-term sacrifices to gain important long-term benefits.

1.4.3.2 Potential impact of dimensions of relationship quality on B2B customer loyalty

Marketing relationship strategies should be evaluated in the light of how it positively changes the behaviour of customers in favour of the supplier. Marketing literature postulates that there is a positive correlation between the relationship quality and the customer's loyalty (Naoui & Zaiem, 2010:145).

Relationship quality must be managed to ensure customer loyalty (Rauyruen et al., 2007:9). The elements of relationship quality have a direct and positive effect on loyalty (Beatson et al. 2011:4). The test for relationship quality is that business customers must believe and confide in their suppliers who lead to additional investment by the supplier and subsequent a greater desire to transact (loyalty) by the partner (Wu et al. 2015:2324). Friendship and devotion are important in business relationships. When customers feel that the other party is a crucial ally and a good partner, then there is a desire to maintain a long-term relationship, hence when the parties have pleasing transactions and supportive experiences they are inspired by loyal behaviour (Wu et al. 2015:2328).

Naude and Buttle (2000:353) further argue that repeat purchase behaviour is positively based on the commitment which relates to a stronger relationship and bond between customer and supplier. Committed customers are dedicated and faithful. Truly committed customers develop interdependencies, shared values and strategies which are met by long-term devotion and loyalty towards the other party (2000:354).

Doney and Cannon (1997:48) conclude that suppliers should make investments to maintain and develop higher level customer trust for more favourable purchasing outcomes. The process of trust-building is time-consuming, expensive and complex. However, the outcomes are strong supplier-seller bonds and intensified loyalty.

Jiang et al. (2016:309) argue that a successful and long-term business to the business relationship (loyalty) from the perspective of the buyer is founded in good relationship quality. Long-term relations are preferred for the parties to know and trust each other to communicate and anticipate the customer's future expectations (Naoui & Zaiem, 2010:150).

Considering these previously established relationships and the fact that trust and commitment are further viewed as dimensions of the relationship quality domain, the possibility exists that trust and commitment may also have an impact on B2B customer loyalty within the crop protection industry. These relationships require further testing, and it is consequently hypothesised that:

H1: Trust positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

H2: Commitment positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

1.4.4 Relationship value

Relationship value originates from the social psychological theory of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) which assumes that human relationships are formed by weighing the cost and benefits of a relationship in comparison with the cost and benefits of other relationships. Value is created when buyers and sellers interact through relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1996), business-to-business marketing (Dwyer et al. 1987) and service marketing (Grönroos, 1990). Ulaga and Eggert (2006b:314) refer to relationship value as a subjective trade-off between benefits and costs that are multifaceted and relative to the competition. For long-term B2B relationships to be successful the understanding of relationship value between the partners is necessary (Kim, 2014:111). Kim (2014:112) points out that relationship value must be viewed from the perspective of both the supplier and buyer to be mutually beneficial through co-production, co-creation and accrued value.

Ulaga and Eggert (2006a:120) conducted a qualitative study to gain a greater understanding of the value-creating dimensions that are important in a business relationship. They interviewed purchasing managers at manufacturing companies who were asked to identify what they perceived as value generators in the supplier-buyer relationships. The factors identified include product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:122) and are further explored in the next section.

1.4.4.1 Relationship value factors

The relationship value factors to be further investigated in this study are outlined below.

1.4.4.1.1 Product quality

For an exchange relationship to develop a product must first exist. The relationship is built around the product. Customers are not motivated to continue the relationship simply for the relationship's sake itself unless they procure a product that meets their needs (Čater & Čater, 2010:6). Zeithaml (1988:3) defines quality as superiority or excellence and perceived quality as the customer's evaluation regarding the superiority and excellence of the product. In a competitive environment, however, it has become more challenging for suppliers to differentiate from competitors by high product quality (Čater & Čater, 2010:6).

Ulaga and Eggert (2006a:123) identify product quality as the degree to which the supplier's primary offering meets customer requirements, with key aspects being performance, reliability and consistency over time. One of the criteria for the selection of a supplier (Kahraman et al. 2003:383) is the technical support and capability to consistently provide high-quality products, promote successful development efforts and ensure future improvements. Product quality and performance are further measured against criteria such as functionality, reliability, maintainability, tolerance, resilience, compatibility, ease of handling, packaging, shelf-life, storage, end-user satisfaction, environmental considerations, recyclability, availability, ergonomics and market demand. The original product quality starts with the customer's expectation and must be fulfilled over time as customer demand and technological innovation changes the perceptions of quality. Thus, to satisfy the customer, a continuous improvement process is important (Geiger, 2015:131). Suppliers should focus on long-term advantages and not short-term gains in the case of a sub-standard product delivery (Čater & Čater, 2010:37).

Within the context of the study, product quality may, therefore, relate to crop protection solutions being reliable and consistent over time to satisfy the needs of the farmer. The product offering must be safe and ethical, according to acceptable specification, of reputable origins and in clean, safe and secure packaging. Prescribing and selling premium quality products to a farmer, benefits the ISA as the farmer's crop is protected. Secondly, the ISA can rest assured that there is not going to be time-consuming complaints, comebacks, claims or even liability suits resulting from damaged crops. Farmer behaviour normally includes a moratorium on all payments, related or not, in the case of potential claims. Thirdly the ISA can maintain his image, reputation and integrity as a responsible advisor in the farming community.

1.4.4.1.2 Delivery performance

Delivery performance refers to the supplier's ability to deliver *accurately*, on schedule with supply *flexibility* and the ability to be *responsive* to changes in the market. Reliability in delivery leads to the benefits of holding a smaller inventory and less idle stock. This also means the ability to respond in case of unforeseen or emergency deliveries and the supplier leaving no stone untouched to source products to satisfy the unforeseen need of the customer. The correctness in the delivery of an order is very important to stay operational (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:123). Delivery performance, therefore, relates to delivery speed, delivery reliability, product availability and the willingness to change delivery procedures (Doney & Cannon, 1997:48). Suppliers should focus on the avoidance of late shipments, have the ability to expand production capacity, treat sample delivery as important and be able to respond to changes in order size to benefit the relationship (Hollensen, 2015:138).

The ability to recommend and supply a crop protection remedy to a farmer is the fundamental purpose of being an ISA. The ISA's tacit promise to the farmers (customers) is after considering the situation, to prescribe a product solution for the problem pest and deliver the order timely on the farm. These crop protection strategies are either preventative or curative and should fit in with the operations and resources available on the farm. The inability to fulfil the promise, understandably, causes a chain reaction of negativity in the relationship of the farmer with the ISA. Ultimately, this leaves the farm gate open for a rival agent to capitalise on the broken promise. Secondly, is the outbreak of disease or pests not always predictable, which creates a sense of urgency to prevent further damage to the crop, which makes availability and delivery even more urgent. Lastly, the ISA usually receives only one delivery per week from the distributing organisation to his depot, which requires availability and accuracy from the supplier to avoid the embarrassment of the ISA at his customer.

1.4.4.1.3 Service support

In the process of selling a physical product in the B2B marketplace, the supplier often realises that the service provided in conjunction with the product is valued more by the buyer than the product itself (Cann, 1998:394). This is also the case in the generic crop protection industry, where there is no scarcity in tangible products to recommend and sell to the end-user producer. The ISA would typically rely more on a supplier who gives good service and support on this product range.

Service support represents the supplier's capacity to add value by being responsive, exchanging information regularly and performing tasks on behalf (outsourcing) of the

customer. Customers value the responsiveness of suppliers in addressing their concerns, especially in the case of complexity and technicality. A second facet is the management of information (feedback) in the supply chain. When the situation and needs of the customer change, the supplier must react timely with new relevant information or action. Thirdly, suppliers can solidify their standing by performing tasks on behalf of the customer, such as doing marketing on behalf of the customer and communicating directly with the end-user (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:123).

Many of the service related intangibles include with the product offering, as service support, also correspond to the factors of service quality as researched by scholars such as Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Barry in the 80's and 90's. Service support includes those factors that give the buyer a competitive edge such as partnering, problem-solving and the communication of new technology to the customers (Cann, 1998:384). Ultimate service support is provided when the supplier aids the buyer with the implementation of a new product by assisting to make the product acceptable and successful (Cann, 1998:400). As far as the crop protection industry is concerned service support consists mainly of the efforts and assistance the supplier extends to the ISA to successfully establish remedies in the market as sustainable solutions to the producer's challenges and problems.

Consequently, it can be concluded that service is a "human interaction" activity. This translates to the proverbial extra mile the supplier is willing to walk regarding customer support, accessibility, timeliness, responsiveness, trustworthiness, value-adding, follow-up, informing, professionalism, knowledge, attitude and accuracy. The benefit created in a good relationship between the supplier and ISA is that both parties can respond to resolve the farmer's concerns and needs enthusiastically and responsibly. Secondly, it creates the impression that the agent has sufficient backup and other means in case his capacity is inefficient. This means that he can seek help from a higher "authority" to assist in solving whatever needs to be solved.

1.4.4.1.4 Supplier know-how

Supplier know-how represents the knowledge base and technical expertise of the supplier (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:123). The supplier's know-how in the market and previous experience with customers are valuable. The assimilation of knowledge from alliance partners can lead to more efficient and effective collaboration in future and may even lead to innovation and new products (Wu & Wu, 2015:184). The concept of know-how is rooted in organisational learning where organisations learn from each other to identify and correct mistakes through improvement in policy and practice, to develop cross-competencies to create new opportunities (Nyaga & Whipple, 2011:347). Supplier know-how can also assist in solving

specific operational problems (Kotabe et al., 2000). Firms should be encouraging to share knowledge with their partners to benefit not only on market level but in the whole supply-chain and must be consciously and proactively managed (Cai et al., 2013:2072).

Within the context of complex products (such as crop protection) customers must rely on their suppliers to give credibility to the product offering as their information and know-how depends on the supplier's efficacy in conveying it (De Ruyter et al., 2001:282). As a result of their superior knowledge of products and markets, suppliers could potentially provide customers with new products and solutions to be mutually beneficial to the partners. To maintain long-term relationships, suppliers should hire sales and service personnel with both technical skills and social abilities to facilitate this process (De Ruyter et al., 2001:283).

Within the context of this study, the supplier's know-how may, therefore, be of great value to the ISA. The supplier usually has in-house technical and research capacity with vast experience and training. The supplier's knowledge of plant pests and diseases, as well as how to manage it and how to position the supplier's products in the quests thereof, may be valuable and assist the ISA in obtaining a competitive advantage above other agents. Access to the supplier's know-how may also assist the ISA in solving particular operational problems for the farmer. The supplier also services other agents in other farming areas which empower him to relay fads, crop protection solutions and market trends to the ISA, to compete more vigorously. For most ISAs, the know-how of the supplier is crude but very accessible, and only a phone call away to the area sales manager.

1.4.4.1.5 Time-to-market

Time-to-market represents the ability of a supplier to bring new products faster to the market than the competition. In a competitive market, companies are under pressure to develop products at a quicker pace to be market leaders. This also includes the development, testing and validation of prototypes (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:126).

The introduction of new or improved products to the market became increasingly important as a result of the reduced life cycle and increased competition. Quicker product introduction improves profitability and extends sales lifetime. By being first in the market, a premium price can be charged for new products. The organisation can be established in the market as a leader and is in a favourable position to set industry standards. Businesses which can introduce new products swiftly can react quickly to changing demand to maintain market share. Lastly, introducing new products into the market improves satisfaction (Feng et al.

2014:730). Benefits such as increased efficiency of resources, price premiums and customer loyalty may also be realised (Perols et al. 2013:153).

Within the crop protection industry, improved products are also required to stay relevant and to obtain a competitive advantage. The supplier has the research and development capacity to design and trial improved formulations, new products, niche products, blends and co-formulations into new profitable offerings in the marketplace. The mutual benefit may be unique new products for the ISAs in a shorter period, thereby creating a competitive advantage at the farmer and new revenue streams for the supplier.

1.4.4.1.6 Personal interaction

Personal interaction represents the relationships which develop between the key contact personnel of the partners at an individual level, which is normally highly valued and contribute to problem-solving, communication and an understanding of the challenges and goals of the partners (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:125). The interaction between parties in commercial relationships, therefore, consists of a continuous flow of acts, episodes and sequences between the parties, which eventually constitute a relationship (Hollensen, 2015:365). During every interaction, individuals will make sense of the other party's situation and objectives through continuous adjustment of their actions and perceptions to the situation in an attempt to create relationship value (Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015:140). Personal interaction assists in creating collective meaning (value) in the relationship. This is achieved by encouragement to change, decreasing risk and uncertainty and increasing dependency (Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015:147).

Consequently, it can be concluded that personal interaction relates to the strong bond and collaboration between partners in person, to solve problems, seek opportunity and mutual benefits and to manage the relationship with the ISAs of the distributor.

Personal interaction between ISAs and sales managers of the suppliers at an individual level is common practice in the crop protection industry. The interaction between the ISA and supplier is not restricted to the working relationship but also to social interaction. Agents are invited to participate in outdoor activities, new product launches, business functions, sports events and concerts. These activities produce positive feelings of affiliation experienced by the ISA (De Ruyter et al. 2001:283)

Productive and rewarding interaction is highly valued and contributes to problem-solving, communication and understanding of the goals for both the supplier and the ISA. Interaction in highly motivated supplier-ISA relationships typically consists of at least monthly meetings

and face-time. Secondary contact support consists of weekly (even daily) interaction by phone, e-mail, Whatsapp and other media. The supplier supports the ISA through their interaction in planning, strategising, budgeting, mentoring, training, market analysis, and marketing visits to the farmers. All this interaction and support are in the interest of the ISA, ultimately to boost product sales to the advantage of both parties.

1.4.4.2 Potential impact of dimensions of relationship value on B2B customer loyalty

Although the customer's intention to continue the relationship (behavioural customer loyalty) is vested in the rationale of direct product cost and product quality, the supplier can increase sales by building relations and value around this core offering. This connects the parties on a more emotional and personal level and contributes to willingness to recommend and positive word of mouth (attitudinal customer loyalty) (Čater & Čater, 2009:593)

Relationship value has a positive effect on customer loyalty in the current trend of supplier consolidation. This is important for the long-term survival of supplier organisations. When distributors experience superior relationship value with their suppliers, they are likely to maintain the relationship and less susceptible to counter competitive offerings and are likely to increase their purchases in future (Skarmeas et al. 2016:34).

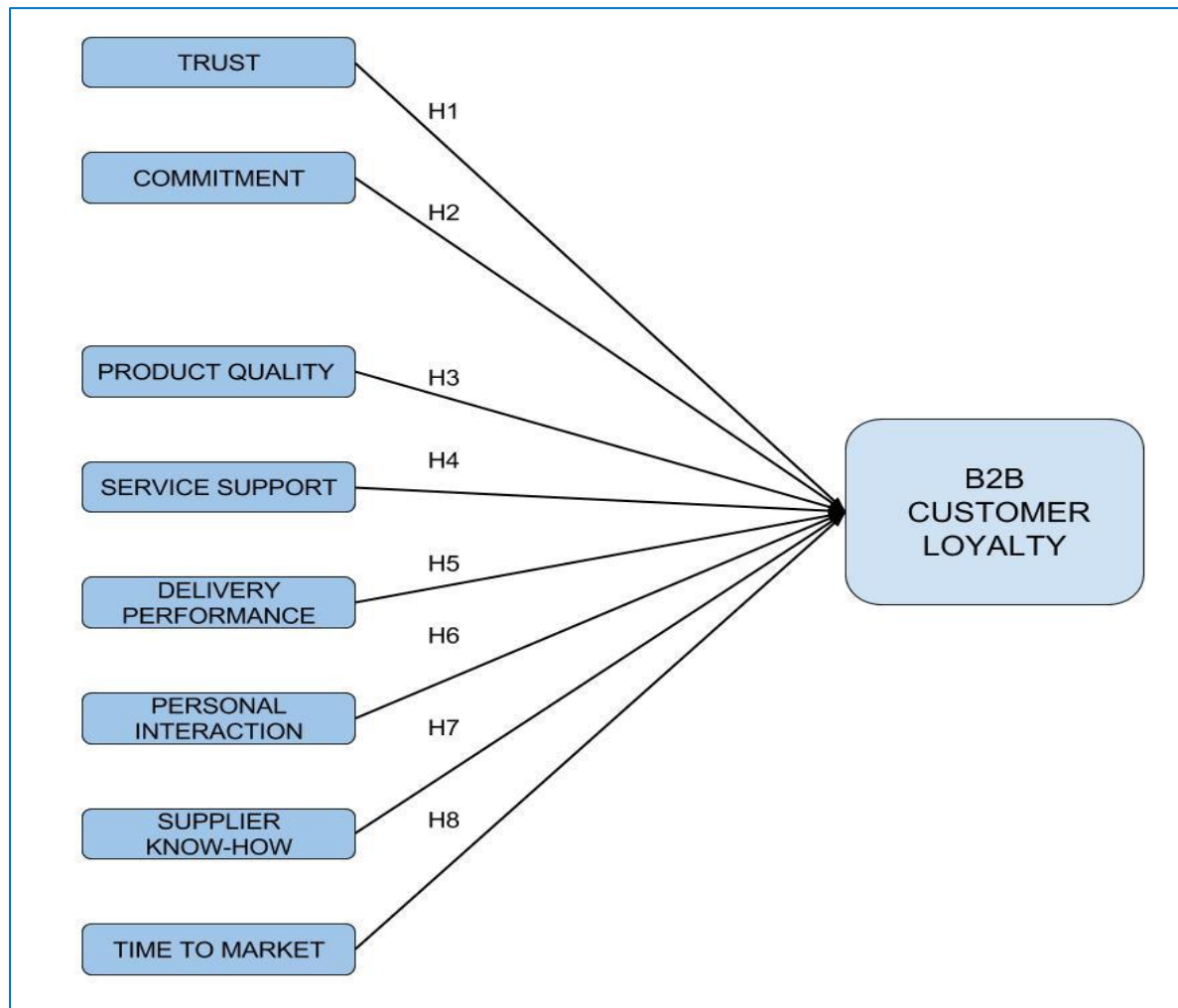
Considering these previously established relationships, there is then also a possibility that the relationship value factors previously established by Ulaga and Eggert's (2006a:130, 134) may have an impact on B2B customer loyalty within the crop protection industry. These relationships require further testing, and it is consequently hypothesised that:

- H3:** Product quality positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.
- H4:** Service support positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.
- H5:** Delivery performance positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.
- H6:** Personal interaction positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.
- H7:** Supplier know-how positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

H8: Time to market positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

1.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the previous section, it became evident that both original, as well as generic suppliers of crop protection products, may benefit greatly from investing, establishing and maintaining relationships with ISAs. The literature review has shown that relationship marketing practices, and especially relationship quality and relationship value have the potential to contribute to customer loyalty within the business to business context. Suppliers of generic crop protection products may, therefore, benefit by focusing on relationship marketing practices to build good relationships with ISAs that could in the long run result in the ISA being more loyal towards the preferred supplier and recommending its products to farmers. This matter, however, requires further empirical testing. As such some hypotheses have been formulated that will be further investigated among ISAs in South Africa to obtain greater clarification. Figure 1.1 below provides a summary of the factors under consideration as well as their hypothesised relationships that will be further explored in the empirical part of the study.

Figure 1.1: Conceptual model

Source: Researcher's own construct

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following objectives are identified for this study.

1.6.1 Primary objective

The primary objective of the study is to investigate factors predicting business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions.

1.6.2 Secondary objectives

The primary objective is achieved by the following secondary objectives which are formulated in Table 1.3:

Table 1:3: Secondary objectives

Secondary objectives	
Secondary objective 1	To provide an overview of research literature related to: 1a) Relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value. 1b) The main constructs of this research study, namely, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time to market, personal interaction and B2B customer loyalty. 1c) The relationships between the main constructs of this research study.
Secondary objective 2	To develop a sample profile of ISAs who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in the Republic of South Africa during the past two years and who participated in this research study.
Secondary objective 3	To measure the perception levels of ISAs regarding the constructs measured in this study. More specifically: 3a) To measure the levels of trust of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3b) To measure the levels of commitment of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3c) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the product quality provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3d) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of delivery provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3e) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of service support provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3f) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding their personal interactions with their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3g) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the know-how (knowledge) of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3h) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the time to market performance of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years.
Secondary objective 4	To assess whether the selected relationship quality and relationship value variables investigated in this study significantly and positively predict business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold by ISAs during the last two years.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section offers clarification on the research methodology followed in this study.

1.7.1 Literature study

The purpose of a literature review is to gain insight into important facts and background information related to the intended study and to provide justification for the research problem. The literature study systematically documents what is already known about the topic. It can also be used to identify the applicable theory, variables, relationships or concepts of the proposed study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015:121). The literature is also used for modelling of designs to select instruments, collect and analyse data and aids the researcher to interpret the results found in the study by comparing and citing it in the conclusion section of the report (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015:123). For this study, a literature review is conducted to clarify and define the research problem, the research questions, scales of measurement and hypotheses to be investigated (Hair et al. 2013:51).

The information used for the literature study was acquired from journals, articles, textbooks, research dissertations, accredited research documents, sources of news and the internet. The sources relevant to this research study are extracted from electronic databases such as Nexis, Science Direct international journals, internet scientific search engine Google Scholar, EBSCOhost international journals, ProQuest international dissertations, Sage Premier, SA publications, international business journals and other publications.

A valuable source of information is the industry body CropLife SA. However, a lot of this information is privileged and is the use thereof sensitive. Therefore, additional and complementary information will also be obtained interviewing some of the researcher's peers from industry on an ad hoc basis. This is to strengthen the understanding of the industry and the ISAs.

Literature sourced must be evaluated for relevance, sufficiency and the value in contribution towards answering the research question and achieving the research objectives (Saunders et al. 2016:106).

1.7.2 Empirical study

This section explains the process followed in conducting the empirical study.

1.7.2.1 Research design and method of data collection

The focus of the research design is to turn the research question into a research project (Saunders et al., 2016:163). In designing the research project, it is then necessary to consider whether an exploratory, descriptive or explanatory research approach will be followed. An exploratory study is conducted as a means to seek new insight, by asking questions to view a

certain phenomenon in a different light and to gain a better understanding of the nature of the problem (Saunders et al., 2016:174). Exploratory research is therefore meaningful in situations where there is not enough understanding to progress with the research project (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:129). The objective of descriptive research is to profile people, explain events or situations. This research can be pre- or post-exploratory or as a piece of explanatory research when it is necessary to gain a clear vision of the objects on which data is to be collected (Saunders et al., 2016:175). Cooper and Schindler (2014:134) further state that the main objective of descriptive research is to describe something like populations, market characteristics or functions. Descriptive studies are conducted when the researcher has considerable understanding of the issues at hand with clearly stated hypotheses and investigative questions available (Saunders et al., 2016:140; Cooper & Schindler, 2014:134; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:46). Explanatory research, also called causal studies (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:136) determine causal relationships between variables and explain the problem or phenomena. The data can be statistical tested and possibly correlated to get a clear view thereof. It can also be followed up by qualitative data to explain some of the reasons for this occurrence (Saunders et al., 2016:176). Causal research can be used to obtain confirmation of cause-and-effect relationships, which variables are the cause (independent variables) and which variables are the effect (dependent variables) of the marketing happenings, to determine the relationship between the causal variables and to test the hypotheses (Malhotra, 2015:88).

For this study, a descriptive design was chosen to profile the ISAs who have sold the crop protection products of their preferred suppliers to farmers, and to examine the constructs of this study. This approach was selected given the fact that a clear problem statement and hypotheses were formulated for further exploration.

In considering the research design, it is also necessary to choose between a quantitative and/or qualitative approach. Malhotra (2015:120) describes a quantitative research approach as seeking to quantify data and employing some statistical testing, and a qualitative research approach as an unstructured exploratory design based on a small sample with the purpose to provide insight and understanding. For this study, a quantitative descriptive approach is selected with the objective to measure and quantify statements relating to the research constructs investigated and to develop a detailed understanding of these constructs within the crop protection industry.

Descriptive research can also be expressed in the time dimension of being cross-sectional or longitudinal, where cross-sectional design is involved in the collecting of information from a

given population sample only once. Longitudinal design involves a fixed population sample repeatedly measured over time, such as a panel of the same people (Malhotra, 2015:87).

As previously indicated, the objective of descriptive research is to describe the characteristics of a relevant group such as salespeople or consumers as to profile them (Malhotra, 2015:87). The types of descriptive methods to be considered are the observational method, the case study method or the survey method.

The observational method makes observations about human behaviour and can be useful as initial research for a broader study. Field observations refer to the study of people's behaviour in their natural environment without the researcher's interaction or without asking them questions (Jackson, 2009:79; Cozby & Bates, 2015:119).

The case study is an in-depth exploration of an individual or a group of people. The case study explores numerous features of a few cases and the information is detailed, diverse and wide-ranging and are mostly qualitative. Typically, a case study may describe the acceptance of a product or a change management phenomenon and can be a single moment in time or over some duration of time (Jackson, 2009:95; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:101; Neuman, 2014:42).

The survey is a data collection method for communication with a representative sample of people to provide a "snapshot" at a specific point in time. The participants in the survey usually provide verbal feedback on questions from an interviewer or provide written answers to written questions. Surveys are primarily used to determine attitude, demographics, beliefs and future behavioural intentions (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:146; Cozby & Bates, 2015:133).

For this study, a once off cross-sectional approach is taken, by collecting information from the population sample only with a survey questionnaire containing standardised measuring instruments (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:278). A questionnaire is a structured technique of data collection made up of a series of questions, written or verbal, answered by a respondent. The objective of a questionnaire is to translate the information needed into a set of questions which the respondent will be able and willing to answer. Secondly, a questionnaire must be uplifting, motivating and inspiring to the respondent involved in the survey, to cooperate and complete it. Thirdly the questionnaire should strive to minimise response errors of inaccuracy from the respondent or miss-recording (Malhotra, 2015:241). In the intercept or self-administered research, the interviewer's primary role is to inspire participation for the participant to finish the questionnaire on his own (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:222).

For this study, a self-administered questionnaire, accessible to targeted ISAs in S.A. in hard copy is chosen. This offers the researcher and collaborators the opportunity to intercept ISAs

at regional sales meetings, technical training sessions, face-to-face call events and to ensure respondents that are knowledgeable and have the necessary experience participate in the survey.

Previously validated measurement scales, as adapted from the work of Ulaga and Eggert (2006) as well as Gil-Saura et al. (2009) will be used to obtain insight into the respondents' perceptions regarding the constructs measured in this study. The measurement scales will include a list of statements, and the respondents will be requested to indicate their level of agreement regarding each statement on a five-point unlabelled Likert scale where one, being in complete disagreement and five being in complete agreement.

Table 1.4 presents the sections to be included in the final questionnaire.

Table 1.4: Sections of the questionnaire

Questionnaire layout	Description
Preface	A cover letter to explain the research into customer loyalty behaviour in the crop protection industry. Explains anonymity and the rights of respondents who participate in this research study.
Section A	Determine respondents' demographic information regarding geography, gender, experience, age and home language
Section B1 Q1.1 - 1.10	Measure respondent perceptions relating to trust and commitment.
Section B1 Q1.11 – 1.36	Measure respondent perceptions relating to product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time to market
Section B2 Q2.1 – 2.4	Assess the respondents' customer loyalty levels towards their preferred supplier of crop protection solutions

The quantitative questionnaire will be validated by conducting a pilot test. A pilot test is used to detect weaknesses in the design, comprehension, instrumentation and to provide proxy data for selection of a sample (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:85). It, therefore, draws subjects from the target population and simulates the procedures and protocols that have been designated for data collection. For this study, a total of 6 respondents from the target population will be requested to complete the questionnaire for the pilot study. The feedback from the respondents will be considered, and adjustments will be made to ensure the statements of the questionnaire measure what it intended to measure.

Permission will be sought on higher management level of the distributing principals to attend, distribute and collect self-administered questionnaires at regional sales meetings.

1.7.2.2 The sampling process

Due to time and resource constraints, a process of sampling will be conducted. The sampling design process describes the sequential steps relevant to obtain information from the population (Malhotra, 2015:11). Table 1.5 provides a summary of the sampling plan for the research study.

Table 1.5: Sampling plan for this research study

Sampling	Description
Target population	All males and females, 18 years and older, who are employed as ISAs and who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in R.S.A. during the past two years.
Sample frame	A sample frame was not available for the study.
Sampling technique	A non-probability purposive (judgment) sampling approach was followed to select the respondents of this study. The researcher specifically approached respondents that form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to complete the survey.
Sampling unit and elements	All males and females, 18 years and older, who are employed as ISAs and who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in R.S.A. during the past two years
Sample size	According to the guidelines provided for conducting standard multiple regression analysis (Pallant, 2010:150), a minimum sample of 114 respondents is required.
Extent	Republic of South Africa
Time Period	1 October 2016 to 28 February 2017

1.7.2.3 Target population

The population is regarded as the total collection of all units of analysis elements about which the researcher wants to make conclusions. A sample is defined as a subclass of the people of the population selected for participation in the research (Malhotra, 2015:272).

For this study, the population is identified as all males and females, 18 years and older, who are employed as ISAs and who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in R.S.A. during the past two years. Males and females will be approached to ensure responses are obtained from both genders. Only respondents 18 years and older will be selected that are employed as ISAs and who subsequently would be in a position to provide independent and valid answers relating to their own work experience. It was further required

that the respondents should be active agents in the industry and have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in RSA during the past two years.

1.7.2.4 Sampling frame

The sampling frame is a description of the elements of the target population. It consists of a list or description used to identify the elements of the target population (Malhotra, 2015). Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain a sampling frame of all ISAs within the Republic of South Africa. Hence, the decision was made to follow a non-probability sampling approach.

1.7.2.5 Sampling technique

Nonprobability sampling depends on the personal judgement of the researcher rather than the chance of selecting sampling elements, and consists of either, convenience sampling, purposive (judgemental) sampling, quota sampling or snowball sampling (Malhotra, 2015:278).

A non-probability purposive (judgment) sampling approach was followed to select the respondents of this study. The researcher specifically approached respondents that form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to complete the survey. Five peers and colleagues, working as area managers in the crop protection industry were recruited as fieldworkers to attend area sales meetings. The fieldworkers were trained and requested to approach respondent's familiar to them, who also form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to participate in the survey. The fieldworkers had to request these respondents (sample elements) to complete the self-administered survey.

1.7.2.6 Sample size

The sample size represents the number of elements to be tested in the study. According to Pallant (2010:150), the minimum sample size for conducting a standard multiple regression analysis can be determined by the following formula:

$$50 + 8 \text{ (number of independent variables)}$$

For this study, a total of 8 independent variables are investigated. Hence, the minimum sample size required is as follows:

$$50 + 8(8) = 114 \text{ respondents}$$

1.7.2.7 Pilot testing

A pilot test is conducted to identify weaknesses in the measuring instrument to be used in the survey research and to provide sample data to be expected from the survey. The participants in this test should thus come from the targeted population and simulate the procedures to be employed in conducting the actual study. Pilot testing assures minimum problems in the answering of the questionnaire and the recording of the data. This will provide some assessment of the validity and comprehension of the questions and instructions. This procedure allows the researcher to refine the instrument before administering the survey questionnaire (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:85; Cozby & Bates, 2015:195; Saunders et al., 2016:394).

For this study, the researcher will approach 6 ISAs in the normal conduct of business and face-to-face interaction to complete, comment and recommend on the proposed questionnaire.

1.7.3 Analysing and interpreting the data

After the fieldwork has been completed, the data collected will be made suitable before it can be analysed. This includes questionnaire checking and treatment (editing) of unsatisfactory responses such as missing values and assigning codes to specific responses to assist in the capturing of the data (Malhotra, 2015:305).

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 will be used to perform the statistical tests required to assess the theoretical model proposed. The statistical tests will include the following:

- Frequencies (counts and percentages) for the variables measuring the demographic profile of the respondents.
- Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each statement measuring the constructs of the study.
- Cronbach's Alpha values, to assess the internal consistency reliability of the scales measuring the constructs of the study.
- Correlation analysis and standard multiple regression analysis to measure the impact of the relationship quality and relationship value variables on the dependent variable business to business customer loyalty.

1.8 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This study has the potential to make several contributions to theory and practice:

- The research results may offer more insight into the importance of relationship quality and relationship value factors in building customer loyalty within a B2B context and in the crop protection market specifically.
- The selected independent variables have never been tested in the crop protection industry, and the study may subsequently offer a greater understanding of their role in gaining the loyalty of intermediaries such as ISAs (ISAs).
- Following the research results, guidelines may be established to improve agent loyalty within a B2B context, which could further assist sales managers and technical support managers with the effective communication and management of ISAs.
- Marketing and sales departments of suppliers will also be able to strategise in advance before their patents expire to maintain sales by acquiring the loyalty of ISAs.

1.9 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The purpose of this section is to provide an outline of the expected chapters involved in this research study.

Chapter 1 is the introduction to this research study in B2B customer loyalty. It contextualises the study and sketches the background. Furthermore, this chapter formulates the research problem, research objectives and research hypotheses. A conceptual model is also proposed. This chapter also contains an outline of the research methodology used to conduct this study. This chapter concludes with an outline of the intended study.

Chapter 2 is concerned with a literature review and analysis of the main themes of Relationship Marketing and B2B Customer Loyalty. The chapter includes the topic of Relationship Quality with the independent variables of trust and commitment. It also explores the independent variables of Relationship Value: product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, personal interaction and time-to-market. This chapter concludes that relationship marketing is a valuable approach to develop, maintain and secure long-term B2B relationships and ultimately B2B customer loyalty.

Chapter 3 deals with the research methodology, design and different steps in the research process followed to achieve the research objectives. The emphasis is on research method,

research format, research technique, target population and sampling methodology (sample size, sampling type and sampling technique) and data preparation.

Chapter 4 covers the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. It gives more insight into the presented data using statistical analysis, and the main findings are also summarised.

Chapter 5 presents the conclusions and implications obtained from the research study. It also assesses whether the research objectives as stated in the first chapter was achieved. It also comments on the relevance of the original research problem. Recommendations regarding management and future research on this topic are also provided.

1.10 SUMMARY

World population growth, estimated at 8.3 billion people by 2030 will put pressure on the amount of arable land available for food production. Therefore, greater use of crop protection products is foreseen to increase and sustain production. The South African market of crop protection products totals at approximately R7.4 billion with an annual growth projected at 2.5%.

Crop protection products start their life cycles with huge amounts of research and development investments that must be recovered before profit is realised and these patented products are protected by IPR. Once the IPR expires, and the product becomes generic, fierce competition ensues which leads to major losses in margin for original inventor. Therefore, original patent holders and generic suppliers must strategise to maintain business and profitability, without compromising on service and quality.

The South African market is further serviced through distribution networks with approximately a 1000 competitive ISAs who are firmly embedded and recognised in their farming communities. These agents recommend and sell the products of the respective suppliers to the farming community as crop protection solutions. B2B customer loyalty of ISAs towards suppliers in this industry, however, is problematic.

B2B customer loyalty relates to the positive experience and feelings that buyers relay to their suppliers in the interaction and needs fulfilment they perceive. This manifest itself possibly through the study field of relationship marketing described as the long-term relationship that evolves through an ongoing process of relationship building and collaboration for mutual benefit and profitability in a supplier-buyer diad (Sheth et al., 2012:5). Customer loyalty relates to the premise that keeping a customer is less expensive than recruiting a new customer.

The relationship marketing domain recognises relationship quality and relationship value as key determinants of B2B customer loyalty. The scholars Morgan and Hunt (1994) are known for their work on the relation quality constructs of trust and commitment being central prerequisites for supplier-buyer relationships. Ulaga and Eggert (2006) state that other soft factors such as product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market, add value to a relationship between a distributor and its supplier.

The impact of relationship quality and relationship value factors on B2B customer loyalty towards preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions, however, has not been formally explored before. There is no other research to explain the B2B customer loyalty and other relationship marketing outcomes in the South African crop protection market. Consequently, it is the aim of this study to address the stated research gap and to shed more light on factors contributing to B2B customer loyalty in the agribusiness environment and that may subsequently aid the supplier in maintaining a loyal client base and profitability.

The next chapter provides an in-depth discussion regarding relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value constructs.

CHAPTER 2: BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1 it was established that this study aims to gain more insight into the underlying factors predicting business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty of ISAs (ISAs) towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions. Competition among suppliers of crop protection products is fierce in the wake of more and more products losing their patents and becoming generic. It was argued that customer loyalty might be established when suppliers of crop protection products build lasting business relationships with ISAs. A “business relationship” refers to repeated business between businesses over an extended period. Relationship marketing within a business-to-business context then is concerned with suppliers selling their products and services to other companies with the aim of establishing a lasting exchange relationship between the supplying company and the customer organisation (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2015:5).

One method of establishing long-lasting relationships is to focus on relationship quality. The term relationship quality, as measured by trust and commitment, has its origins in the relationship marketing research (Crosby et al.,1990; Dwyer et al.,1987). The basic objective of relationship quality is to strengthen relationships, resulting in loyal customers (Rauyruen et al., 2007:2). Ulaga and Eggert’s 2006a:130-134) suggests that there are also other value factors that may assist in strengthening business relationships in the supply channel between suppliers and customers, such as product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time to market. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical overview of these matters and to obtain more insight into the factors that are further explored in the empirical part of the study.

Consequently, this chapter commences with an overview of customer loyalty, after which the relationship marketing domain is further explored. The second part of this chapter focuses on relationship quality, relationship value and the underlying factors that are further explored in this study.

2.2 THE NATURE OF BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Loyalty within the marketing context has been extensively researched from various angles, including brand loyalty (Moolla & Bisschoff, 2013), customer loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994, Reichheld et al., 2000), store loyalty (Van Niekerk, 2015), shopping mall loyalty (Lehew et al.,

2002), business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty (Lam et al., 2004) and salesperson-owned loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2007) in business-to-business buyer-supplier dyads. Generally marketing researchers agree that loyal customers contribute to higher sales, reduction in cost, higher profit (Reichheld et al., 2000), increased competitive advantage (Dick & Basu, 1994:99), require less time, are less price sensitive and is critical for sustainability and growth (Reichheld, 1996:57).

This study aims to explore further business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty.

2.2.1 Characteristics of B2B customer loyalty

As stated before loyalty relates to “...a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future...” (Oliver, 1999:34). In a B2B context loyalty can also be defined as a partner’s commitment towards a supplier and to stay with the supplier notwithstanding minor displeasures and the discounts offered by competitors. The partner will recommend the supplier to other customers and cooperates actively (Hetesi & Veres, 2005:8).

True customer loyalty in a B2B context can, therefore, be defined as the extent to which repeated purchases are made by a client, with a positive attitudinal temperament toward the supplier, supporting only this supplier when the need for a similar service develops (Bardauskaitė, 2012:28).

In contrast to non-loyal customers, expressing behaviour such as negative word-of-mouth, courting alternative suppliers and openness for alternative offerings, true B2B loyalty is characterised by sophistication which is more collaborative and technical. True B2B loyalty contains the “want to” psychological element in comparison with “have to” and “ought to” relationships. Such relationships are highly involved and interpersonal and require exceptional management and support (Grisaffe, 2003:3).

On the other hand, the loyalty of dissatisfied buyers can be explained by their willingness to forgive, good relationships with personnel, a necessity where there is no other choice, as well as the risk and cost involved in switching suppliers (Hetesi & Veres, 2005:14). Switching costs are those costs connected to the decision to change from a specific product or service to an alternative. These costs include downtime for recalibrating, training, problem-solving and the searching cost for an alternative supplier (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013:239)

Customer loyalty, therefore, contributes to profitability and the development of B2B customer loyalty is regarded as a long-term investment. Business customers tend to buy huge volumes

of products, and the management and maintenance of B2B customer loyalty are important to secure a steady income stream (Rauyruen et al., 2007:21). The development of relationships can also reduce risk as the customer stays loyal to a known supplier. Bad buying decisions are averted, given the supplier continues to satisfy (Dwyer & Tanner, 2002:113). Customers are prone to become and stay loyal if the value they receive from the business relationship is in accordance with their needs (Geiger & Kleinaltenkamp, 2015:196). Ultimately, long-term B2B relationships contain an element of “*me-loyalty*”, being described as the sense of connection between the salesperson of the supplier and the customer. This manifests in a personal relationship also described as one-to-one loyalty. The supportive and consultative role played by the supplier is critical to cultivate personal loyalty because it is difficult to reject a person to which the customer feels a connection (Kamo, 2014).

2.2.2 Types of B2B customer loyalty

Oliver (1999:35-36) distinguishes between different levels of general loyalty.

- **Cognitive loyalty.** The preference of a specific offering above other alternatives. The perception about this offering is anchored in prior or second-hand knowledge or recent experience. This is a general consumer state of a shallow nature and can only advance once the customer experience enjoyment. The customer is loyal to knowledge about price, features and performance.
- **Affective loyalty.** The customer develops a *liking* or attitude towards a specific offering, resulting in repeated purchases. Cumulative pleasure and fulfilment lead to more affection and loyalty. The customer typically buys because he likes it.
- **Conative loyalty.** The customer experiences a series of positive effects and develops a desire or impulse (behavioural intention) towards the specific offering. This state relates to the motivation and intention to rebuy the offering but is still not spurred into action.
- **Action loyalty.** The customer is ready to act and give expression by habitual repeated purchases of the offering. The result is where the customer upholds his intention of repeated buying the specific offering “*under any circumstances and at any cost*”. True loyalty is deeply rooted in the dedication to repurchase, enduring sacrifices and recommendations to others, notwithstanding the odd negativity or competing for marketing efforts to cause switching behaviour.

An example of the above types of loyalty may entail a buyer stating that: “I like supplier X! (affective) They are such helpful people to deal with. Their products are always up to

specifications (cognitive), and I believe we will probably always buy from them (action) rather from any other supplier (conative)".

The discussion above demonstrates loyalty behaviours from customers mainly regarding certain brands, products or services. However, there are also other factors to consider in the supplier-distributor distribution channel, to add complexity to the occurrence of loyalty. As relational exchanges occur over time between supplier and distributor, the value is created which establish devotion or "addicted" loyalty. This loyalty is also influenced by factors such as benefit derivatives, externalities and relationship attributes. Some of them are interdependence (Wu & Wu, 2015), cooperation (Wu et al., 2015); supplier-distributor collaboration (Mugarura, 2010), power distribution (Naude & Buttle, 2000), relationship age (Wang & Wu, 2012), fairness (Jambulingam et al., 2011), franchise system (Beatson et al., 2011), salespersons (Palmatier et al., 2007), intermediaries (Chung et al., 2012) and investment in specific assets (Chiou & Droge, 2006).

Costabile (2000:12) proposed two additional types of loyalty within a B2B context:

- **Mental loyalty:** The customer perceives the supplier's offering to be a better value proposition with a constant positive value difference compared to other offerings. This stage is characterised by broadening the scope of business for cross buying and selling. The customer is passive in the exploration of alternatives and will repurchase even at an economic disadvantage of other offerings. Mentally loyal customers are the basis of long-term relationships and good financial results.
- **Cooperative loyalty.** A bond exists between the supplier and distributor which is tied in a relationship of mental and behavioural (action) loyalty founded on equity and fairness. This loyalty is founded in reciprocity (mutual benefit) and manifests in fair and cooperative attitudes and behaviours.

Therefore, it can be concluded that B2B customer loyalty is a multidimensional construct expressed over time, intensity and life cycle from a mere rational buying decision to an intensive cooperative bond and ultimately to determined self-isolation (Walz, 2009:40). This study explores action loyalty as displayed by ISAs towards preferred suppliers in the crop protection industry. This loyalty manifests as the ISA's "willingness to act" loyal (Oliver, 1999:34) by recommending and prescribing the products of the preferred supplier, despite some negativity, obstacles and even at a personal or financial sacrifice.

2.2.3 The value of B2B customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is the main component of customer relationships and demonstrates the loyalty which is established between customers, organisations, persons, products and brands. Thus, customer loyalty is the basis for an organisation's sustainability (Kandanarachchi, 2014). The cost to acquire a new customer is considerably higher than to maintain an existing one. The amount of effort and the marketing budget required to interest, attack and hook potentially new customers is substantially more than to maintain and protect the relationship with an existing customer base (Grönroos, 1990:5).

Furthermore, loyal customers who are in sustained long-term relationships are less price sensitive in comparison with non-loyal customers (Moriarty et al., 1983:3). Loyal customers' behaviour, therefore, tends to be more profitable as customers spend a greater share of their wallet, purchase more regularly, are willing to extend their purchases to other products and are being less price sensitive (Fredricks & Gonzalez, 2007:13)

Bardauskaitė (2012:24) states that intense, loyal customers are also likely to give positive word-of-mouth recommendations about their suppliers. This is of significant value because when the customer acts as a reference, their reputation is at stake (Reicheld, 2003:4).

Once B2B customers are loyal, they stay longer loyal because of the exit barriers created by conducting business with the supplier. The cost to switch to another supplier or offering comes at a cost such as sunk cost (previous investment in the relationship), search cost (for an alternative supplier) and the cost of recalibrating machines and processes to accommodate the alternative products (Egan, 2011:87).

2.2.4 The link between relationship marketing practices and B2B customer loyalty

Relationship marketing is differentiated from transactional marketing by the parties investing in the relationship to preserve it (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2015:33). The core of relationship marketing is to maintain relations between the company and other stakeholders in the trading milieu such as suppliers, intermediaries, the public and customers (Kim, 2014:113). Costabile (2000:7) describes customer loyalty as the strongest form of relation between a customer and the firm. Relationship marketing departs from the view that customers give loyalty as a trade for their expectations of perceived value that will be unlocked through the relationship. This value stream does not only include products but other less tangible remunerations such as the quality of interaction and customer service (Christopher et al., 2002:8). Rauyruen et al. (2007:3) assert that relationship marketing's purpose is to gain trust from customers. Once trusted they become loyal and that trust is an important aspect of the business relationship.

Reichheld and Sasser (1990) determined the link between the customer relationship, profitability and customer loyalty. More profit is realised from loyal customers by the reduction in marketing cost, more sales and reduced unit cost per customer. Loyal customers are willing to pay a premium for products and services and is less likely to switch (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990:105). Raman (1999) stated that loyal customers are a “fantastic marketing force” that recommends, increase positive word-of-mouth, do business referrals and serve as references. These loyal customers then increase the supplier’s profits by buying a wider range and more frequently and they cost less to serve (Anabila et al., 2012:55). Relationship marketing tactics like personal communication and the gaining of customer trust lead to quality relations and customer loyalty (Horri et al., 2013:418). Therefore, relationship marketing is the main strategy to establish, enhance and retain profitable relationships with mutual benefit for both parties (Grönroos, 1994:4-20).

2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING DOMAIN

This section aims to provide an overview of the relationship marketing domain. The discussion commences with a historical perspective and evolution of marketing and the development of the relationship marketing concept.

2.3.1 Historical perspective of relationship marketing

This section offers perspectives on the history of marketing in general and relationship marketing.

2.3.1.1 Periodisation of marketing

Periodisation is a method to order history in a chronical narrative and to label sequential time periods. Periodisation can divide history as rigid calendar dates such as decades or centuries, context-driven periods or turning point events (Hollander et al., 2005:32). Because marketing is a continually evolving subject authors and scholars identify perceived important different periods and eras which are not always precise and are frequently overlapping.

Although marketing is only seen as phenomena of the last 100 years, there is agreement that marketing practices existed before being formalised as a study field. Markets can be traced back to the time of the ancient Greeks right through to 1800’s where economists such as Adam Smith theorised about them (Egan, 2011:3) and it can be said that marketing is as old as trading (Ambler, 2004:1).

Relationship marketing has historical significance in going back to the pre-industrial era with direct interaction between the producers and consumers of agricultural produce. Likewise,

craft workers often developed customised products for respective customers. These exchanges led to affection between farmer and customer. It was only after the era of mass production, intermediaries and less interaction between producer and consumer that transactional marketing gain prominence (Sheth et al., 2012:8).

In the product era (1900s–1960s) marketing then consisted of informing people about products and their attributes. This was followed by the consumer era (1960s-2000s) where people were persuaded to buy the products. Following the consumer period, a new relationship marketing era has been introduced with the aim of fostering sustainable relationships (Levy, 2010:10).

Alternatively, Buttle (1996:3) describes the 50's as the era of mass marketing; the 70's the era of market segmentation. The 90's era as the origins of personalised marketing where knowledge of the individual customer is used to focus marketing efforts. The shift was driven by intensified global competition, fragmented markets, demanding customers and the pursuit of competitive advantage. Thus, lasting relationships cannot be replicated by competitors which provide an exclusive and lasting competitive advantage.

After a century of marketing practice, researchers attempt to understand the dynamics and complexities of buyer-supplier relationships as the model of exchange by people from earlier times. The focus of marketing research used to be the product and the nature of the transaction. Marketing scholars are refocusing on the core of exchange and the interaction of the partners involved (Walz, 2009:5). Marketing practices came almost full circle where Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995:403) describes relationship marketing as “.....*a reincarnation of the marketing practices of the pre-industrial era where producers and consumers interacted directly with each other and developed emotional and structural bonds in their economic market behaviours.*”

2.3.1.2 The evolution of relationship marketing

The significance of relationships in the conduction of business can be tracked to the Homeric Greeks. However, relationship marketing was only placed in the spotlight by marketing scholars and managers the last couple of decades (Palmatier, 2008:xiii). The phenomenon of relationship marketing can be traced back to the 1970's with initial research published in the early 1980's (Gummesson, 1997:267).

According to Sheth (2002:590), the popularity of relationship marketing is attributed to three antecedents. First, the energy crisis of the 70's lead to excess capacity, high raw material costs and intensified global competition. This forced organisations to retain customers and defocus on customer acquisition and related marketing costs, resulting in the ongoing

relational exchange between the parties. Secondly, the emergence of service marketing which is personal and ongoing over time. This enabled researchers to theorise about customer loyalty and one-to-one marketing. Thirdly, in B2B marketing organisations initiated key account management processes to increase the share of the accounts and simultaneously to consolidate their supplier base.

By 1983 Gummesson integrated the theories of services marketing and the network approach to B2B where relationships, networks and interaction emerged as an important element (Gummesson, 2008:16). There is a consensus that Leonard Berry is the father of the term "relationship marketing" which was born in 1983 (Grönroos, 1999:328; Harker & Egan, 2006:216; Palmatier, 2008:1; Sheth et al., 2012:4). He defined relationship marketing as "*attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships*" (Harker & Egan, 2006:222). Berry argued that marketing should not only focus on market penetration but also on establishing relations with their customers (Gilchrist, 2015:5).

Another reason for the change in marketing approaches is contributed to the change in demand and customer sophistication where customised products and services are required to satisfy more specific needs (Harker & Egan, 2006:220). This also explained the shift of purpose of salespeople from so-called high-pressure sales-orientation to customer-orientation which is focused on long-term customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982:344).

The focus from marketing shifted from efficiency in distribution to the understanding of consumer behaviour which was expressed as repeat purchases and brand loyalty. Thus, producers were pushed to gain control over the distribution channel to ensure customer satisfaction (Sheth et al., 2012:7). It became a philosophical cornerstone to build and maintain relationships (Grönroos, 1999:328), which was called a paradigm shift away from transactional marketing to relationship marketing domain (Gummesson, 1997:267; Harker & Egan, 2006:216).

Relationship marketing was advanced to complement marketing regarding the type of product offering, the type of business relationship (consumer, buyer, etc.) between the firm and its stakeholders and customer behaviour. More recently, the addition of database information technology to relationship marketing brought the focus to the individual customer, creating a one-on-one relationship which contributes to sales growth and customer retention, also known as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) (Gummesson, 2008:18; Sheth et al., 2012:7). Drawing from the fields of social psychology, psychology, sociology, anthropology and exchange theory two marketing perspectives were developed. First, the Morgan and Hunt (1994) commitment-trust perspective determine relationship performance. Secondly, the

perspective of interdependence (power structure) among the partners determine exchange performance (Palmatier et al., 2007b:173).

The area of total quality management (TQM) influenced relationship marketing significantly to create the concept of relationship quality which refers to the constant improvement of the quality of the firm's relationships. This led to the integration of marketing, quality, logistics and customer service (Sheth et al., 2012:8; Gummesson, 2008:17). The concept of relationship value was also introduced to define the overall purpose of relationship marketing to improve marketing productivity and increase mutual value for the partners involved in the relationship (Sheth et al., 2012:11).

The final product of the evolution of relationship marketing should be viewed as a generic process: initiation, maintenance and termination of the marketing relationships (Sheth et al., 2015:122), where the paradigm was shifted from customer acquisition to customer retention (Sheth, 2002:591). Also, relationship marketing is concerned with intense collaboration between firms and their customers, just short of a joint venture and creating value for all parties (Sheth et al., 2015:123).

Academics interested in B2B marketing and supply chains further developed models and theories on the workings of the relations between business buyers and their suppliers. This was new if compared with the traditional marketing-mix and transactional narrative (Moller & Halinen, 2000:32). Initially, to comprehend B2B marketing the reliance was on the principal view of consumer marketing. This methodology predominantly relied on the marketer operating on the 4P's variables (product, price, place and promotion) to create maximum profit from the trading environment. This implied a temporary and argumentative buyer-supplier relationship (Buttle, 1996:40). This was a contradiction because B2B partners are characterised as active, mutually dependent and relational (Harker & Egan, 2006:223). Therefore, it didn't correspond in practice where relationship thinking was central for buyers and sellers in the services and B2B settings (Bliemel et al., 2004:2). Accordingly, with time the view of marketing practices in distribution channels was amended. The focus of marketing practices changed from the economic theory of the lowest production cost and highest profit to increased efficiency and effectiveness with emphasis on customer service and fair pricing which ensure the behaviour of customers returning (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013:296). Therefore, B2B marketing practitioners employ cooperative "relationship type" strategies which are long-term and highly interactive, to develop, maintain and enhance ongoing business relationships. The importance of price is contradicted as customers are seeking other benefits from their suppliers (Egan, 2011:106). Table 2.1 summarises the differences in the transactional (4P's) orientation and the B2B relational orientation.

Table 2:1: Theoretical foundation for B2B and business exchange

Business exchange based on transactions	Business exchange based on relationships
Economic-based – customer acquisition	Behaviour-based – customer retention
Economic exchange	Economic and social exchanges
Simple resource and information exchange	Complex resource and information exchange
Rationality – high access to information	Bounded rationality — incomplete information access
Sales and marketing	Partnering
Independence	Interdependency
Role of salesperson: Persuader and problem solver	Role of salesperson: Value creator
Few numbers of exchange	Large numbers of exchange relationships
Short-term and maximum profit for the firm	Long-term mutual benefit for the counterparts
Supremacy of seller	Strategy development together
Conflict	Equal cooperative position
Homogeneity (heterogeneous markets segmented for ease of contact and uniformity, limited offerings)	Heterogeneous (individual customer needs identified; multiple channels for contact; wide variety of offerings; customisation)
Competition	Cooperation
Low adaption	High adaption

Adapted from: Hadjikhani and LaPlaca (2013:296); Weitz & Bradford, 1999:242)

From Table 2.1 it can be derived that the nature of B2B relationship marketing is strategic, accommodating, flexible, collaborative and relational with a long-term outlook. Drawing from this discussion above and the definitions in Section 1.4.2, relationship marketing for this study is defined:

B2B relationship marketing is the conscious and continuous pursuit by a supplier of crop protection solutions to assist and cooperate with the independent sales agents in their marketing endeavours to farmers, resulting in a financial gain, social benefits and relational satisfaction for both parties.

In conclusion, B2B marketing in its current state focuses on the management of strategic partnerships with the aim to deliver superior customer value. Therefore, stable customer relationships are also seen as a strategic resource of the business (Webster, 1992:1)

2.4 COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN B2B AND BUSINESS-TO-CONSUMER (B2C) RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Some commonalities and differences between B2B and B2C relationship marketing can be highlighted.

2.4.1 Commonalities

There is a couple of golden threads running through the vast body of research into relationship marketing irrespective whether the subjects were B2B or B2C. Similarities are listed in Table 2.2.

Table 2:2: Commonalities between B2B and B2C relationship marketing efforts

Similarity	Manifestation	References
Profitability, value and relationship satisfaction	Relationship marketing is concerned with the welfare of customers. Companies make a profit by satisfying and delighting their customers. Relationship marketing adds value for customers	Buttle (1996), Fredricks and Gonzalez (2007), Storbacka et al. (1994), Fierroa et al. (2014), Gruen (1995), Raval and Grönroos (1996), Ulaga and Eggert (2006a)
Cost reduction	Close working relationships and customer retention reduce costs of customer acquisition, customer service, distribution costs and inventory costs.	Sheth et al. (2012); Reichheld (1996)
Customer loyalty, repeat patronage and retention	There is value in retaining customers and repeat loyalty purchases as savings on marketing cost is reduced. Emphasises on greater share of supplier's wallet, not market share	Buttle (1996), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Costabile (2000), Fierroa et al. (2014)
Trust and commitment for successful relationships	Relationship commitment and trust is a desire to provide excellent service and satisfaction of needs	Buttle (1996), Morgan and Hunt (1994), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Gruen (1995)
High product & service quality	Relationship marketing requires an organisation-wide commitment to providing high-quality products & service support which is reliable, empathic and responsive.	Buttle (1996), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Christopher et al. (1991), Ulaga and Eggert (2006a),

Similarity	Manifestation	References
Co-creation, coordination and collaboration	The company not only supplies solutions to customers but collaborates and co-creates value with the customer. A long-term cooperative partnership.	Zimmerman and Blythe(2013); Cai et al. (2013); Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh (2014); Morgan and Hunt (1994)
Problem-solving and conflict resolution	Relationship marketing creates a trading environment where the parties can openly discuss problems and resolute conflict.	Sheth et al. (2012); Kumar et al. (1995b); Chakiso (2015)
Switching cost	There are costs that a customer incurs when changing brands, suppliers or products. Switching cost creates customers dependence with especially with only a few other alternatives or sellers. Switching costs also refer to the search cost, time and emotional effort required to deal with a new supplier.	Palmatier et al. (2006); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Homburg et al. (2014); Kaur et al. (2012) Ibanez et al. (2006)
Relationship with an individual person	The representative or salesperson of the organisation maintains a trusting and personal relationship with the customer	Palmatier et al. (2006); Weitz and Bradford (1999); Neu et al. (2011);

2.4.2 Differences

When considering the differences in B2B and B2C relationship marketing, it is important to look at the market environment in general. This implicates that the markets are different and that value is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, the relationship marketing approach would therefore also vary regarding the characteristics of the prospective customer. The differences between B2B and B2C relationship marketing practices are summarised in Table 2.3.

Table 2:3: Differences in B2B and B2C market environments

	B2C	B2B
Trade language used	Simple commercial language that relates to the consumer is used to transfer information.	Industry language and technical language is used to relay information.
Drivers	Consumer choices are typically emotionally triggered such as by hunger, entertainment, desire, status or cost.	Purchase process tends to be rational, economically and logically driven to increase efficiency.
Products	Customers buy standard products and standalone consumables – everyday products.	Customers have needs for more complex and customised products which is linked to a service component.
Expectations	Consumers want to enjoy themselves, be happy with their purchase and have their needs fulfilled.	Customers want to be educated, trained and provided with expertise.

	B2C	B2B
Marketing effort	Marketing content simply needs to meet the basic needs of being useful, humorous and shareable.	Marketing content is highly detailed and is delivered by an expert sales and marketing team.
Type of relationship	Organisational-personal relationship with customised communication.	Inter-organisational relationships, interdependence, reciprocal and co-creation with personal interaction and communication.
Customer loyalty	Customer tend to be more loyal to a store or brand linked to membership and loyalty programs	Customer loyalty is interpersonal regarded as a strategic alliance
Numbers of customer per seller and segment	Companies have many potential consumers in a mass market. It is easy to replace a customer.	Suppliers have only a few buyers, and 20% of them account for 80% of revenue. Difficult and time-consuming to replace – production and manufacturing market.
Buying decision and amount involved	Individuals make their own speedy purchase choices, possibly with a slight influence of others through recommendations, word-of-mouth or suggestions. Relatively inexpensive.	Marketers have a long chain of command to deal with since procurement must often be approved by management. Usually expensive and needs a big outlay of funds.
Sales and marketing	Limited personal selling and relationships	Personal selling, contact and interdependent relationships are used extensively
Significance of decision	Purchase cycle can be as short as a few minutes (such as a meal), depending on the product.	The contract for purchase can last months or years, making it a significant decision and investment.

Sources: Zenn (2013), Willan (2016), Moller and Halinen (2000), Brennan et al. (2011) and Gruen (1995).

From Table 2.3, there are a lot of differences between the needs, approaches and characteristics of a consumer and a business procurer, where the former is more casual and relaxed and the latter personal, complex and intense. There are a couple of important points to highlight. The personal relationship between the salespeople of the supplier and procurement officer of the buyer is vitally important for successful relationships. Secondly, the relationship is also a working and cooperative relationship which runs much deeper than being loyal or liking a brand, store or mall.

Despite a vast array of differences between consumers and business customers, there are universal expectations from customers which enter into a relationship with the business. It can be argued that the primary expectancy of customers is to satisfy their needs and requirements through the purchase of high-quality products and “best value” which is supported by reliable

service support. Secondary, the customer, must trust and be committed to the business and the representative to do repeated business and be loyal.

From the business' point of view, relationship marketing pursues profit for the shareholders through value creation, by satisfying and delighting their customers. From the literature discussed earlier, it is common knowledge that it's more expensive to acquire new customers than to retain them and benefit from repeated patronage and ultimately to gain customer loyalty from the relationship.

2.5 RELATIONSHIP MARKETING WITHIN A B2B CONTEXT

Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2015:4) state that marketing in business relationships are synonymous with business relationship management and relationship marketing, which implicitly rely on a long-lasting exchange relationship between a single supplier and a single customer.

2.5.1 Dimensions of B2B relationships

This section offers insight into the different B2B relationship dimensions.

2.5.1.1 Time dimension

The nature and being of relationships are dynamic and evolve (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009a:1). Dwyer et al. (1987:14) first described the life cycle of a business relationship as “... *the marriage of a buyer and seller*”. Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2015:80) summarise the five stages in the business relationship, where the life cycle begins with the *initiation* stage where the future partners get to know each other by demonstrating attractiveness and planning some transactions. The next stage is *exploration* where the parties conduct the first transaction, evaluate benefits and considerable risks. The third stage is the *expansion* of business between the parties by performing additional transactions and mutual reliance. This stage is followed by the solidifying stage of *loyalty*, characterised by strong bonds, commitment and trust, with a common vision of the future. Every business is also susceptible to the termination stage or *disillusionment* where circumstances for entering the relationship in the first place has fundamentally changed.

The life cycle of a business relationship can also be described in three stages as build-up, maturity and decline phases (Eggert et al., 2006:22). The *build-up* phase is characterised by strong growth, hardly any growth in the *maturity* phase and shrinking in the *decline* phase. Thus, in a research context, the intention to expand the purchasing relationship indicates a relationship in a growth stage and a low intention of purchase expansion show a mature relationship. The intention to reduce purchasing volumes suggests a declining business

relationship. The deduction from this study suggests that customers perceive more value creation at the beginning of the relationship by the improvement of procurement processes. This perception is replaced over time with one of value-adding in production processes. Therefore, to maintain successful relationships over time, the supplier must consistently add value to the customer and anticipate proactively how customer perceives value changes (Eggert et al., 2006:25).

Business relationships can also be defined regarding duration. Business relationships usually have a long-term orientation, where the integration of activities and subsequent results are expected to benefit both partners in a series of transactions over time. Short-term suppliers are only concerned in the gains of the current period generated by the market forces (Claro et al., 2003:705).

B2B relationships are products of evolution over time as the partners interact and learn from each other. This *involvement* and *closeness* enhance the stability of the relationship and ultimately lead to trust, commitment and loyalty (Ng, 2011:4).

2.5.1.2 Structure or relational governance dimension

The structures in a business relationship are the features that can be observed by third parties. The four key features are continuity, complexity, symmetry and informality that govern the relationship (De Castro et al., 2005:4). *Continuity* refers to the continuation of transactions over time. *Complexity* is derived from the number, type and contact pattern of people involved in the business relationship. *Symmetry* refers to the balance in the relationship regarding access to resources, inherent capabilities as well as the interdependency of the partners. *Informality* is the attitude of the partners and personal interaction that is conducive for problem-solving. Bagdonienė & Žilionė (2009a:5) suggests that the amount of flexibility brought to the relationship by the business partners will impact success by encouraging interaction and coordination to achieve mutual objectives. Informality is vital in B2B relationships as an example, problems are solved on a telephone call, negotiations done and deals struck on a golf course or at a hotel bar (Gummesson, 2008:34).

The success of business relationships is also dependent on the *flexibility* of the partners as they continuously *negotiate* to reach decisions and agreements while resolving conflicts and disputes (Ng, 2011:4).

2.5.1.3 Process dimension

Business relationships over time, are governed by tacit or implicit routines, rules, behaviour and rituals, which can be described as *routinisation* (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009b:21). Partners also put deliberate routines and processes in place to undertake joint activities such as product development, extended product ranges, improving quality and production flexibility (O'Cass & Ngo, 2012:125). Routines may be introduced for deliveries, and both customer and supplier follow certain rituals and standard procedures (Gummesson, 2008:34).

Furthermore, the development of the B2B relationship is complex and often requires *relationship-specific investments* (capital improvements, training, equipment and software) which are non-retrievable (Ng, 2011:4). Successful and useful relationships require adaptation, cooperation and social bonds to improve itself (Ng, 2011:4).

2.5.1.4 Substance and function dimension

The business relationship is the beginning of *something new*. Resources, energy and participants are brought together to produce something new and unique and not attainable individually (De Castro et al., 2005:4). The new relationship entity (partnership) can be described as a *virtual enterprise* (quasi-organisation) with its own culture, goals, structure and communication methods as result of the collaborative efforts of the parties. The boundaries of the *influence of employees* are expanded beyond the normal employment in regards with the “new” enterprise to harness new opportunities (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009b:21).

This new quasi-organisation can include other logistic and supportive entities, acting as the interface between the two partners. Replacing one point of contact (salesperson), multiple points of cooperation is established for shared distribution, information technology and forecasting, with all participants pursuing the goals and interests of the partnership (Buttle, 1996:22).

The pursuing of *mutual goals* through joint efforts between the B2B partners is a strong motivation for the *continuation* of the relationship and a common understanding of expectations. *Joint planning* and *co-working* are indicators of a close bond between suppliers and buyers (Ng, 2011:5).

2.5.1.5 Value or economic dimension

Central to the existence of business relationships is the value that they generate (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009b:21). Invaluable *knowledge* and *skills* are gained from the relationships by the partners through their *social exchanges* (Ng, 2011:5).

For a relationship to be effective regarding value, it must either provide additional benefits or lower customer cost. Thus, the value is derived from weighing cost against benefits in the relationship. Costs identified are direct costs, acquisition costs and operational costs. Benefits or value drivers can be product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time to market (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:119-122).

2.5.2 Types of B2B relationships

The B2B market can be defined as organisations who buy products and services which are used in the manufacturing of other products and services which is rented, sold or supplied to customers (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013:2). In business markets, it is not uncommon to establish strong personal and business relationships between the buyer and seller of products. Purchases are of such strategic importance that the organisations cannot shop around. To satisfy their needs and specifications, buyers and sellers enter into long-term relationships which enable them to plan jointly for their respective futures (Dwyer & Tanner, 2002:8).

Therefore, business relationships can be defined as exchange relationships between two businesses, abstracted as collective participants, doing business with one another, which are commonly referred to in the literature as a dyadic business relationship. Efficiency and profitability are created by the dyad with integrated products, processes, logistics, systems and administrative routines (Eriksson & Johanson, 1999:6).

B2B relationship marketing literature is rich in research describing simple dyadic relationships used in commerce. *Buyer-seller* relationships are classically used as a reference in this field by Ford (1980), Dwyer et al., (1987), Metcalf et al., (1992), Wilson (1995), Gummesson (2008) and Wu et al., (2015). The term *buyer-supplier* or *key supplier* relationship is interchangeable and similar in literature to buyer-seller (Bensaou (1999), Ulaga & Eggert (2006a), Hansen (2009) and Tanskanen and Aminoff (2015)). Wicks (2012:18) defines a key supplier to be a supplier that delivers and support key inputs, processes, activities, products or services, whose failure to supply would seriously impact on the success or survival of the business in the short and medium term. These relationships are viewed as supplier partnerships or buyer partnerships respectively (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Relationship marketing research into business-to-business relationships was done in numerous other dyadic configurations. To name a few:

- *Retail buyer-vendor* relationships refer to the relationship between a vendor (manufacturer) who sells products at wholesale price to the retailer, which sells it to the consumer (Chung et al. 2006; Wagner & Benoit, 2015).

- The *client-consultant* relationship is central to the nature of management consulting and can be characterised as a helping and knowledge-based relationship. The supplied service is usually professional, complex and highly skilled (De Castro et al., 2005; Werr & Styhe, 2002).
- The domain of agribusiness frequently refers to *supplier-distributor* relationships. In this relationship, the supplier makes use of the well-developed salesforce of a distributor network. Products that are typically distributed are consumables such as agrochemicals, seeds, motor-oil and fertilisers (Ritter et al., 2004; Ng, 2012).
- The *client-service provider* type relationship usually refers to the relationship between the service worker of a service provider (bank, insurance or law firm) and the personnel of the serviced firm (Moller & Halinen, 2000; Coulter & Coulter, 2002).
- *Franchisor-franchisee* relationship exists between a supplier of a trusted and proven business concept (franchisor) and a business owner (franchisee) using the business concept. A typical example of a South African franchisor is Famous Brands which supplies, consults and service the popular franchises of Wimpy, Steers and Debonair's (Beatson et al., 2011; Pillay, 2014).
- Original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) purchase resources such as parts, sub-assemblies and partly finished goods from their suppliers to manufacture finished goods for their customers (Fill & Fill, 2005:9). The *supplier-manufacturer* relationship refers to the highly collaborative, adaptive and very innovative relationship between OEMs and their suppliers (Sobrero & Roberts, 2002).
- The role of intermediaries is to develop relationships between suppliers or manufacturers and their customers, often in international markets where they know little about each other (Samiee & Walters, 2003:207). It is common in supply channels to have a triangle of players such as the producer, intermediary and the end user. The *manufacturer-intermediary's* relationship must create value that is delivered to the end-user (Chung et al., 2012).
- An agent, such as a travel agent is paid commissions by its supplying principal (the airline) to do work on its behalf, such as selling tickets (Hatton, 2004:101). Furthermore, international manufacturers or suppliers of specialised and complex products (such as heavy equipment) can not necessarily justify their own international sales force. It then makes sense to appoint an independent agent to manage the relationship with the

customer. The customer will be visited by the supplier from time-to-time, and they would know each other well. The agent will perform the following tasks on behalf of the supplier (Havila & Wilkinson, 2002:194):

- Collecting payment from the customer
- Contact function between the customer and the supplier
- Generating new business for the supplier
- Provide business and market information
- The social link with the customer

The relationship between the supplier of crop protection products and the ISA of the distributing company contains features of three of the relationships above. Although the trading relationship (supply and payment of product) exists between the supplier and the distributor, the relationship with the ISA can be compared to the intermediary and an agent. For the scope of this study in relationship marketing in the crop protection industry, the study will refer to a *supplier-distributor-agent relationship*.

The primary relationship is a crop protection supplier-distributor relationship, where documentation, goods and money flow between the supplier, distributor and the farmer. Thus, the distributor's buyer would place an official order (initiated by the ISA) for specific products of the supplier. The supplier would invoice and deliver the products to the nominated premises of the distributor. Once the products are received, the distributor would invoice and deliver (on the recommendation of the ISA) the product to the farmer. The farmer pays the distributor who in turn pays the supplier. The distributor maintains a geographically distributed salesforce of ISAs, which are paid in commission after the farmer settled the account.

The secondary, but most important relationship is between the ISA and the supplier, where the ISA can be described as the agent or intermediary between the farmer, distributor and supplier of crop protection products. The importance is due to the ISA owning the relationship and friendship with the farmer and is, therefore, the "key" to the farm gate for the supplier. Therefore, the ISA act as a middleman who facilitates various interactions and functions both for the supplier and the distributor of crop protection products. It includes product delivery to the farm, making recommendations, collecting payment and facilitating the relationship interaction between supplier, distributor and farmer.

From this discussion, can be concluded that B2B dyadic relationships stretch over a wide range of fields in the supply chains, services industries and in marketing channels. These business relationships can also be described as competitive strategic partnerships. Although extensively researched, there is very limited data on such studies conducted specifically on supplier-distributor relationships in the crop protection industry.

2.5.3 Role and benefits of B2B relationship marketing

The generic reason for businesses to implement strategies and programmes such as relationship marketing is to sustain a profitable and competitive position in the market. To improve the position of the partners implies the creation of relationship economic advantages that cannot be replicated with ease by competitors. Sustainable *competitive advantage* is reached through unique relationship value or low transaction cost (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2002:105).

At the core of relationship marketing in buyer-supplier relationships is the “show-off” of mutual *attractiveness* between the buyer and supplier. Attractiveness can be based on economics, behaviour or resources as perceived by the parties (Tanskanen & Aminoff, 2015:128). Once the partnership comes into a function, it *captures market share*, now virtually inaccessible to market competition. This phenomenon manifests especially in the case of complexity and where the partners made specific investments (Bensaou, 1999:40). Once the supplier becomes the in-supplier, it is challenging for the out-supplier to sell to the buyer (Brown, 1995:178). Through the relationship marketing approach, entry barriers are created for the competition and switching barriers for customers (Jacob, 2015:64-72). Businesses are consolidating their supply resources and implement measures to select key suppliers for their procurements. The threat to suppliers is being reduced to backup supplier status with their customers (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:119).

From the discussion in this section it can be concluded that when relationships are well managed, it creates benefits in the supply chain by reducing waste, being more flexible and having reliable deliveries and cost reductions, which makes planning easier and reduces competitive pressure (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013:255). The relationship marketing approach must increase efficiency and add value to the partnership. If there is no improvement in systemic efficiency, the parties can only benefit at the expense of another in old style transactional and confrontational relations (Brennan, 1997:770).

2.5.4 Factors undermining B2B relationship marketing

Various factors can undermine B2B relationship marketing. This topic is not limited to the following factors:

2.5.4.1 Internet technology

The reliance on B2B internet technology, have the potential to undermine business relationships which were created over years of personal interaction. Therefore, it is important to ensure that B2B e-commerce strategies are complementary to the types of relationships between the supplier and the customer. With relational encounters, other non-economic benefits such as better communication, coordination and responsiveness can be addressed. Therefore, the personal attention and interaction could be lost with internet technology (Jap & Mohr, 2002:25,34).

2.5.4.2 Opportunistic behaviour

Opportunistic behaviour refers to self-interest and the deceit-orientation of a relationship partner that ultimately destroys trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:25). Full cooperation and the sharing of information with a relationship partner carries the risk of opportunism and even the leaking of confidential information to a competitor (Gilchrist, 2015:65). Some remedial action for opportunistic behaviour is to increase commitment through relationship-specific investments (Wu et al., 2015:2324). The misusing of close personal relationships to shrewdly cut corners, hide issues and influence outcomes, can also be referred to as opportunism (Anderson & Jap, 2005:76-77).

2.5.4.3 Internal barriers

Internal barriers to relationship marketing are problems that are typical intra-organisational in nature, which can be corrected with internal relationship marketing programs, such as employees' resistance to change, market orientation and organisational culture (Brady, 2004:148). Other internal barriers are managerial knowledge and skills in marketing (Dibb et al., 2008:542). Managers can also lack vision. Another undermining factor can be the lack of support from the board and managers. The current marketing success, arrogance, ethical drivers and managerial honesty can also undermine success (Brady, 2004:151-154). Unsuitable marketing strategies refer to those strategies challenged by factors such as inapt functional structures, unrealistic marketing objectives, faulty market analysis and marketing personnel with unmatched skills (Dibb et al., 2008:545). Another challenge arises to harmonise relationship marketing activities across sites and countries as a result of cultural

differences. Another internal barrier occurs where corporate strategy is misaligned with the relationship marketing strategy (Brady, 2004:150-152). Time constraints and a shortage of resources can undermine the implementation of relationship marketing strategies (Dibb et al., 2008:545).

2.5.4.4 Constrained relationship scenario

Certain business scenarios are not likely to benefit from relationship building strategies, and the attempts to develop them may be fruitless. These factors are usually industry or market related where relationship marketing is just unrealistic (Palmer, 1996:20):

- There is a very low likelihood that the buyer and supplier would pursue business again with each other. Examples thereof can be where it was only a once off transaction or where the cost of maintaining a relationship exceeds the profitability thereof (Egan, 2011:63-65).
- There may be situations where suppliers and buyers are bound or regulated by formal contracts and where any attempt to build relationships would be perceived as corrupt (Egan, 2011:63-65).

2.5.4.5 The market

In some situations, the mere nature of the market and trading environment make relationships between the supplier and buyer unrealistic.

- The impact of market forces, the economic environment, current market positions and monopoly forces makes relationship marketing a futile strategy (Brady, 2004:151).
- In low-risk situations, it may seem that there is no reason to establish a relationship between the supplier and buyer (Egan, 2011:63-65). A possible example is the focal business buying consumables such as cleaning products and toiletries from a supplier.
- Competitive and price sensitive markets where transactional behaviour is preferred, make it unnecessary to maintain relationships. The buyer strategy is to pitch potential suppliers against each other (Egan, 2011:63-65).

2.5.4.6 Ethics and moral concerns

Problematic ethical and moral issues may develop over time from strong relationships between supplier and buyer:

- There may be just concerns that partnering networks are anti-competitive, as the process is used to restrict the choice of buyers (Egan, 2011:199).
- There is also the view that the social bonding interconnecting the network of buyers and suppliers can be so powerful or pervasive to allow market inefficiencies and even corruption in extreme cases (Palmer, 1996:21).
- Gifts, meals and entertainment is a common phenomenon in the purchasing arena which also leads to obvious ethical concerns. This can place the buyer in a position where a conflict of interest occurs between personal interest and the interest of the employer. Relationship marketing makes it difficult to differentiate between actions, attitudes and behaviours intended to strengthen a relationship (which is desirable) or pressurising the buyer to “give back” or influence a buying decision (Fisher, 2007:100).

2.5.4.7 Interdependence

Resource dependence theory determines that the scarcity of resources and the competitive environment create the need for organisations to establish inter-organisational relationships based on cooperation to supplement the resources that they do not own (Rossignoli & Ricciardi, 2015:29). This cooperation and collaboration lead to a situation of relationship interdependence which can be divided into four categories. First, where there is no perceived interdependence. Second, the buyer is more dependent on the supplier. Third, the supplier is more dependent on the buyer. Lastly, the partners are equally dependent on each other (Jambulingam et al., 2011:42). Although this suggests long-term, collaborative B2B relationships the relationships are easily shaped or controlled from a power perspective (Rossignoli & Ricciardi, 2015:33). Power refers to the possibility of one partner to influence the other to act in such a way they would not have done. This asymmetry in power can create opportunistic behaviours such as coercion which negatively affects the relationship regarding stability, more conflict and lower levels of relationship quality (Matanda et al., 2015:122). Asymmetrical power is introduced in the B2B relationship where there are differences between the partners such as expertise, size, switching costs, resource dependence and contract structure (Nyaga et al., 2013:42).

One outcome to the phenomenon of power asymmetry and dependence can be dependency avoidance where benefits of the relationship are trumped by lost opportunities elsewhere in the market (Egan, 2011:63). Another detrimental *relational related* behaviour can be where long-standing buyers with high volumes know their value and tend to exploit it to get premium service and discounts. The buyer is pushing for price cuts, leading to the supplier secretly

sacrificing slightly on quality, with the accompanying risk, to maintain profitability and the eventual breach of trust (Anderson & Jap, 2005:76-77). Therefore, fairness in an asymmetrical power relationship is of the essence (Jambulingam et al., 2011:42).

2.5.4.8 Complacency

There are also issues that can hold potential danger for the survival of existing long-term relationships. These are commonly referred to as the “dark side of relationship marketing”. It is suggested that parties perceive the relationship as stale and not satisfactory anymore (Grayson & Ambler, 1999:132).

A striking phenomenon suggested by research on why apparent good relationships have gone bad is that those who appear to be doing well is the most vulnerable, as destructive forces are playing in the background. Thus, the closest and stable relationships can also be the most susceptible to decline and disillusion. The beginning of the dark side is not aggressive but subtle, such as neglect and passive reaction to disappointment (Anderson & Jap, 2005:76-77).

By protecting the relationship from external market pressure, the partners become complacent, not pursuing innovation and progress, with inefficiency as the outcome. This can erode the relationship where the original relationship benefits are not perceived or sustained anymore (Anderson & Jap, 2005:78). The partners in the relationship may ask: “...*what have you done for me lately?*”, which makes them sensitive to price and short-term benefits (Ramkumar & Saravanan, 2007:454). Secondly, the benefits of strong, flexible and trusting interpersonal relationships which lead to cooperation, can be eroded by “cheating” from the partners, by considering other offerings (Anderson & Jap, 2005:78). Thirdly, by heavily investing in unique processes and adaptations, the partners can lose touch with new market developments over time and neglect innovation (Anderson & Jap, 2005:79). Fourthly, by trading extensively with the current preferred customers, potential new customers are neglected (Ramkumar & Saravanan, 2007:455).

To conclude, there is an eventual downside, a potential murky and even an evil side to B2B relationship marketing if not managed vigorously over time. The initial strengths leading to the formation of the relationship can become the poison chalice over time. The conflict between flexibility and rigidity can contribute to unstable business relationships. The balancing act would be to develop business relationships that are responsive to market changes yet have enough structure to create benefit for the parties to keep acting in good faith (Anderson & Jap, 2005:79).

2.6 THE RELATIONSHIP QUALITY DOMAIN

This section aims to provide more perspective on the relationship quality domain. The discussion commences with an overview of the nature and generic elements that can be associated with relationship quality.

2.6.1 The nature and generic elements of the relationship quality domain

While many definitions of relationship quality have been formulated, there is no consensus on a formal definition of the concept. Table 2.4 below lists the different perspectives in defining relationship quality.

Table 2:4: Definitions of relationship quality

Authors	Adopted definitions of relationship quality (RQ)
Dwyer et al. (1987)	RQ is manifested in high levels of trust in and satisfaction with the supplier and its personnel and a perception of minimum supplier opportunism.
Crosby et al. (1990)	The ability of the salesperson to decrease uncertainty and achieve the environment where the customer can rely on the integrity of the salesman to perform in future by historical performance. RQ is a duality of trust and satisfaction.
Morgan and Hunt (1994)	The key mediating factors in relationship marketing is trust and relationship commitment.
Kumar et al. (1995b)	RQ is defined as the manifestation of several distinct and related constructs represented as conflict, trust, commitment, willingness to invest and the expectation of continuity.
Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997) Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002)	RQ is the “degree of appropriateness of a relationship to fulfil the needs of the customer associated with the relationship”. Thus, RQ describes the spirit of a relationship and the benefits derived from it. The related dimensions of RQ are satisfaction, trust, and commitment.
Naude and Buttle (2000)	RQ is described with five attributes, being trust, power, coordination, mutual needs understanding and profit.
Huntley (2006)	The degree of satisfaction of buyers over time with the business relationship as the totality of a relationship as concerned by product quality, price, perceived value and partnership value.
Ulaga and Eggert (2006b)	RQ is typically assessed as a combination of commitment, satisfaction and trust.
Rauyruen et al. (2007)	The RQ can be viewed as a higher-order construct with four strong dimensions which are trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality needed to maintain customer loyalty.
Palmatier (2008)	RQ is a composite concept assessing the “calibre” of relationship ties such as trust, commitment and relationship satisfaction which accounts jointly far more than any single dimension.

Authors	Adopted definitions of relationship quality (RQ)
Vieira (2009)	RQ is defined as the assessment of business exchanges by key personnel in the dyad regarding conflict, trust, commitment, willingness to invest and expectation of continuity.
Čater and Čater (2010)	RQ lacks a formal definition but is probably conceptualise as a complete assessment of the relationship between a buyer and seller with constructs of adaptation, knowledge transfers, trust and cooperation.
Bardauskaitė (2012)	RQ can be described as the assessment of the combination of trust, commitment and a long-term orientation as a multidimensional construct to explain different facets and the strength of a relationship.
Mullins et al. (2014)	Customer RQ is defined as the “combined strength of a customer’s trust in, satisfaction with, and commitment to a given salesperson”. Salesperson RQ is defined as the “combined strength of the salesperson’s perceptions of the customer’s trust in, satisfaction with, and commitment to him/her”.
Buttle and Maklan (2015)	RQ suggests that some relationships are of better quality than others based on the core constructs of trust and commitment.
Jiang et al. (2016)	RQ is defined as a higher order multidimensional construct that reflects “the intensity communication, long-term orientation, social satisfaction and economic satisfaction perceived” by a partner in a B2B relationship.

Based on the definitions provided in Table 2.4, it seems that while there is no consensus on a formal definition of relationship quality, scholars, in general, believe that the quality of relationships is the basis for longevity and resilience of the relationship. It further appears that there are three major dimensions of relationship quality, namely customer satisfaction, trust and commitment (Athanasopoulou, 2009:603).

Customer satisfaction as a contributor to relationship quality, however, is an unstable dimension dependent on emotions and can be transaction specific (Hennig-Thurau, 2000:133). The conclusion from this is that satisfaction with the service itself does not lead to loyalty, but the accompanying overall relationship (Bardauskaitė, 2012:41). Commitment and trust, in contrast, are the “building blocks” of relationships (De Ruyter et al., 2001:273). Furthermore, high relationship quality holds a benefit for both buyers and suppliers. Benefits will typically include a secure client base, positive word-of-mouth, reluctance to switch, repeat purchases, better planning and improved marketing productivity (Buttle & Biggeman, 2003:4), all contributing to customer loyalty.

Considering those above, the following definition of relationship quality is proposed for this study:

Relationship quality is defined as a measure of the resilience of a mutually beneficial relationship between an independent sales agent and the salesperson of the preferred supplier of crop protection solutions as measured by trust and commitment to the relationship.

2.6.2 The strategic importance of relationship quality within the B2B context

The strategic importance of relationship quality is emphasised by Rauyruen et al., (2007:8), stressing that suppliers should enhance all aspects of relationship quality to maintain the buyers' loyalty. The promotion of trust in the supplier and the emphasis on emotional rather than transactional commitment is recommended.

The influence of relationship quality relative to actual sales and profitability is demonstrated where customers perceive it as high; they are more willing to recommend the supplier's offering to colleagues with increased purchases from the supplier. Goals, risky environments and uncertainty are all addressed through higher levels of relationship quality especially where the partners are a strategic fit (Huntley, 2006:712).

It is therefore clear that relationship quality, and by implication relationship marketing, is of strategic value not only regarding an extended time dimension but also in so far as strategic alliances, competitive position and profitability are concerned.

2.6.3 Relationship quality variables

As identified in Chapter 1, Section 1.4.3, trust and commitment are considered as the key dimensions of relationship quality for this study and are now further considered.

2.6.3.1 Trust

Porter, Lawler, and Hackman (1975) declare that:

"Trust ... tends to be somewhat like a combination of the weather and motherhood; it is widely talked about, and it is widely assumed to be good for organisations. When it comes to specifying just what it means in an organisational context, however, vagueness creeps in" (McAllister, 1995:24).

Trust is a construct extensively employed in relationship quality studies and posits to be a vital ingredient of relationship maintenance (Buttle & Biggeman, 2003:7). Buyers have more trust and confidence in people than in organisations, and every contact encounter is an opportunity to instil more trust (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002:236). The most extensively used and fundamental cornerstone of marketing relationships is the level of trust perceived between the exchange parties and can be defined in a variety of ways (Wong & Sohal, 2002:34). Table 2.5

below provides a summary of definitions of trust that have been formulated over the last 30 years.

Table 2:5: Definitions of trust

Authors	Adopted definition of trust
Dwyer et al. (1987)	Trust is defined as the acceptance that a business partner's word or undertaking is credible and would perform accordingly in the exchange relationship.
Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990:69)	Trust is the confident expectation of the buyer that a specific salesperson or supplier can be counted on to advance the long-term interests of the buying organisation.
Morgan and Hunt (1994:23)	Trust deems to exists when the exchange partners have confidence in the reliability and integrity of the other party.
Doney and Cannon (1997:37)	The risk exposed buyer resort to a supplier or salesperson believed that he would act efficiently, bona fide and in the interest of the buyer.
Chiou and Droge (2006:616)	Trust is defined as a rational (cognitive) rather than emotional (affective) construct.
Doney et al. (2007:1099)	Trust in in buyer-supplier relationship can be defined as the expected trustworthiness and compassion showed by the trusted partner ("target of trust")
Jambulingam et al. (2011:41)	Trust can be described by the two dimensions of credibility; the belief that the supplier will perform satisfactorily and benevolence, the belief that the supplier will acts beneficial towards the buyer irrespective of circumstances.
Kim (2014:78)	Trust can be defined "... as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence".
Baumann & Le Meunier-FitzHugh (2014:8)	Trust can be defined as the as the trustor's mental state and the willingness to accept vulnerability based upon a positive outlook on the intentions or behaviour of the trustee.
Hollensen (2015:210)	Trust is the belief that an alliance partner will act consistently, honour promises and acts in good faith in towards the other partner.
Ashnai et al. (2016:130)	Inter-personal trust, from a buyer's perspective, can be defined as the degree that the employees of the supplier are honest and compassionate (benevolent).
Ashnai et al. (2016:130)	Inter-organisational trust, from a buyer's perspective, can be defined as the degree of positive expectations that the buyer has in the reliability of the supplier to realistically fulfil the buyer's needs.

From the definitions provided in Table 2.5, it is evident that there are different perspectives of trust in the business-to-business relationship. The trust expectations can be directed towards a natural person (salesperson), a juridical person (company) or a supplier. To add some more complexity, it can be debated that trust is cognitive (rational) or affective (emotional) in nature. It can further be deduced from Table 2.5 that trust in the first place, relies on the credibility of

the supplier and whether their word is reliable. Secondly, the trust in a supplier revolves around his reliability and his intention to advance the interests of the buyer. Thirdly, trustworthy suppliers act benevolent, bona fide and with integrity.

This study proposes a definition of trust: *The belief by the independent sales agent that his/her preferred supplier of crop protection products will act fair, compassionate and in the best interest of the supply relationship.*

In the context of the supplier-distributor-agent context trust, therefore, refers to the agent's (and by implication the distributor), expectation that the preferred supplier understands his business and will act honestly and in good faith to maintain the business relationship in the quest for mutual benefit.

2.6.3.1.1 Types of trust

Trust as a research concept has been approached from some different perspectives.

- Personal or interpersonal trust

Interpersonal trust manifests itself in two forms. Cognition-based trust, based on the person's belief that the other partner is reliable and dependable. Affect-based trust is based on give-and-take, thoughtfulness and concern for the other partner (McAllister, 1995:25). Cognitive and affective trust are not different types of trust but are interconnected (Baumann & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2014:9).

Personal trust is built on knowledge about the partner. It can be characterised by ethnicity, kinship or business relationships stretching over a long time and often well-known. This relationship is governed without explicit rules and with the confidence that the friend or partner will not act in bad faith towards the relationship (Höhmnn & Welter, 2004:6). Interpersonal trust, therefore, can be defined as the degree to which a person is convinced by and act according to the word, deeds and choices of another (McAllister, 1995:25).

This type of trust is evident in the crop protection industry where the area sales manager changes his allegiance to another supplier; the new business would gain significant sales as some of the ISAs will follow out of personal trust. This is also known as salesperson-owned loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2007:187). Therefore, the highly trusted salesperson can uphold the buyer's commitment in difficult times created by unintended consequences of supplier policies giving the appearance of not acting in the buyer's best interest (Doney & Cannon, 1997:35).

- Cognitive trust

Trust is cognisance based when we free-willingly decide who is to be trusted, on which matter, under which circumstances and the decision are based on sound reasoning with accompanying evidence (Lewis & Weigert, 1985:970). To trust cognately an amount of previous knowledge of the other party is required. This knowledge stretches between total ignorance implying no reason to trust and total knowledge implying no need for trust (McAllister, 1995:26). The need for trust assumes a situation of incomplete knowledge about the partner. Knowledge is accumulated through observation of the partner's previous dealings and reputation. From extant literature, central to the theme of cognitive trust is that there must be the prior knowledge that the partner is competent, responsible, reliable and dependable (Johnson & Grayson, 2005:501; McAllister, 1995:26). When there are trust-implying actions and behavioural display that the partner is trustworthy, they are even trusted more and remunerated with affection. However, distrust occurs where the one partner's actions violate the other's trust (Lewis & Weigert, 1985:971).

Cognitive trust is a buyer's confidence and readiness to depend on a supplier's competence and trustworthiness. Cognitive trust is knowledge-driven accumulated through previous supplier reputation and prior interaction. This knowledge is used to calculate and predict the likely outcomes of the supplier's obligations and is therefore also referred to as calculative trust which implies a "leap of faith" (Johnson & Grayson, 2005:501). The cognitive dimension of trust relies on the perceived credibility of the supplier to have the necessary expertise to execute the job successfully and reliably (Jambulingam et al., 2011:41). Therefore, partners will act rationally when they trust each other and cooperate when the relationship has future economic benefit potential (Blomqvist, 1997:274).

In the context of this study, cognitive trust by the ISA is vested in the knowledge obtained from the track record, previous interaction, reputation and even market gossip of the supplier of crop protection products regarding factors such as product quality and reliability.

- Affective trust

Complimentary to the cognitive (rational) construct of trust, there is an emotional (affective) bond among the participants in the relationship. These affective bonds can be compared to the emotional bonds of love and friendship which require significant emotional investments. Therefore, the betrayal of trust invokes an emotional outrage response (Lewis & Weigert, 1985:971). Affective trust needs a cognitive foundation to be established (Baumann & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2014:9).

Affective trust is portrayed by feelings of certainty by the buyer. The buyer is confident that the supplier will attend and take care of the partner's needs. The essence of affective trust is the emotional reliance of the buyer on the supplier and is generated by a sense of security and strong relations (Johnson & Grayson, 2005:501). This emotional dimension of trust relies on the perceived benevolence of the supplier to stay valuable under changing conditions which was not committed for (Jambulingam et al., 2011:41). Emotional trust is vested in the welfare of the one another and the expectation of rewarding activities between the participants (Jarrat & Ceric, 2015:3).

Affective trust within the context of the study relates to the emotional affinity of the ISA, believing that the preferred supplier is kind, honest and dependable at fulfilling promises made.

- Inter-organisational trust

Doney and Cannon (1997:36) define inter-organisational trust as the perception of a person regarding the credibility and benevolence of the group of people acting on behalf of the partnering organisation. Inter-organisational trust or collective trust can be explained as the trust between groups of business people with shared norms and mutual business orientation. Trust develops when the partners value the reputation of their commercial partner more than the possible breaching of their goodwill-based agreements (Höhmann & Welter, 2004:6).

Collective trust in the crop protection industry refers to multi-faceted interaction and collaboration between management, personnel and ISAs of the supplier and his preferred distributor.

- Institutional trust

Institutional trust refers the trading environment in term of formal governance, sanctioning mechanisms, codes of conduct and values. Institutional trust is important for an efficient market economy and also relies on legal safeguards if relationships fail (Höhmann & Welter, 2004:6).

This trust is demonstrated by ISAs, distributors, manufacturers and suppliers of crop protection products adhering to good practice guidelines and code of conduct as presented by Croplife SA and ACDASA.

As demonstrated above, trust plays a major role in the establishing and maintenance of relationships between ISAs and their suppliers. Trust will always have an uncertain cognitive dimension as it is impossible to obtain total knowledge and clarity about the other partner. This

uncertainty is mitigated by strong interpersonal trust and affective trust where emotional bonds are established between the preferred supplier and the ISA of crop protection products. Therefore, the questionnaire used in this study investigates affective trust, seeking more insight about how ISAs perceive the sincerity, reliability and benevolence of their preferred supplier.

2.6.3.1.2 Benefits of trust within a B2B context

- Trust as a governance mechanism

When strangers are entrusted with important aspects, conventional wisdom suggests binding the parties by contractual mechanisms. This implies that formal contracts are necessary for distrust (Möllering, 2002:142). Often, there are no written agreements between the partners and the organisations cooperate under mutual understanding and trust (Blomqvist, 1997:275). However, when trust is present in the relationship, it moderates opportunism in a dependent and uncertain environment (Jambulingam et al., 2011:41). Trust encourages the discussion and development of collective norms for trade (Blomqvist, 1997:275). Furthermore, trust governs the protection of partner information, negotiations, monitoring, loss evaluations and general relationship success (Seppanen et al., 2007:254). Therefore, it can be concluded that a trust brings much more benefits to the supplier-buyer relationship than a mere supply contract agreement.

- Trust as an investment driver

Trust encourage suppliers to make specific investments in their buyers to “lock them in”, which promote and continuity and collaboration between the partners. The specific assets invested in are categorised as (Handfield & Bechtel, 2002; Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2015:36):

- Physical assets such as tools and dies used for in manufacturing.
- Dedicated assets are additional investments in general production and processes.
- Human assets are the transfer of skills and training.
- Site assets are a convenient location to minimise inventory and logistics costs.

Literature suggests by buying from as specific supplier an investment is made into the relationship. The interaction between the partners involves an investment of time and emotional labour, and the purchase represents an economic investment. These investments create further trust by the reduction of perceived risk in future transactions (Johnson & Grayson, 2005:503)

- Trust enhances sales and marketing success

Doney and Cannon (1997:1104) state that sales effectiveness relates to the pursuit of a higher percentage of the buyer's purchases. Sales effectiveness refer to the supplier's success in achieving sales. Johnson and Grayson (2005:503) argue that satisfactory product performance leads to cognitive trust and may be the first phase in establishing bonds and affective trust. Affective trust contributes significantly in to meet again with a representative of the supplier, customer's listening behaviour and response to persuasion (2005:505). The promotion of buyer's trust is the main ingredient to expand business and achieve relationship longevity (Doney et al., 2007:1110).

The presence of trust in B2B relationships leads to outcomes such as information exchange, improved process, mutual investments and cost savings (Dowell et al., 2013:437). Many scholars have argued that trust is the key component of relationship marketing success (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Arnott, 2007; Palmatier et al., 2008). If an organisation ensures high levels of customer trust, the outcome is customer loyalty and positive buying behaviour (Trif, 2013:122). Other outcomes of trust regarding the improvement of relationships are the reduction of perceived risk, reduced transaction cost, effectiveness and increased confidence. Trust is the "glue" that keeps the business partners in the relationship (Seppanen et al., 2007:256).

To conclude, trust has a prominent effect on relationship marketing results and manifests in loyalty, commitment and greater share of purchase (Doney et al., 2007:1109). Suppliers of crop protection products could encourage their personnel to keep their promises and instil trust with the ISA to grow their share of wallet (purchases) with the distributor and their ISAs. Myburgh (2014:53) concludes loyal ISAs are engaged in long-term relationships with their suppliers, characterised by the mutual trust which mediates a larger share of wallet.

- Expectancy of future interactions

The expectancy of desirable future outcomes relates to the intention of to stay in the marketing relationship (Johnson & Grayson, 2005:503). Trust in a supplier is a necessary ingredient for long-term orientation and future intention of business based on the integrity of the supplier and his good intentions (Doney & Cannon, 1997:47).

From the discussion, above, it can be deducted that if suppliers of the crop protection products are reliable, reputable, fair, sharing, cooperative, good communicators and have similar values and long-term goals as the ISAs they will be trusting and loyal towards the supplier.

To conclude this section, trust represents a key antecedent for the development of favourable buyer-seller relationships and is the most valuable marketing tool the organisation possesses (Berry, 1995:242).

2.6.3.2 Commitment

Commitment is recognised in relationship marketing literature, as an essential ingredient of long-term business relationships. It is presented in most cases as a kind of unwavering intention to build and maintain long-term relationships (Dwyer et al. (1987); Morgan & Hunt (1994); Walter et al., 2000:3). Table 2.6 below provides a summary of definitions of commitment that has been formulated over the last 30 years.

Table 2.6: Definitions of commitment

Authors	Adopted definition of commitment
Dwyer et al. (1987:19)	Commitment is the tacit or direct undertaking to continue the buyer-seller relationship virtually excluding other suppliers who can provide similar offerings.
Anderson and Weitz (1992:19)	Commitment is the drive to establish stable relationships, sacrifice on the short-run to solidify the partnership and convinced of its future success.
Morgan and Hunt (1994:23)	Commitment is the customer's persuasion that the long-lasting relationship with the supplier is crucial and needs a concerted effort to preserve it.
Dwyer and Tanner, (2002:49)	Commitment is a long-term desire to uphold or preserve a valuable, critical relationship.
Doney et al. (2007:19)	Commitment represents the tacit or obvious undertaking to continue with the buyer-supplier relationship and will exclude other suppliers despite similar benefits offered.
Palmatier (2008:106)	Commitment is "...an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship."
Chen et al. (2011:263)	Commitment is the motivation of the buyer-supplier partners to make investments in the relationship to sustain it.
Roghanian and Gheysari (2013:158)	"Commitment is the main belief that a relationship is worth the effort to be maintained."
Kim (2014:83)	Commitment is the high level of unity experienced by the partners to stay in the relationship
Van Tonder (2016:293)	Commitment is regarded as the buyer's belief that the seller care for their well-being, is willing to adjust according to needs and that the continuance of the business relationship is productive.

Based on the definitions provided in Table 2.6, it seems that commitment involves an emotional component and the motivation to continue (continuance, stay and maintain) the business relationship. Secondly, commitment implicates some benefit or value in the

relationship. Thirdly it implies an extended time horizon (future and long-term). Within the context of this research study, *commitment is therefore defined as the independent sales agent's passion for upholding his long-term association with a valued supplier of crop protection products.*

Extant literature is not always clear on the description of commitment constructs, and they are of overlapping nature and contains elements of behaviour and affection and overlap with the behavioural intention to stay in a relationship (Huang et al., 2007:755). Morgan and Hunt (1994: 31) confirm that commitment is a critical mediating factor for collaborative relationships and successful relationship marketing.

2.6.3.2.1 Types of commitment

Researchers in organisational behaviour observed and identified different motivators playing a role in the determination of commitment (Geyskens et al., 1996:304). Meyer and Allan (1991:62) proposed a three-component model (3CM) from a psychological point of view with three separate components. Commitment can, therefore, be described as a psychological state (mindset) concerned with the relationship partners' beliefs and feelings:

- As a desire or affective commitment
- As a need or continuance commitment
- As an obligation or normative commitment

From the definitions in extant literature, three general themes can be identified. First, is an affective attachment to the partner. Secondly, perceived cost associated with leaving the relationship and thirdly, the obligation to stay in the relationship (Meyer & Allan, 1991:63).

- Affective commitment

Affective commitment aspires to maintain the relationship through its association with the supplier and he “likes” the relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996:304). Cross-buying, the buying of additional goods and services, gives the buyer, even more, exposure to the preferred supplier and would, therefore, be expressed as affective commitment (Marshall, 2010:68). Gundlach et al. (1995:79) describes it as attitudinal commitment and manifest itself as the intention to invest in the future of the relationship. According to Sharma et al. (2006:69), affective commitment is the passion for preserving and expanding a business relationship because of its ease, friendship, and confidence acquired over time through interpersonal encounters (Sharma et al., 2006:69).

By applying the 3CM on the crop protection industry, affective commitment refers to the emotional attachment between the supplier and ISAs which make them “want to” stay in the supply relationship. This concept can also be applied to the farmer that would buy exclusively from the ISA, even at a price disadvantage (Meyer & Allan, 1991:67).

- Continuance (cognitive or calculative) commitment

Calculative commitment is grounded in rationality, focusing on termination and switching costs and their need to stay in the relationship as the benefits exceed the cost thereof (Geyskens et al., 1996:304). Calculative commitment is based on economic realities; therefore, the customer would probably not be interested in buying additional products or services from the supplier (Marshall, 2010:69). Gundlach et al. (1995:84) describe calculative commitment as input commitment taking in account self-interest of investments made in the relationship. Calculative commitment can be negative where switching cost is a barrier which locks the partners in (Sharma et al., 2006:69). Calculative commitment can also be positive in the sense that it is vested in the continuous value that it unlocks (Sharma et al., 2006:70).

By applying the 3CM on the crop protection industry, continuance commitment refers to a rational decision from the ISA to continue the business with the supplier and therefore, “needs to” stay in the supply relationship. An example would be where the ISA invested years in the brand, range or active ingredient of a supplier and is totally discouraged by the mere effort to switch. A second example would be where the market dominant multi-national supplier, Monsanto’s warranty requires to only spray Monsanto Round-up over their proprietary Round-up Ready GMO crops. This situation has the ISA so locked in that he cannot afford the switch without compromising his business.

- Normative (temporal) commitment

Normative commitment suggests a perceived obligation towards the relationship partner possibly rooted in previous benefits (Jaros, 2007:7). Normative commitment also contains an element of cultural and social norms (Jaros, 2007:19). Temporal commitment relates to the development and duration of the relationship over the dimension of time, and that the “history” of the relationship in itself expresses commitment (Roghianian & Gheysari, 2013:159). Sharma et al. (2006:70) refer to it as “*obligation based commitment*” as the guilt felt to stay committed to the relationship. This can also be phrased as “... we go way back!”. A typical statement in a supplier-distributor customer loyalty questionnaire illustrates it and would read: “*Given all the things our two firms have done for each other over the years, we feel we ought to continue our relationship with this distributor*” (Gilliland & Bello, 2002:36).

By applying the 3CM on the crop protection industry, normative commitment refers to a moral and obligational motivation from the ISA to stay in the supply relationship. An example of normative commitment in the crop protection industry where the ISA and the supplier have a history of interaction, collaboration, mutual benefits and fairness and the ISA from a moral standpoint “ought to” stay in the relationship.

From the above can be deducted that commitment to a relationship is either wanting to stay, required to stay or obligated to stay in the relationship. These types of commitment of the ISAs in the crop protection industry may be described firstly; affective commitment is where the agent has a close friendship with the supplier firm, their offerings and personnel and wants to promote their products and continue the association with the supplier, his product range and his brand each other. Secondly, calculative commitment (positive or negative) is where the ISAs have the sense to continue the business where the deterrent may be the potential loss, or the motivator may be the potential continuous gains. Normative commitment is where the ISA has such a longstanding association with a supplier and his personnel, and where this arrangement is so institutionalised with the supplier, ISA and farmers that changing it would almost be considered as amoral or even treason.

From the above discussion, it can be deducted that both normative and continuance commitment have an element of “leverage” which does not constitute free will. Alternatively, affective commitment constitutes the free will by the ISA of wanting to stay in a supply relationship, which is also explored in the questionnaire used for this research study.

2.6.3.2.2 Benefits of commitment within a B2B context

Commitment stands as a pivotal construct in relationship quality (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:23). Commitment is one of the building blocks of relationships (De Ruyter et al., 2001:272). Without commitment; relationships would be strained as the partners would be unwilling to cooperate and invest in the relationship’s future (Dwyer et al., 1987:19). High levels of commitment limit the buyer’s exploration of alternatives. When alternatives are evaluated, bias leans towards the current relationship commitment and reduces the possibility of acting towards the alternative (Tsiros et al., 2009:272).

Commitment has a direct effect on buyers behaviour and the revenue of the supplier. Thus, the more a buyer purchase, a bigger revenue stream is created for the supplier. With a steady stream of purchases, management can be improved on inventories, sales and support and efficiencies can be improved to lower cost of production (Stanko et al., 2007:1096).

Commitment impacts on buyer's plans to expand business and reduces their susceptibility to withdraw from the relationship (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006b:321).

2.7 THE RELATIONSHIP VALUE-DOMAIN

A popular view in traditional marketing is that selfishness and competition are the drivers of value creation. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995:399) challenge this notion with a believe that it is relationships with cooperation that delivers value. One must not be mistaken that relationship marketing is unconcerned about the profit motive because of its apparent benevolent and collaborative nature (Egan, 2011:73). Supplier-buyer relationships are initiated with the anticipation that the virtually new entity can initiate synergy which will create value (Wilson & Jantrania, 1994:59). Sheth et al. (2015:123) argue that relationship marketing is all about collaboration between suppliers and customers. The objective of this teamwork is to create market value to the benefit of both partners in the relationship. Partnership benefits can be described as of economic, social or phycological value.

2.7.1 The nature and generic elements of the relationship value domain

The early research pioneers in relationship marketing amongst others were Wilson and Jantrania (1994), Raval and Grönroos (1996), Grönroos (1997), Payne and Holt (1999) and Lindgreen and Wynstra (2005). The concept of perceived customer value which was defined by Zeithaml (1988:17), remarks that the meaning of value is vague because value can be added in multiple ways. The definition of relationship value in the supplier-buyer relationship is also unclear.

Relationship value is a complex concept which resulted in ambiguous definitions in literature and a variety of approaches to its crucial components (Sun et al., 2014:79). The concept of relationship value as perceived by the buyer is complex and relates to the buyer's opinion of the supplier's product and service in comparison with competitive offerings. This evaluation and communication of the buyer's requirements make them the custodians of the value appraisal (Chang & Dibb, 2012:266). Therefore, the term often used is customer perceived value of the relationship. Wilson and Jantrania (1994:62) argue that value means different things to different people. The term "value" is extensively used in various fields and contexts.

Furthermore, it is not clear whether relationship value is a one-dimensional or multidimensional construct. Therefore, this research study tries to uncover the meaning of relationship value in the supplier-ISA context by defining possible dimensions of relationship value as presented in the extant literature. Table 2.7 below provides a summary of definitions

of relationship value as perceived by the customer or buyer in the B2B environment, formulated over the last couple of years.

Table 2:7: Definitions of relationship value

Authors	Adopted definition of relationship value
Dwyer et al. (1987:14)	Buyer-seller relations involve benefits and costs and the possibility of gains.
Zeithaml (1988:14)	Perceived value is the buyer's total consideration of the usefulness of a product rooted in "what was received and what was given".
Anderson and Narus (1998:6)	The value in B2B markets is the financial worth received in technical, economic, social and service benefits the buyer received in trade for the price paid for the goods.
Holm et al. (1999:473)	Relationship value is the result of the relation on the joint profitability of the B2B partners.
Lapierre (2000:123)	The value perceived by the buyer is defined as the difference between benefits, monetary cost and non-monetary cost incurred, compared to their needs and wants.
(Ulaga and Chacour (2001)	Customer perceived value in B2B markets is a balancing act between the numerous benefits and sacrifices of a supplier's proposition as judged the main decision-makers of the buyer's organisation and discounting the proposition of rival suppliers in the current supply scenario
Menon et al. (2005:5)	"The business customer's overall assessment of the utility of a relationship with a vendor based on perceptions of benefits received and sacrifices made."
Ulaga and Eggert (2006a:128)	In a customer-supplier relationship, perceived value can be defined as an influential higher-order concept which can be characterised as the "trade-off between the benefits and the costs perceived in the supplier's core offering, in the sourcing process, and at the level of a customer's operations" evaluated against other supply relationships in the market.
Blocker et al. (2011:217)	Customer value is the offset of benefits and sacrifices that originates from a supplier's product, and relationship resources which buyers consider are assisting in achieving their goals
Chang and Dibb (2012:19)	Customer-perceived value can be defined as the customer's general judgement of what is received and what is given from a certain supplier in comparison with available competitors. This assessment is made by weighing the mix of product and service quality, price affordability and buying experience. Value is a need fulfilling encounter which leads to buyer satisfaction.
Moliner-Velazquez et al. (2014)	...the compensation or balance between benefits that the buyer perceives in contrast with another supplier. Value is what buyers perceive, not what suppliers believe it should be.

Based on the definitions listed in Table 2.7, it seems that some generic elements can be identified. Firstly, relationship value is a subjective concept driven by a perception (judgement

of value) by the customer of the value received in satisfying its needs. Secondly, a common theme from the definitions to determine value is the social exchange principle of getting (receive) and give (sacrifice) that is discounted (trade-off). Lastly, total relationship value as perceived by the buyer from the current supplier, is assessed against the potential offering of another supply-relationships (opportunity cost) in the market. Within the context of this research, *relationship value can be defined as the benefits received by the ISA for associating with and recommending the products of the preferred supplier offset against the opportunity cost of alternative supply relationships in the crop protection market.*

2.7.2 The strategic importance of relationship value within the B2B context

Every business has a unique purpose and reason to exist. The strive to this unique existence is all about gaining competitive advantage. Competitive advantage can be described as anything the organisation does better than the competition (David & David, 2015:42). The strategic objective of any business is to create competitive advantage. With competitive advantage, the firm creates more economic value than the competition. Economic value simplistically refers the perceived benefits gained versus the economic cost of the goods and services (Barney & Hesterly, 2015:30). Strategic management concepts lead to financial benefits (sales, profitability and productivity) and non-financial benefits such as problem-solving, interaction shared objectives and improved understanding of competitor's strategies (David & David, 2015:50). Wilson and Jantrania (1994) stated that B2B relationships are value creators and categorised relationship value as being economic value, operational value, strategic value and behaviour value.

No discussion on strategy, value and competitive advantage are completed before referring to the work of strategy guru, Michael E. Porter (1990:27.11) stating that “...*competitive advantage involves the entire value system*”. This value system includes all actions in the creation and use of a product, including the value chain of suppliers, channels and buyers. He states furthermore that close and continued interaction with suppliers is essential to the process of creating and maintaining a competitive advantage. Relationship profitability is reflected in additional marginal revenue created, larger volume, lower cost of customer service, fewer customer defections, lower sales- and marketing expenses and increased frequency of repurchasing. To maximise the transaction profitability, the supplier has to make customer-specific investments. From this “loyalty money,” the customer might show appreciation regarding loyalty from an economical, technological or psychological perspective (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009:245).

The question then begs: How can relationship value contribute to the competitive advantage of the supplier? In other words, how can the constructs of product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market be levered to create a competitive advantage for both the supplier of crop protection products and the ISA?

- Cost leadership

With this strategy, the organisation minimises production, distribution and marketing cost with the intention to be more price competitive without harming profitability (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013:43). The relationship value can create a market position regarding transaction cost, which cannot be copied, countered or defeated by competitors, without compromising on quality (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009:260). Cost leadership can be developed through streamlining routinisation of the buying process to include economy of scale where there are less frequent buys, better supplier service and easier adaptation (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2002:264). Therefore, the supplier-ISA relationship has the potential to create competitive advantage by cooperation to drive cost out of the supply chain to present the farmer not only with good service but also a competitive price.

- Interdependence and switching cost

Dependence refers a buyer or supplier's necessity to maintain a B2B relationship to achieve goals. Interdependence, therefore, means mutual dependence or balanced dependence (Tirpitz & Zhu, 2015:170). In a relationship, interdependence is central because the partners are responsible for different interlocking activities (Rossignoli & Ricciardi, 2015:42). Frequent contact between the partners leads to closeness and interdependence. This, closes the relationship for outsiders. Switching costs are all the costs involved where the buyer changes from one product or supplier to another. The customer will be reluctant to change when the anticipated cost including downtime, training and unforeseeable problems associated with a major change (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013:239). Exit barriers from a relationship exist when there is limited other opportunities, high levels of integration, emotional barriers or high cost of terminating the relationship (Hollensen, 2015:81). Therefore, the supplier-ISA relationship has the potential to create competitive advantage and stability by functioning as a sales and marketing team, where the investments regarding emotion, time, effort and financial deter the parties from switching to alternatives.

- Differentiation and collaboration

Differentiation refers to the degree that the supplier's value proposition substantially differs from other suppliers, which justifies a price premium being charged (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013). The ability of a supplier to provide superior value is one of the most successful strategies for differentiation and competitive advantage (Grönroos, 1997:411). Collaboration refers to cooperative behaviour and coordination of the activities of a supplier and distributor including manufacturing, finance, purchasing and R&D (Egan, 2011:233). Relationship differentiation and collaboration bring benefits for the distributor such as convenience or comfort. The most important cost drivers of the customer are identified by the supplier and eliminated to create differentiation. Just-in-time delivery is typically a *convenience* differentiator, with special competencies and reduced inventory holding costs. Relationship differentiation can also create *comfort* for the customer regarding flexibility, support, trading hours, training or logistical support (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2002:269). Therefore, the supplier-ISA relationship has the potential to create the competitive advantage of comfort and convenience for the independent salesagent where the supplier transfers knowledge and competencies to the ISA, assist with forecasting, logistical support and make consignment stock available.

- Customer retention

Research on the economic benefits of business retention in B2B markets is well documented (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Eriksson & Vaghult, 2000), where customer retention leads to the reduction in sales cost when contrasted against selling to new customers (Grönroos, 1997:412). It can be argued that retaining current customers are less expensive to retain than to recruit, and customer loyalty produces superior profits over time (Egan, 2011:98). Customer retention leads to revenue growth, cost savings, referrals and price premiums over time (Egan, 2011:98:113). Suppliers might increase customer retention by investing in the customer themselves, which rests on the premise of the customer being a co-producer in the supply value chain (Hollensen, 2015:148).

Therefore, from this discussion is learned that relationship value perceived by the buyer can contribute significantly to the competitive advantage of the supplier. The next section covers the value dimensions of relationship value.

2.7.3 The dimensions of relationship value

The issue of the appraisal of the value of the relationship between a supplier and a distributor has been argued in the past years. Regrettably, the value dimension is not easily

conceptualised for empirical research because of the complexity of the “value concept” which varies over individuals, situations and by comparison. Therefore, the majority of research was done on economic value that emerged from the trading environment of goods and services, given a specific market price (Becerra, 2009:85). Extant literature reveals that buyers evaluate both “hard and soft quality” factors of their expectations and what was received (Barry & Terry, 2008:229).

Research in the judgement of value by customers (Sheth et al., 1991) and B2B (Biggeman & Buttle, 2005) context gave some insight into the different views on value. Sheth et al. (1991:160) categorised five types of value in terms customer value perceived as *functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional value*. Biggeman and Buttle (2005:4) described business relationship value as personal, financial, knowledge or strategic value.

Songailiene et al. (2011:384) argue that in a supplier-distributor dyad, the relationship value must be evaluated from both the supplier and distributor’s perception. They posit that the relationship value is created by the parties’ interaction to co-produce, co-create and aggregate value. Therefore, this research supports the notion that that relationship value regarding crop protection industry is created in a joint effort and collaboration between the ISA and the supplier of crop protection products.

Wilson and Jantrania (1994:62) suggest a dimension trinity of *economic, strategic and behaviour value*. Economic value refers components such as concurrent engineering, investment quality value engineering and cost reduction. Strategic value is created when goals in the achievement of goals and core competencies. Behaviour value assures the long-term growth of the relationship and is realised through social bonding, trust and a caring relationship culture.

Songailiene et al. (2011:404) categorise the relationship value concept as *financial value, strategic value and knowledge related value*. They concluded that economic value are those elements that drive profit and strategic value is gained from access to market intelligence and new customers. Co-creation value is unlocked through social factors such as goodwill, trust, knowledge and efficient operations.

Uлага and Eggert (2006a:122) state that relationship value is achieved when the cost to the customer is reduced (value created) with the core offering, during the sourcing process and the operational phase. They also showed that relationship quality (satisfaction, trust and commitment) in itself gives value to a relationship (Uлага & Eggert, 2006b:311). In reality, relationship value is derived from costs and benefits in both the primary offering and the

interactions within the relationship which are realised before, during and after the transaction (Keränen, 2014:20).

Kim (2014:116) models the dimensions of relationship value as economic value, operational value, strategic value and behaviour value. Table 2.8 illustrates how previous research studies including those in this section manifest when organised according to Kim's 4-value model.

Table 2:8: Dimensions of value in B2B relationships

Research	Economic Value	Operational value	Strategic value	Behaviour value
Sheth et al. (1991)		Functional value	Epistemic value Conditional value	Social value Emotional value
Wilson and Jantrania (1994)	Concurrent engineering Investment quality Value engineering Cost reduction		Goals Time to market Strategic fit Core competencies	Social bonding Trust Culture
Lapierre (2000)	Price	Alternative solutions Product quality Customization Responsiveness Flexibility Reliability	Technical competence Supplier's image	Trust Supplier solidarity with customers
Menon et al. (2005)	Purchasing price Acquisition cost Operation cost	Product quality Pre- and post-sale service Add-on benefits Flexibility Adaptations	Joint working	Trust in supplier Commitment
Biggeman and Buttle (2005)	Increase in efficiency Share of wallet Share of market Received price		Market intelligence Idea generation Innovation Long-term planning Extended networks	Customer retention Referral
Ulaga and Eggert (2006a;2006b)	Direct cost Acquisition cost Operation cost	Product quality Delivery performance Service support	Supplier know-how Time to market	Relationship quality Personal interaction

Research	Economic Value	Operational value	Strategic value	Behaviour value
O'Cass and Ngo (2012)		Responsiveness Marketing capability Performance value	Intelligence generation Intelligence dissemination Product innovation Co-creation value	
Ritter and Walter (2012)	Payment function Volume function	Quality function Safeguard function	Innovation function Information function Access function	Motivation function
Coenen & Schäfer-Cui (2013)	Price Process cost	FM Service Quality Service Delivery Core business support Troubleshooting	Supplier know-how	Personal interaction Sustainability
Pérez & Cambra-Fierro (2015)		Reduced number of partners	Understanding Specialization Communication	Power-imbalance Interaction
Sousa-e-Silva et al. (2015)	Price Search for alternatives	Satisfaction Service quality	Reputation	Trust Commitment Word-of-mouth Purchase Intention
Kärki (2015)	Save resources	Process control Product quality Service performance	Minimized risk Learning Communication	
Skarmeas et al. (2016)	Future purchase expansion	Relationship-specific assets Complementary capabilities	Knowledge sharing	Relational norms Psychic distance Cultural distance

Source: Adapted from Ulaga and Eggert (2006a; 2000b), Songailiene et al. (2011), Sousa-e-Silva et al. (2015) and Kim (2014)

From the information presented in Table 2.8, can be concluded that Kim's 4-values model offers valuable insight into the dimensions and sources creating value for the partners in a B2B supplying relationship. Building on all the relationship value and relationship quality discussions in this chapter, this research study proposes as follow:

- *Economic value* is created when the relationship interaction between the ISA and the preferred supplier leads to time savings or cost reduction in the relationship process in

terms of the direct cost, acquisition cost and operational cost (Kim, 2014:121; Becerra, 2009:88; Ulaga & Eggert 2006a:122).

- *Operational value* is achieved when the relationship interaction between the ISA and the preferred supplier enables flexible, fast and timeous decision-making to address difficult operational problems in terms of product quality, delivery performance and service support (Kim, 2014:122; Songailiene et al., 2011:408; Ulaga & Eggert 2006a:122).
- *Strategic value* is attained when the relationship interaction between the ISA and the preferred supplier enables new competencies, opportunities and competitive advantage facilitated by the supplier's know-how, assistance in new product development and time-to-market (Kim, 2014:122; Wilson & Jantrania, 1994:62; Ulaga & Eggert 2006a:122).
- *Behaviour value* is unlocked when the relationship's personal interaction between the ISA and the supplier's representatives manifests itself in strong social bonding and a quality relationship characterised by deep trust and commitment to each other (Wilson & Jantrania, 1994:62; Ulaga & Eggert 2006:122; Ulaga & Eggert 2006b:311).

In conclusion, relationship value is very complex and not easy to react to a single concept. However, Kim's 4-values model is an insightful tool for the different facets, description and the creation of relationship value.

2.7.4 Relationship value driving constructs

A most thorough description of relationship value constructs in B2B relationship value was conducted by Ulaga (2003), Ulaga and Eggert (2005) and Eggert et al. (2006). This was filtered into the value driving dimensions by interviewing senior decision makers in the manufacturing industry (Ulaga, 2003:680). Eggert et al. (2006:21) and Ulaga and Eggert (2006:122) sub divided them into categories such as the value creation of the primary offering, during the procurement process and throughout the customer's operations. It was also revealed that perceived benefits are more important than the perceived cost reductions. The greatest benefits are realised in the sourcing and operations fields.

Therefore, it is proposed to use the constructs used by Ulaga and Eggert to determine the ISAs relationship value perceived when dealing with their preferred supplier of crop protection products. Table 2.9 represents a tabulated summary of the different dimensions, benefits, and elements of relationship value conceptualised by Ulaga and Eggert (2006a).

Table 2:9: Summary of relationship value drivers by Ulaga and Eggert

Field	Benefit	Elements
Core offering	Product quality	Product performance Product reliability Product consistency
	Delivery performance	On-time delivery Delivery flexibility Accuracy of delivery
Sourcing process	Service support	Product-related services Customer information Outsourcing of activities
	Personal interaction	Communication Problem solving Mutual goals
Customer operations	Supplier know-how	Knowledge of supply market Improvement of existing products Development of new products
	Time to market	Design tasks Prototype development Product testing and validation

Adapted from Ulaga (2003), Ulaga and Eggert (2005) and Eggert et al. (2006).

Hence, forward a brief discussion of the different relationship value constructs contained in Table 2.9.

2.7.4.1 The core offering

Core benefits can be defined as the minimum standard or attributes offered by the supplier to the buyer. This is the minimum requirement for a supplier-buyer relationship to exist (Menon et al., 2005:5). Organisations can differentiate themselves by bundling services and delivery with the core offering (Hollensen, 2015:596). However, from a relational perspective, a supplier offers much more to the buyer, and the buyer expects much more value than the mere core product or service to satisfy long-term needs (Grönroos, 1997: 407,410). In a competitive market, buyers are not only content with a good price, but also evaluate added value and services to the core product, and make their decision on the total offering (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

The core offering entails the primary business transaction and consists of the product quality and delivery performance dimensions.

2.7.4.1.1 Product quality

Essentially, buyers pursue relationships with their suppliers to obtain products. Hence, the product offering is the foundation for relationship value (Homburg & Rudolph, 2001:17). Solution (product) quality is the “hard evidence” assessed by buyers in B2B services and goods (Barry & Terry, 2008:229).

Product quality refers to the standard technical specifications, technical performance and reliability of the product by the need of the customer. The supplier must be able to deliver these minimum standards and quality at a consistent level over time. It is difficult for suppliers to differentiate themselves from the opposition just on product quality because the quality is regulated by default manufacturing standards (Ulaga, 2003:682). Product quality and the price is the key issue in initial criteria and consideration of supplier selection (Menon et al., 2005:8). The consistent improvement of quality over time is critical to stay competitive (Lapierre, 2000:137).

Product quality is the primary driver of relationship value (Ulaga, 2003:682). Thus, the relationship can only commence once the buyer is satisfied with the product and its accompanying quality and support.

For the study, product quality and support refer to the ability of the supplier’s product to satisfy the farmer’s needs. It’s accomplished with products which perform consistently as expected.

2.7.4.1.2 Delivery performance

Delivery performance refers to “... *all factors related to the timely and accurate fulfilment of the buyers’ needs*”, and is an important element of supplier attractiveness (Tanskanen & Aminoff, 2015:134,135). Delivery performance relates to delivery speed, delivery reliability, product availability and the willingness to change delivery procedures (Doney & Cannon, 1997:48). Delivery must be on-time, flexible if need be (just-in-time) and accurate to prevent supply disruption (Ulaga, 2003:685). Suppliers with flexible delivery capabilities create value for customers to maintain lower levels of inventory and save stock holding costs (Menon et al., 2005:14). Superior logistics practices that focus on high levels of flexibility and respond to buyers changing needs and special non-routine requests can gain a competitive advantage for the supplier (Hartmann & De Grahl, 2011:64).

Scholars are in consensus that flexible and reliable delivery performance is not only a major driver for relationship value but also in a negative sense a big risk for customer defections (Heide & Miner, 1992; Barry & Terry, 2008; Scheer et al., 2010; Coenen & Schäfer-Cui, 2013).

For the study, delivery performance refers to the availability and timeous logistics of the supplier's product to ensure the ISA can deliver in accordance to the undertakings given by him to his farmer to protect his crops.

In conclusion on the core offering, it can be argued that product quality and delivery performance are essential for supplier-distributor relationships in the crop protection industry but not the foremost source of value creation (Sun et al., 2014:91).

2.7.4.2 Sourcing process

Additional to the core product and its quality, B2B buyers also assess the "soft quality" surrounding the transaction in the form of customer service (Barry & Terry, 2008:229). The sourcing process refers to the managing, developing and integrating of supplier capabilities to achieve competitive advantage. The benefit drivers to create relationship benefits are service support and personal interaction (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:126).

2.7.4.2.1 Service support

Service support refers to the range of service-related elements that accompany the products procured by the buyer. These intangibles play a critical role to make the supplier's offering unique. These include product-related services, customer information and conducting activities on behalf of the buyer (outsourcing) (Ulaga, 2003:683). In the process of selling a physical product in the B2B marketplace, the supplier often realises that the service provided in conjunction with the product is valued more by the buyer than the product itself (Cann, 1998:394). Lapierre (2000:125) identify responsiveness, flexibility, reliability and technical competence as "service-related" value drivers in B2B supplier-buyer relationships.

Service support can be compared to servitization where suppliers are shifting from selling products to selling a combination of integrated products and services to create value. Servitization can be defined as an increased offering or a fuller market packages. This bundle includes goods, services, support, self-service and knowledge to add value to the primary offering (Baines et al., 2009:551).

B2B suppliers frequently add value by not only managing relationships with their own customers but also have some indirect service relationship with the customer's customer (Homburg et al., 2014:58). This, is a common practice for the supplier of crop protection products to maintain a relationship not only with the ISA but also with some of the farmers.

For the study, service support refers to the supplier of crop protection products doing everything in his power to service and accommodate the ISA, to strengthen his standing with his farmer and defending the ISA's position against the opposition.

2.7.4.2.2 Personal interaction

Personal interaction refers to the human component of a supplier-buyer relationship and the value that the parties create. Although bonds develop between organisations, these relationships and the success thereof is managed by people (Ulaga, 2003:686). It is important for the buyer to trust the supplier's salesperson. The buyer sees frequent contact as the supplier's sincere interest in his well-being (Doney & Cannon, 1997:37).

Strong supplier-buyer relationships are vested in relational exchange and contact between the parties. The partners engage in a complex, personal, non-economic social contract that benefits the relationship partners (Dwyer et al., 1987:12). Personnel of the dyad hold individual relationships in high regard. Frequent interpersonal contact improves problem-solving, communication and alignment of goals (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:125). For the supplier to co-create value with the buyer, the supplier must be personally engaged with the buyer. This, is usually through the supplier's salespeople being the interface with the buyer by playing a pivotal role in the process of value co-creation (Baumann & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2014:6). Long-term personal relationships are important for inter-company cooperation, the establishment of friendship, trust, commitment and the building of customer loyalty (Pesamaa & Hair, 2007:612).

Referring to Section 2.3 on the history of marketing, the nature of interaction or personal selling also changed dramatically over the last three decades. Therefore, supplier representatives are involved in different activities and need different competencies, skills and knowledge to be effective (Weitz & Bradford, 1999:242). Table 2.10 is an adapted summary of the change in the roles of personal sellers.

Table 2:10: The roles of salespeople over the different eras

Era	Sales	Marketing	Partnering
Sales objective	Making sales	Satisfy buyers needs	Building relationships
Product / Service	Stand-alone product or service	Bundled problem solutions	Mutual beneficial integrated value proposition
Role of sales person	Persuader	Problem solver	Value creator
Sales orientation	Short-term supplier needs	Short-term buyer needs	Long-term supplier & buyer needs
Critical sales tasks	Convincing buyers about products	Matching buyers needs with supply offerings	Creating new alternatives by merging buyers needs and supplier capabilities
Main sales activities	Influence buyers using hard-selling	Influence buyers using adaptive selling	Building and maintaining customer relationships

Adapted from Weitz and Bradford (1999:242)

Table 2.10 illustrates clearly how the important role of personal selling has changed over time, with a logical and apparent emphasis on quality personal interaction and relationship value creation.

Consequently, it can be concluded that personal interaction relates to the strong bond and collaboration between a supplier and distributor in person, to solve problems, seek opportunity and mutual benefits and to manage the relationship with the ISAs of the distributor.

2.7.4.3 Customer's operations

Drivers of relationship benefit viewed as important on the level of the customer's internal operations are supplier know-how and time-to-market (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:126). Barry and Terry (2008:232) identified the supplier's business understanding, supplier reliability and flexibility as operational benefits also linked to relationship value.

2.7.4.3.1 Supplier know-how

Supplier know-how can be described as the valuable information and expertise possessed by the supplier which can be utilised in the buyer's operations. This includes a knowledge base of the market, how to improve existing products and new product development (Koufteros et al., 2005:104). In the context of supplier-buyer relationships, products are commonly complex with extensive technical know-how which must also be addressed and communicated by the supplier to satisfy the needs of the customer (Homburg & Rudolph, 2001:17).

Suppliers can greatly increase their efficiency by cooperation, transferring supplier know-how and innovation to the buyer in the development of systems and integrated solutions (Geiger & Kleinaltenkamp, 2015:218). Training is a product related service with the purpose to transfer from the supplier to the buyer know-how, information, suggest improvements in processes and the use of the product (Geiger & Kleinaltenkamp, 2015:208). Involvement of suppliers in product development can be helpful by mobilising and leveraging supplier expertise. (Hollensen, 2015:274). Relationship value is increased if the supplier can play a role in improving the customer's operational processes and achieve cost savings. Therefore, a supplier suggestion scheme can be used to identify and scrap unnecessary steps in the production process (Geiger, 2015:133).

For this study, supplier's know-how refers to the transfer of knowledge and information from the preferred supplier to the ISA in such a manner to create value, create competitive advantage and secure more business.

2.7.4.3.2 Time-to-market

Time-to-market is the time it takes from a product being envisaged until being available for sale, the so-called research and development (R&D) phase. Time to market is important for competitive advantage, price premiums, faster break-evens and higher profits and ROI (Hollensen, 2015:409). Shorter time-to-market allows customers to gain competitive advantage through a higher market share, better efficiency, price premiums and customer loyalty. Therefore, supplier integration in the customer's operations is essential (Perols et al., 2013:153).

Organisations Companies are constantly under pressure to develop products faster, speed-up designing and prototyping, perform testing and validation, to stay relevant in the marketplace (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a:127).

For this study, time-to-market refers to the preferred supplier's capacity to bring new products to the market and assist the ISA in quick access to the market to gain market share there with.

From the discussion in this section it is very clear that relationship value is not only derived from a mere product or solution supplied to the B2B buyer, but a whole package, which can include delivery, advice, advertising, packaging, customer training, maintenance, spare part service, information, documentation, warehousing, financing, claims handling and joint development to satisfy buyer's needs (Grönroos, 1997:411,413).

Alternatively, from the supplier of crop protection products perspective, the preferred ISA receives better treatment than other agents regarding product quality, product availability, support in the sourcing process, delivery and prices. These privileges are vested in a deep relationship between the supplier and the ISA (Nollet et al., 2012:1187).

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter covered the topics of business-to-business customer loyalty, relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value. The various definitions, characteristics and strategic importance of each topic including the different constructs were reviewed in detail.

Loyalty develops out of deep commitment to a supplying relationship and represents the dedication to rebuy the product or service from the supplier in the future (Oliver, 1999:34). Loyalty is multidimensional and can be sub-divided in cognitive, affective, conative and action loyalty. Customer loyalty brings various benefits to the supplier such as the reduced customer acquisition cost and price sensitivity. Positive word-of-mouth, higher sales volumes and bigger customer share are also consequential benefits of loyalty. B2B customer loyalty is the holy grail pursued by every supplier and attainable through the disciplines and practices of relationship marketing.

The purpose of relationship marketing is to embark on those marketing initiatives by suppliers in establishing, promoting and maintaining long-term relationships with the distributors of crop protection products and their ISAs (Palmatier, 2008:3; Morgan & Hunt, 1994:20). Relationship marketing differs between B2C and B2B primarily because of the different target markets. The B2C market consists of consumers (end-users) and the B2B market of users (producers) with different characteristics and needs. Relationship marketing is subject to time, structural, process, substance and value dimensions (De Castro et al., 2005:4). All B2B relationships can be characterised as a dyad between a supplier selling something and a customer buying something (Gummesson, 2008:45), irrespective of the customer being a retailer, wholesaler, manufacturer, franchisee or a public institution. Notwithstanding many other benefits, relationship marketing is the pursuance of competitive advantage to differentiate from other competitors (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2002:105). Therefore, relationship marketing is concerned with intense collaboration between organisations and their customers, just short of a joint venture and creating value for all parties (Sheth et al., 2015:123).

Relationship quality is a measuring instrument to determine the durability of the relationship between a supplier and the buyer. Relationship quality is a multi-dimensional measurement

(Naude & Buttle (2000:359) measuring mainly the levels of satisfaction, trust and commitment, extensively research by amongst other scholars Dwyer et al. (1987), Crosby et al. (1990), Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Palmatier (2008). Trust is, therefore, the belief by the ISA that his preferred supplier will act fair, compassionate and in the best interest of the supply relationship. On the other hand, true commitment can be defined as the ISA's passion for upholding his long-term association with a valued supplier of crop protection products. The strategic value of relationship quality is that long-term committed business relationship is a good recipe for competitive advantage (Yee, 2008:80).

Relationship value is a complex concept, concerned with the value of a supply relationship as perceived by the customer calculated by an offset between benefits received and sacrifices made (Menon et al., 2005:5). The strategic value of relationship value is the long-term bond between supplier and buyer, exit/entry barriers and high switching cost contributing to a competitive edge in the marketplace. Relationship value can be assessed by the value created at different stages of the procurement and production cycle, namely the core offering, the sourcing process and operational process. Alternatively, can value creation be measured against the dimensions of product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:122). Relationship value can, therefore, be defined as the benefits received by the ISA for associating with and recommending the products of the preferred supplier offset against the opportunity cost of alternative supply relationships in the crop protection market.

Consequently, Chapter 3 is devoted to providing more insight into the research methodology of this research study that was followed to complete the empirical part of the investigation. The discussion focuses mainly on the selected research design, data collection method, sample plan and statistical techniques used to test the proposed theoretical model.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the main theories and research constructs investigated in this study. A detailed investigation was conducted into theory related to relationship marketing, relationship quality, relationship value and customer loyalty. Relationship value and relationship quality factors were also studied that might influence the customer loyalty of ISAs working in the crop protection industry, and that will be further investigated in the empirical part of the study.

Chapter 3 discusses the research roadmap taken to address the questions asked in the research problem. The chapter covers the research problem, research design, data collection methods, sampling, data analysis, interpretation and research reporting.

3.2 THE MARKETING RESEARCH PROCESS

Market research is concerned with finding the truth about markets through the application of scientific methods (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:5). Market research may involve identifying opportunities, solving problems, assessing new market ideas, monitoring performance and gaining a better understanding of the whole marketing process. Therefore, marketing research can be defined as the function that connects the firm to the market through the collection of information (Hair et al., 2013:5). Marketing research is useful to the extent that it assists decision makers to move from intuitive information to planned and objective inquiry methods (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:5). As illustrated in Table 3.1, the description by scholars varies in the way they describe the steps and stages in the research process.

Table 3:1 Steps or stages in research as described by different scholars

Zikmund and Babin (2010:51)	Malhotra (2015:32)	Burns and Bush (2014:69)	Bordens and Abbott (2014:26)	Bradley (2013:36) 4P's
Defining research objectives	Defining the problem	Establish the need for market research Define the problem	Develop a research idea into a testable hypothesis	Purpose - Why is the research undertaken?
Research design	Developing an approach to the problem	Establish research objectives Determine the research design	Choose an appropriate research design	Population – Who are the players in the marketplace?
Sampling	Formulating a research design	Identify information types and resources Determine methods of accessing data	Choose subject population	
Data collection	Doing fieldwork and collecting data	Design data collection forms	Decide what to observe with appropriate measures	Procedure – How should the study be conducted?
Data analysis	Preparing and analysing data	Determine sample plan and size Collect data	Conduct study	Publication – Who is the audience and what should be communicated?
Conclusion and reporting	Preparing and presenting the report	Analyse data Prepare and present final research report	Analyse data Report results	

From Table 3.1, it is apparent that although the individual steps recommended by each author may vary, generally the research process entail an identification of the research problem, determination of the research design, designing of the data collection method and forms, development of the sampling plan, collecting data, analysis and interpretation of the research

data and the preparation of the research report. Hence, the generic stages, as recommended by Berndt and Petzer (2011:25) and Fourie (2014:110) were followed to research this study.

- Stage 1: Defining the research problem
- Stage 2: Determine the research design
- Stage 3: Design the data collection methods and forms
- Stage 4: Design the sample and collect the data
- Stage 5: Analyse and interpret the data
- Stage 6: Use information to draft the research report and conclusions

3.3 STAGE 1: DEFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The initial step in the marketing research process is the identification of a marketing problem or opportunity in the market. The incorrect definition of the problem can make the marketing research a futile exercise (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:46). Problem definition expresses the problem experienced by management which is to be addressed by the market research, broken down into a broad statement and specific elements (Malhotra, 2015:55).

The management dilemma is not confined only to problems, but can also be early signals of a growth opportunity, a future fad or a trend. Recognising management dilemmas is not difficult as they manifest themselves in the performance indicators of the organisation, such as sales figures, profit, rising costs delivery performance and customer satisfaction (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:77; McDaniel & Gates, 2015:71). It is also important to determine early on if the research question can be answered (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:76). Hence, the research problem is extremely important as it forms the foundation and direction of all future research activities.

The research problem for this study is described in Section 1.2 and is primarily identified as insufficient knowledge about the impact of relationship quality constructs and relationship value constructs on the B2B customer loyalty of the ISAs in the crop protection industry. The suppliers of crop protection products in South Africa operate in a very competitive market and the ISAs (ISAs) play a significant role in the recommendation of products used by the end-user, the farmer. Suppliers should be more involved in the business of the distributors and their agents by adding value through relational exchange and collaboration to forge customer loyalty towards the supplier. Thus, for the suppliers of crop protection products to succeed in

a generic and very price sensitive market, their efforts should rather be directed at adding value and building high-quality relationships with the ISAs who recommend and sell their products to the end-user farmers. Therefore, the relationship marketing concepts of relationship quality and relationship value require further scrutiny and must be tested for their relevance in the crop protection supply scenario to determine if they have an impact on the B2B customer loyalty ISAs may develop towards their preferred supplier of crop protection solutions. Therefore, the research problem can be contextualised by the summary in Table 3.2.

Table 3:2 The research problem of the study

The suppliers of crop protection products in South Africa trade in a very competitive market. This is due as a result that the market is limited and product offerings are very generic as their patents have lapsed and their uniqueness have been eroded by similar products. Therefore, suppliers of crop protection products must offer more than just well-priced products to the distributors and their sales agents. Suppliers should strive to differentiate themselves based on other attributes such as product and price by the building of a quality relationship with ISAs and add value through collaboration in their relationships. Extant literature suggests that the relationship marketing concept of relationship quality and its constructs, trust and commitment, can strengthen B2B customer loyalty. The literature furthermore suggests that there are “softer” relationship value drivers contributing to B2B customer loyalty such as product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market.

These relationships, however, have not yet been explored within the South African crop protection industry. A deeper understanding of these relationship marketing phenomena could empower suppliers to differentiate their product offerings to the ISAs, strengthen trust and commitment and nurture B2B customer loyalty. The study may shine some light on the factors that keep ISAs loyal towards a preferred supplier’s product range.

3.3.1 Primary objective

Following the identification of the research problem, the primary objective of this research is to investigate factors predicting ISA’s business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions.

3.3.2 Secondary objectives

The following secondary objectives are put forward to support the primary objective tabled in Table 3.3.

Table 3:3 Secondary objectives of this study

Secondary objectives	
Secondary objective 1	To provide an overview of research literature related to: 1a) Relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value. 1b) The main constructs of this research study, namely, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time to market, personal interaction and B2B customer loyalty. 1c) The relationships between the main constructs of this research study.
Secondary objective 2	To develop a sample profile of ISAs who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in the Republic of South Africa during the past two years and who participated in this research study.
Secondary objective 3	To measure the perception levels of ISAs regarding the constructs measured in this study. More specifically: 3a) To measure the levels of trust of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3b) To measure the levels of commitment of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3c) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the product quality provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3d) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of delivery provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3e) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of service support provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3f) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding their personal interactions with their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years. 3g) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the know-how (knowledge) of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years.
Secondary objective 3	3h) To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the time to market performance of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last two years.
Secondary objective 4	To assess whether the selected relationship quality and relationship value variables investigated in this study significantly and positively predict business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold by ISAs during the last two years.

3.4 STAGE 2: DETERMINE THE RESEARCH DESIGN

After the formulation of the research problem and the objective statements, the researcher can design an overall plan to achieve those objectives (Hair et al., 2013:36). The research design creates the plan and structure to address the research hypotheses (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:54). The research design provides the outline for the execution of the marketing research project. It stipulates the necessary procedures to obtain the information required to address the research problem (Malhotra, 2015:84). There are three general classifications of research design. They are exploratory, descriptive or causal in nature (Hair et al., 2013:37).

3.4.1 Exploratory research design

The primary objective of exploratory research is the provision of insight and understanding of the problem faced by management, where the researcher has limited experience and knowledge about the issue at hand (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:95). The situation may be that the information needed at this stage is not very well defined. The approach in this research design is flexible and unstructured (Malhotra, 2015:86). Exploratory research is usually qualitative, which consists of data collecting by text, images, observations and open-ended questions (Hair et al., 2013:78). Techniques commonly used are in-depth interviews, focus groups, document analysis and participant observation (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:130). The findings produced by exploratory research are usually based on a small and non-representative sample and must be regarded as tentative until confirmed and verified through conclusive research (Malhotra, 2015:86). Therefore, researchers frequently conduct exploratory research when the faced problem is not clear enough to develop research hypotheses (Clow & James, 2014:27). However, B2B customer loyalty is a well-researched phenomenon which makes exploratory research redundant for this research study.

3.4.2 Descriptive research design

Descriptive research describes the characteristics of marketing phenomena by answering the questions of *“who, what, when, where and how”*. This is different from exploratory research as the researcher already has a good perception of the marketing problem, but is seeking additional information to make more informed business decisions (Clow & James, 2014:28). Descriptive research frequently makes use of surveys (pre-designed questionnaires) and observing people’s behaviour in regard to a certain issue. This kind of research can either be cross-sectional, collecting from a sample once or longitudinal, where a fixed sample is repeatedly measured over time (Malhotra, 2015:87). Most survey research is descriptive and is most often quantitative in its results (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:146). Descriptive research

using surveys is classified as person-administered, self-administered or telephone-administered. Person-administered surveys are typically in-home personal interviews or intercept surveys. Telephone administered surveys can consist of a traditional phone interview or a computer-assisted telephone interview. Simple data can also be collected by texting from a mobile phone. Self-administered surveys refer to mail surveys, online surveys or drop-off surveys (Hair et al., 2013:111). The advantage of surveys is the provision of a quick, efficient, inexpensive and accurate measurement of a population by straightforward statistical tools (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:147). Disadvantages of surveying methods are the challenge in developing meaningful questions as well as getting satisfactory response rates from the participants (Hair et al., 2013:109).

3.4.3 Causal or experimental research design

Causal or experimental research is concerned in obtaining information about cause-and-effect relationships, such as higher prices leads to the decrease in sales. Like descriptive research, causal research is planned and structured in design (Malhotra, 2015:88). Descriptive research explores non-causal relationships between variables, whereas the concept of causality explores the influence of the various independent variables (X) on the dependent variable (Y) (Hair et al., 2013:122). Experimentation refers to an intervention by the researcher by manipulating an independent or explanatory variable and studying the effect thereof about the study (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:192).

The cross-sectional descriptive research method was decided upon for this research problem after assessing the research objectives and extant literature. The descriptive research design is appropriate as the study has a structured design and clear research hypotheses have been identified that is based on a good understanding of the research problem. Furthermore, this study aims to uncover additional information about the characteristics of ISAs regarding their trust, commitment and value perceptions and their loyalty behaviour towards their preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

3.5 STAGE 3: DESIGN THE DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND FORMS

Data collected in the research process can be classified as either primary or secondary.

Primary data, also called field research, can be described as data collected for a specific reason. Secondary data, also called desk research, is best described as “old” primary data from previous research studies (Bradley, 2013:70; Hair et al., 2013:50). By collecting and studying secondary data, it is may be possible to assess that the research problem is not necessarily that unique and has been researched before (Malhotra, 2015:89). Secondary data

can be obtained from the organisation's databases itself (internal) or external sources. External sources can be classified as published data, syndicated service data and databases. Published data are available from libraries and the internet nowadays, which includes information from governments, business chambers, universities, trade associations and professional associations and handbooks. Syndicated data refers to specialised information available only by subscription. Online external databases would refer to searchable indexes and directories (Burns & Bush, 2014:124) such as Google Scholar, Ebsco and Elsevier. Secondary data sources are also used to conduct a critical review of the extant literature.

The foundation of research is laid by a critical review of current literature to gain understanding and insight into previous research, emerging trends and the conclusions of other researchers (Saunders et al., 2016:74). Hence, a thorough investigation was executed during the initial stages of this research study to gain more insight into relationship marketing and related topics. A variety of published academic resources were used including textbooks, management and marketing journals. Journals include amongst others *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of Marketing Research* and *European Journal of Marketing*. Topics investigated by the literature review were the South African crop protection industry (Chapter 1), B2B customer loyalty, relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value (Chapter 2).

To collect the primary data in the empirical study, a suitable collection method and questionnaire must be selected. The primary data collection method and questionnaire selected for the empirical part of this study are motivated in the following two subsections.

3.5.1 Data collection method

Primary data is generated by the researcher to solve the management dilemma. Primary data can be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative research provides understanding and insight in the research problem, while quantitative research needs to quantify data using statistical analysis and are descriptive or causal (Malhotra, 2015:120).

Qualitative research is unstructured and probing to define a problem better and to develop an approach to address it (Malhotra, 2015:118). Qualitative research gathers, evaluates and interprets by studying what people say and do. Qualitative data can be quantified in broad categories through a "translating" process. Qualitative research help to understand customer behaviour and their perception of products and services in comparison with the competition (Burns & Bush, 2014:146-147). Therefore, qualitative research is also suitable to identify variables and construct hypotheses (Malhotra, 2015:118).

Qualitative research makes use of a small sample of participants as it seeks to understand people rather than fitting into predetermined categories. The richness of qualitative data may complement other forms of data collection methods (Hair et al., 2013:78,80). Typical qualitative data collection methods include observations, in-depth focus group interviews, in-depth personal interviews, telephonic interviews, online collaboration and monitoring of social media to name a view (Burns & Bush, 2014:148; Hair et al., 2013:81).

On the other hand, quantitative research is descriptive and uses numbers and statistical analysis to condense demographics, attitudes and behaviours. Surveying methods are usually the foundation of quantitative marketing research related to descriptive designs (Hair et al., 2013:109). Quantitative research creates meaningful segmentation to account for behaviour, consumption and attitude (Bradley, 2013:268). Structured surveys by the administration of questionnaires are a very popular data collection method because of ease of use and the reliability of data (Malhotra, 2015:150). Descriptive quantitative research describes the relationship between variables or the differences between groups (Hair et al., 2013:108), and data is obtained from a big number of respondents. The data format and sources are defined, the collection process formalised and the data mainly numerical (Burns & Bush, 2014:146). Business statistics are employed to classify quantitative data into data types (Saunders et al., 2016:499).

In this research study, a quantitative research method was decided upon with the objective to examine the effect of the relationship marketing dimensions, relationship quality and relationship value, on B2B customer loyalty as perceived by the ISAs in the South African crop protection industry. Consequently, this research focuses on predicting future behaviour and attitudes of ISAs towards their favourite suppliers of crop protection products. Quantitative research was employed to assess the relationships between the identified constructs and to test the hypotheses formulated.

Furthermore, the quantitative research approach is used in combination with a descriptive research, chosen as design for this study. The purpose is to generalise and describe the characteristics of ISAs and their loyalty perception regarding their preferred suppliers.

3.5.2 Data collection form

After the decision about the nature and appropriate data collection method for the study, a data collection form must be selected to communicate with the participants in the study (Malhotra, 2015:236). Researchers can choose between observational, experimental and survey data collection forms. According to Hair (2013:93) is observation research a systematic

process to observe and record human behaviour patterns and marketing phenomena. Thus, observations are made about actual behaviour and not reported behaviour such as the respondents in a survey. Experimental research consists of well-designed data collection procedures where the researcher manipulates a causal independent variable and measure the hypothesised effect on a dependent variable while controlling for adverse influences (Hair et al., 2013:122). The survey data collection method is based on the questioning of research subjects (respondents). These questions are asked verbally, written or via computer. Questions are regarding behaviour, intentions, attitude, motivators, demographics and lifestyle choices (Malhotra, 2015:149).

Surveying methods are popular methods and widely used by marketing researchers to obtain data (Burns & Bush, 2014:172; Saunders et al., 2016:439). Surveys have evolved with various questionnaires and measuring devices (instruments) available to the researcher (Bradley, 2013:188). With the survey method, all participants are required to respond to the same collection of questions, and it's an efficient way of collecting data from a large sample before the quantitative analysis (Saunders et al., 2016:439). Surveys are usually designed to be descriptive or predictive. Descriptive research is used to profile people, objects or issues such as income levels, marital status, age, gender or family size. Predictive surveys collect a wider set of data that can be used to predict changes in attitude and behaviour by testing the different hypotheses (Hair et al., 2013:188). As previously discussed surveys are either cross-sectional, conducted at a single point in time or longitudinal which are the same questions asked at multiple points in time (Clow & James, 2014:163).

Therefore, for this study, a cross-sectional survey method was chosen to collect data from a relatively small population of ISAs from the South African crop protection industry. The survey method is appropriate for use in a descriptive research design and helped to describe and statistically explain B2B customer loyalty, relationship quality and relationship value as perceived by ISAs regarding their preferred suppliers.

Surveying methods further have various advantages. First, according to Burns and Bush (2014:172), surveys provide standardisation where all respondents react to an identical set of questions and response scales. Secondly, ease of administration is possible where respondents can answer quickly and easy. Thirdly, computer processing and standardisation give quick feedback and statistical analysis, despite large sample sizes. Lastly, it reveals sub-groups and market segments for comparison and the search for significance.

Survey research also has its shortcomings. Respondent errors occur where respondents can either not be reached, is inconvenienced or is unwilling to participate. This phenomenon is

referred to as nonresponse errors and has the result of a different final sample than the planned sample (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:123). Researchers can attempt to improve survey response rates through giving prior notice, offering incentives and doing follow-up communication (Malhotra, 2015:164). The ISAs in the crop protection industry is known for nonresponse behaviour. Therefore, for this study, it was decided to “go” to the ISA instead of them “coming” to the research. It was decided to intercept the respondents in person or collectively at sales and training meetings.

Response error is the result of the human imperfection such as selective memory, biased perceptions, guessing (Hair et al., 2013:110) or the tendency to give socially desirable answers (Malhotra, 2015:154). Clow and James (2014:167) describe these response biases as either deliberate falsification or unconscious errors. Response bias was reduced by giving special attention to questionnaire design, as not to leave an impression that the respondent is ill-informed. Pilot testing also gives valuable feedback in this regard and was addressed in this study as discussed in section 3.5.3.3 (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:124).

Input errors occur where the data gathered from the survey instrument is not correctly captured on the computer (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:123). This study uses the professional services of Statistical Consultation Services (StatCS) of the NWU to minimise possible errors.

Survey methods can be classified as person-administered, self-administered, telephone-administered or electronically-administered. The person-administered survey method makes use of a trained interviewer that asks questions and records the interviewee’s answers in a face-to-face interview can be done in-home, in-office or by intercepting the respondent at a suitable location (Hair et al., 2013:112). Answers can be recorded either on paper or be computer based (Burns & Bush, 2014:175). Telephone-administered surveys are conducted by asking questions and recording answers via telephone or mobile phone technologies (Hair et al., 2013:111).

Self-administered survey methods, also called self-completion methods, refer to the approach where the respondent is primarily involved and responsible for responding to the survey questions and need little reassurance and guidance on the research topic (Bradley, 2013:118). The respondent completes the typical “paper-and-pencil” survey on his own without a computer or human agent administering the interview. The respondent usually selects his own pace, time and place to complete the questions. He may also decide when to return his completed questionnaire (Burns & Bush, 2014:178).

The criteria for selecting a specific survey method depends on the factors such as situation, time-frame, willingness of respondents, complexity, budget, characteristics of the target population, amount of data, access to population and geographical considerations (Hair et al., 2013:118; Malhotra, 2015:162; Burns & Bush, 2014:197).

For this research study, the respondents were intercepted at regional sales and technical training meetings, where self-administered questionnaires were distributed and recollected after a session of approximately 2 hours.

This method was selected owing to the many benefits it may provide. Firstly, there is no need for an interviewer or computer assistance, making it one of the least costly methods of data collecting. Secondly, there is no chance of “contamination” of responses by an interviewer’s presence, body language, personal odours or mannerism. Lastly, respondents are more comfortable and truthful in their responses when they are anonymous (Hair et al., 2013:115; Burns & Bush, 2014:178).

There are also a couple of disadvantages in using self-administered surveys. They are inflexible as they contain only the standard questions with no in-depth probing possibilities. Also, the completion and return are in the control of the respondent and therefore a high non-response rate is likely, as the majority will not complete the survey. Further, response errors are possible as the respondent is not fully comprehending the questions and not having an interviewer can increase misunderstanding. Lastly, the time to collect and capture data on a computer can take significantly longer than other methods (Hair et al., 2013:115; Burns & Bush, 2014:178). A pilot study with feedback was conducted to minimise the shortcomings, and the data services of Statistical Consultation Services (StatCS) of the NWU were used.

The questionnaire is the most common data collection instrument in business surveys (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:295). The questionnaire is the tool used to present the questions the researcher needs the respondents to answer (Burns & Bush, 2014:214). Some researchers believe questionnaire design is the most critical phase of the research process. Poorly designed questionnaires can frustrate, overwhelm and confuse the respondents which result in either refusal or disinterest in the completion thereof (Burns & Bush, 2014:223). The following section discusses considerations for the design of self-administered questionnaires.

3.5.3 Questionnaire as a data collection form

Hair (2013:188) defines a questionnaire as a document containing questions and scales intended to collect primary data. According to Malhotra (2015:240), a questionnaire is a structured technique for the collection of data and comprises of verbal or written questions,

answered by the respondent. The questionnaire uses a set of questions which generate data that satisfy the objectives of the research survey. The data gathering process is standardised because all survey participants are asked to answer the same questions in the same way (Clow & James, 2014:323). The next section gives more insight into the questionnaire designing process for the empirical section of this research study.

3.5.3.1 Question response formats and measurement levels

3.5.3.1.1 Open-ended and closed questions

The primary decision for researchers is to determine the questions format for the survey being either open-ended, closed-ended or a combination of both (Clow & James, 2014:326). Open-ended questions, also referred to as unstructured questions, pose a problem question which requires the respondent to state in their own words the answer (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:272; Hair et al., 2013:190). For example, *“Name your main (preferred) supplier of crop protection products”* or *“What is your annual sales turnover in crop protection products?”*. Open questions invite spontaneous response, are unprompted and used to start a talking point (Brace, 2008:46). Open-ended questions can request subjective or factual answers. Subjective questions may start with something like *“In your opinion, the most important....”*. Factual questions require concrete answers (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014:119). For example, *“On average how many kilometres do you drive monthly?”* The advantage of open-ended questions is that they provide more information or highlights new issues overlooked by the researcher. Disadvantages of open-ended questions are misinterpretations, slow speed of asking and difficult analysis (Bradley, 2013:199). The use of open-ended question must be restricted to absolute necessity as they can bore respondents (Burns & Bush, 2014:223).

According to Brace (2008:46) conversation is stopped with closed questions, as there is only a small set of predictable answers that the respondent can give. Close-ended questions are structured and require the participant to choose an answer from a predetermined set of responses or scale points. With closed questions, the researcher feels able to predict the type of answer resulting from a specific question. These questions are also referred to as fixed-alternative questions where the respondent is asked to choose the answer representing his viewpoint (Brace, 2008:46; Bradley, 2013:200; Hair et al., 2013:190; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:272). Advantages of fixed-alternative questions are the ease of data coding and capturing, a limited number of responses, prompt respondent's recollection and limited interviewer bias. Disadvantages of closed-ended questions are that the alternatives must be anticipated as the respondents must choose from the given alternatives with no freedom to explain the answer (Clow & James, 2014:330).

Fixed-alternative questions can be as simple as Yes or No or present various multiple-choice questions, lists, scales, categories, rankings and ratings (Bradley, 2013:201; Malhotra, 2015:247; Saunders et al., 2016:457). Fixed-alternative questions can be divided into two types namely, lists and scales. The first format requires making a single or multiple choices from a list of available responses. The second format uses rating scales where the participant has a given fixed range of categories to choose a single response from (Bradley, 2013:201).

Closed-ended questions can be classified as dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions and scaled-response questions. A question with only two options as an answer is a dichotomous question. Dichotomous questions are easy to answer with no neutral stance on the question. However, these type of questions does not indicate degree or intensity in their answers. Dichotomous questions are easy to code, capture and analyse. Examples of these questions are the common Agree/Disagree or Yes/No questions. (Clow & James, 2014:331; Malhotra, 2015:247; Saunders et al., 2016:454).

Multiple-choice questions provide the respondent with various alternatives to select one or more answers. Possible responses include a set of all possible choices. Sometimes an alternative label "Other (please specify)" can be included to accommodate the respondent. For example, instead of writing down an answer to "*In which province is your car registered?*", the respondent is presented with a list of L / MP / GP / KZ / NW / NC / FS / EC / WP / Other (Clow & James, 2014:331; Malhotra, 2015:247; Saunders et al., 2016:454).

Lastly, scale questions assign descriptors to a range of possible answers about a particular subject. Degrees of intensity or scale points give insight into the question (Hair et al., 2013:161). A continuous rating scale runs in an "*intensity continuum*" from a positive outmost of some criteria to the negative outmost thereof (Burns & Bush, 2014:207; Malhotra, 2015:217). The Likert Scale developed by Rensis Likert is a most commonly used scale. The Likert scale has typically five response categories to indicate the degree of agreement. The scale ranges from "*Strongly disagree*" to "*Strongly agree*" with a specific statement on a certain object. The Likert scale is easy to construct and administer because it is easy for respondents to understand the mechanics thereof (Malhotra, 2015:221).

It is also important to note that bad questions prevent or distort the conversation between the researcher and the respondent. Bad questions can be unanswerable, leading questions or double-barrelled where several issues are addressed in a single question and response (Hair et al., 2013:193).

For this research, the questionnaire was drafted using mostly fixed-alternative questions. There were two open-ended questions included asking the respondent his annual sales turnover and year of birth. All three categories of close-ended questions were used in the questionnaire namely dichotomous, multiple-choice and scale questions. A five-point unlabelled (without categories) Likert type scale was used to measure the respondent's degree of agreement with statements given about the research study's constructs (B2B customer loyalty, relationship quality and relationship value)

3.5.3.1.2 Measurement and scaling

Malhotra (2015:206) defines measurement as the assignment of numbers or symbols to characteristics of objects corresponding to a specific set of rules. The measurement process is important for two reasons. First, it measures not a person, object or event but the attributes thereof such as loyalty, trust or commitment. Secondly, numbers must be applied consistently according to rules made by the researcher to be useful (Clow & James, 2014:256). There are four measurement levels: nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio (Malhotra, 2015:207). Table 3.4 gives a summary of each type of measurement.

For this research, nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio measurement scales were employed in designing this questionnaire. The dichotomous and fixed alternative questions with their numbered responses produced nominal data. The nominal data is used to generate descriptive statistics such as the demographics of the ISAs in the crop protection industry. The Likert scale, measuring the intensity of the responses, provided ordinal data. The ordinal data is processed in to interval data, which is used to generate summarised statistics to explain the importance and significance of the different B2B customer loyalty, relationship quality and value constructs. The open-ended questions are used to determine the age and the annual sales turnover of the ISAs and subsequently produced nominal and ordinal data (age) and ratio data (sales turnover).

Table 3:4 Levels of measurement

Level of Measurement	Description
Nominal scale	The nominal measurement scale places respondents into separate categories, for example, home province (Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Northern Cape, Orange Free State and Western Cape), gender (male or female), language (Afrikaans, English, Setswana, Sesotho, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, isiZulu), or marital status (married, single, widowed, divorced). Nominal scale questions are used to categorise people to fit into only one category.

Level of Measurement	Description
Ordinal scale	The ordinal measurement scale is a ranking scale which assigns a number to the relative position of the object. For example, a participant is asked to rank his preferred banking method from 1 to 4 according to categories: <i>“ATM, Telephone banking, Internet banking or Personal banker”</i> .
Interval scale	Interval measurement scales have nominal and ordinal attributes but also capture the differences in quantities of the study objects. Numbers are used to rating the objects, and those values have numerical significance, as the scale represents equal distances in the attributes being measured. For example, a respondent can be asked to measure his attitude on a statement according to a 5-point scale where <i>“1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree”</i> .
Ratio scale	Ratio measurement scales consist of all the properties of nominal, ordinal and interval measurement scales but with an absolute zero point. The ratio scale represents the highest level of measurement and communicates the most information. It can be used to measure data very accurately as the number zero has a definite meaning. For example, <i>“The number of children under 18 living in your household is</i> ” will produce an exact number as an answer.

Source: Hair et al., (2013:162); Malhotra (2015:208); Zikmund and Babin (2010:244)

3.5.3.2 Question sequence, content, phrasing and layout

The researcher must pay attention to the sequence of the questions, question content, phrasing and the way it is laid out. The next section describes the considerations and procedures to be followed.

For a questionnaire to be effective, the content must be organised and presented as a logical and visually pleasing design to avoid the respondent's boredom with the questionnaire (Bordens & Abbott, 2014:264). Too long surveys contribute to respondent fatigue and laziness. Shorter surveys can improve response rates (Fanning, 2005:8). The following basic guidelines can be useful in drafting the questionnaire:

- A well-designed questionnaire always starts with a cover letter and directions. The cover of the survey should attract and motivate the participants and make them eager to participate by establishing a sense of trust (Fanning, 2005:3).
- The format, spacing and positioning of the questions must be visually pleasing and printed on good quality paper and stapled (stitched) (Acharaya, 2010:13; Malhotra, 2015:255; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:284).
- The progression through the questionnaire must be fluent. The careful wording of the question and thoughtful consideration of its placement in the questionnaire is important (Bradley, 2013:214). Each survey questions should relate to the others in that section of

the instrument (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:317) Question sequence establishes survey's logic and flow (Fanning, 2005:5).

- The first questions should be general but should relate to the cover (Fanning, 2005:5). Begin the questionnaire with questions that are easy to answer by the respondents. This can be followed by questions that “*dig deeper*” such as opinions, attitudes and preferences (Faarup & Hansen, 2010:47). Subsequent questions may influence earlier questions, called a funnel approach to progressively explore the issue more thorough (Malhotra, 2015:253).
- The question in the questionnaire should be in a logical order (Malhotra, 2015:253). The questionnaire format should represent thoughtfulness by ensuring subjects and topics are grouped (Faarup & Hansen, 2010:47). Questions should be grouped in a way that respects the participants and support ease of answering (Fanning, 2005:5). Use section breaks to segregate broader topics (Acharaya, 2010:13). Questions can be grouped by content, type or logical order (Fanning, 2005:12)
- Sensitive issues should be placed later in the questionnaire (Faarup & Hansen, 2010:47). Dangerous issues such as personal and confidential information can ruin a survey's response rate (Fanning, 2005:5).
- For consistency in appearance use the same font, font size and indentation through the whole survey (Fanning, 2005:6).
- Avoid “2 in 1” or double-barrelled questions that address multiple issues and require more than one answer (Acharaya, 2010:11; Fanning, 2005:7).
- Characters and words make data entry difficult. Therefore, questions and their answers should be numbered where possible (Acharaya, 2010:12).

The questionnaire developed for this research study complies with all the above good practices of survey design.

3.5.3.3 Pilot testing

The final stage in questionnaire design is to conduct a pretest with a small number of respondents before conducting the actual survey (Hair et al., 2013:39). The purpose of the pilot test is to identify and eliminate potential problems. All aspects including question content, wording, sequence, difficulty, ambiguity and layout should be scrutinised (Malhotra, 2015:255). Pilot testing allows the researcher to identify ambiguous and biased questions and

determine whether there is any difficulty in understanding the questions (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:291).

The pretest also helps the researcher to calculate the time needed from the participants to complete the survey (Hair et al., 2013:202). The feedback given by the small group of respondents after conducting the questionnaire is valuable to refine the questionnaire (Saunders et al., 2016:474). Further pilot testing may be necessary after the suggested changes were made (Bradley, 2013:216).

The questionnaire for this research study was pretested and completed by six ISAs from the crop protection industry. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with these individuals to solve ambiguity, linguistic and other areas of confusion. After the feedback from the pretest participants, some minor corrections were made.

A summary of the final survey questionnaire used in the empirical part of this study is given in the next section. Careful consideration was given to the ethical guidelines provided by the North-West University in the design and execution of the questionnaire. The researcher adhered to all the ethical guidelines provided by the North-West University for conducting a study of this nature

3.5.4 Summary and overview of final questionnaire

The final survey questionnaire consists out of three parts. The first part contains the cover letter to potential respondents, followed by Section A and Section B. A copy of the final questionnaire used in this research is presented in Annexure A.

- The cover letter gives some background as to the purpose of the study, that participation is voluntary, confidential and anonymous. Contact details of the researcher were included.
- Section A: Demographic questions consisted of seven questions. The main objective here was to obtain demographic profile information of the ISAs, such as geographic location, gender, work experience, marital status, home language, date of birth and annual sales turnover.
- Section B: This section contains first the questions about the relationship quality constructs trust and commitment. The second part of this section explores the relationship value constructs. The last part of this section contains four questions about perceived B2B customer loyalty. Section B was constructed mainly by adapting previous relationship marketing constructs developed by the scholars Gil-Saura et al. (2009) and Ulaga and

Eggert (2006). The participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale where one = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree.

Table 3.5 contains a summary of the statements developed for this study's questionnaire with the sources used, therefore. These statements were adapted to be relevant and applicable for this study environment. The table also indicates the response format and measurement level used for every statement. Furthermore, the table specifies the objective and hypothesis, if applicable, involved for each statement.

Table 3:5 **Summary of questions, statements, sources, response format, measurement level, secondary objectives and research hypotheses**

	Question/Statement	Source	Response format	Level of measurement	Secondary objective	Research hypothesis
Section A: Demographic information						
Question 1	I work mainly in (province)	Self-generated	Multiple-choice	Nominal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 2	Please indicate your gender	Self-generated	Dichotomous	Nominal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 3	How many years have you been recommending and selling crop protection solutions?	Self-generated	Multiple-choice	Nominal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 4	Please indicate your marital status	Self-generated	Multiple-choice	Nominal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 5	What is your home language?	Self-generated	Multiple-choice	Nominal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 6	In which year were you born?	Self-generated	Open-ended	Nominal and ordinal	Secondary objective 2	*
Question 7	Annual sales turnover in crop protection products	Self-generated	Open-ended	Ratio scale	Secondary objective 2	*
Section B: Perceptions regarding research constructs						
Trust						
Question 1.1	This supplier is sincere and honest.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1
Question 1.2	This supplier keeps his promises.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1

/ Section B: Perceptions regarding research constructs						
Trust						
Question 1.3	This supplier informs me honestly of any problems which might affect me.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1
Question 1.4	This supplier is concerned about me and my interests.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1
Question 1.5	The information this supplier give is reliable.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1
Question 1.6	This supplier is an expert in the products I sell.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3a & 4	H1
Commitment						
Question 1.7	I am very committed to my relationship with this supplier.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3b & 4	H2
Question 1.8	I am very faithful to this supplier.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3b & 4	H2
Question 1.9	I try to maintain a long-term relationship with this supplier.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3b & 4	H2
Question 1.10	The relationship I have with this supplier is worth making the maximum effort to preserve it.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3b & 4	H2

Product quality						
Question 1.11	Provides better product quality.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Question 1.12	Meets quality standards better.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Question 1.13	Offers more reliable products.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Question 1.14	Have fewer products that are rejected.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Question 1.15	Provides more consistent product quality over time.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Question 1.16	Has fewer variations in product quality.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3c & 4	H3
Service support						
Question 1.17	Provides better services and product support.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3e & 4	H4
Question 1.18	Is more available when information is needed.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3e & 4	H4
Question 1.19	Provides more appropriate information.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3e & 4	H4
Question 1.20	Responds faster when information is needed.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3e & 4	H4

Delivery performance						
Question 1.21	Performs better in meeting delivery due dates.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3d & 4	H5
Question 1.22	Has fewer delivery errors.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3d & 4	H5
Question 1.23	Has more accurate deliveries (no missing or wrong products).	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3d & 4	H5
Personal interaction						
Question 1.24	Is easier to work with.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6
Question 1.25	Gives me a greater feeling of being treated as an important customer.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6
Question 1.32	Have a better working relationship with this supplier's representative.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6
Question 1.33	Interact better with this supplier's representative.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6
Question 1.34	Can address problems more easily with this supplier.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6
Question 1.35	Can discuss problems more freely with this supplier.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3f & 4	H6

Supplier's know-how						
Question 1.26	Knows better how to improve existing products.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3g & 4	H7
Question 1.27	Performs better at introducing new products.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3g & 4	H7
Question 1.28	Knows better how to help drive innovation in spraying programs / products.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3g & 4	H7
Question 1.29	Knows better how to provide assistance in new product development.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3g & 4	H7
Question 1.36	Have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of this supplier.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3g & 4	H7
Time-to-market						
Question 1.30	Performs better in helping to get new products faster into the market.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3h & 4	H8
Question 1.31	Helps more in delivering the products faster to the market.	Ulaga & Eggert (2006)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 3h & 4	H8
B2B customer loyalty						
Question 2.1	I intend to continue selling this supplier's products in the future.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 4	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7 & H8
Question 2.2	The next time a farmer needs the same type of product I shall sell this suppliers' product to the farmer again.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 4	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7 & H8

B2B customer loyalty						
Question 2.3	I shall continue selling products from this supplier more frequently in the future.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 4	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7 & H8
/ B2B customer loyalty						
Question 2.4	I will probably sell products from this supplier again.	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)	Multi-item scale – unlabelled Likert-type scale	Interval	Secondary objective 4	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7 & H8

3.6 STAGE 4: DESIGN THE SAMPLE AND COLLECT DATA/

So far, the research problem was identified for this research study; an appropriate research design has been developed, as well as a suitable data gathering method and questionnaire. The next step in the research process is to develop a suitable strategy and plan to gather the required data.

3.6.1 The study population

Identifying the target population is the next step in the research process. The target population are those people, events or records that can give answers to the designed question statements (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:86). A population element consists of the individual participant or object being measured (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:338). Thus, the defined target study population can be defined as a recognisable group of elements of interest which are relevant to the research problem based on the research objectives (Hair et al., 2013:137). Sample units are those population elements which are actually available and accessible to the researcher (Hair et al., 2013:137).

For this research, the population is defined as all males and females, 18 years and older, who are employed as ISAs and who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in R.S.A. during the past two years.

3.6.2 Selecting the sample, determine the sample size and collect data

A census can be defined as collecting information from the whole population (Burns & Bush, 2014:239). Sampling is preferred over census for reasons of practicality, extend and cost (Burns & Bush, 2014:241). The rationale behind sampling is to select some elements of the population targeted for research, from which a conclusion can be extracted pertaining the whole population (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:338). A sample can be described as a subgroup of a population that duly represents the group in totality (Burns & Bush, 2014:239). The sampling frame is a list of people from which the sample will be taken (Clow & James, 2014:227).

The researcher also has to decide on a sampling procedure. With a probability sample, all members of the population have an equal chance of being approached. With a non-probability sample, the chance of a participant being selected for a response cannot be determined. With non-probability sampling, the sample is based on the judgement of the researcher (Clow & James, 2014:231; Hair et al., 2013:141)

As a sample frame was not available, for this research study a non-probability purposive (judgment) sampling approach was followed to select the respondents of this study. The researcher specifically approached respondents that form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to complete the survey. Five peers and colleagues, working as area managers in the crop protection industry were recruited as fieldworkers to attend area sales meetings. The fieldworkers were trained and requested to approach respondent's familiar to them, who also form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to participate in the survey. The fieldworkers had to request these respondents (sample elements) to complete the self-administered survey.

The aim was originally to obtain 114 responses, as explained in section 1.7.2.6. The final amount of completed questionnaires which eventually realised were 121, resulting in a sample realisation rate 106% as reported in section 4.2.

3.7 STAGE 5: ANALYSE AND INTERPRET THE DATA

The subsequent step in the research process is to prepare, analyse and interpret the data. Data preparation refers to the editing, coding and data entry to ensure that data is accurate and a form more suitable for analysis than in the raw form (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:376). The purpose for the collection of data is to acquire information to make marketing decisions. The quality of those decisions rests on the integrity of the data obtained. Therefore, is it necessary to follow a methodical process to find and reduce errors to ensure high-quality data (Clow & James, 2014:359). The data must initially be edited, coded, transcribed and cleaned (Hair et al., 2013:252; Malhotra, 2015:302-308). Editing consists of verifying the data for omissions, clarity and uniformity in classification. The editing process rectifies problems such as interviewer and respondent mistakes before the data is captured on the computer (Hair et al., 2013:245; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:59). Coding entails the grouping and assignment of values, numbers or symbols to the various answers to the questionnaire (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:380; Hair et al., 2013:249). Editing and coding ensure that data is more accurate and suitable for processing and analysis (Bradley, 2013:313).

According to Malhotra (2015:306) transcribing is the process of reading the data from the questionnaire or coding sheets into a computer to create data files. The extant literature describes this step as data entry by keyboarding the gathered information to create an electronic data file for further manipulation or analysis (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:391; Hair et al., 2013:252).

Data cleaning is the process that checks and treats missing responses. Data cleaning also deals with inconsistent values that are out of range, extreme or inconsistent (Clow & James, 2014:373).

This research study made use of the Statistical Consultation Services (StatCS) of the NWU to verify the data for accuracy, completeness and validity. The data was entered into the IBM SPSS ver. 22 statistical computer program for further analysis.

After the data is edited, coded, transcribed and cleaned, the data analysis process can commence. The next section discusses the techniques employed for data analysis for this research study.

3.7.1 Reporting the descriptive and inferential statistics

Data analysis uses reasoning and understanding to explain the data that have been collected. (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:59). This includes the calculation of indices, measures and patterns (Kothari, 2004:180). The first step in this process is to describe the data that has been gathered. According to Saunders (2016:527), descriptive statistics is used to describe and compare variables. Descriptive statistics is the basic conversion of the raw data in such a way that describes the basic characteristics thereof (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:354). Table 3.6 presents the descriptive statistical techniques that were used in this study.

Table 3.6: Descriptive statistical techniques used in this study

Descriptive statistical techniques	Definition	Descriptive statistical techniques' application in this study's results
Mean	The mean or arithmetic average can be defined as the value obtained by dividing the total of all values by total number of items (Kothari, 2004:132)	Table 4.2 to 4.11
Percentage	Percent simply means "per hundred" (Statistics Canada, 2015)	Table 4.1
Frequency or count	Frequency lists the number of times a value appears in a specific set of values (Burns & Bush, 2014:321)	Table 4.1
Standard deviation	Standard deviation explains the amount of variation or diversity in a value represented by a bell-curve (Burns & Bush, 2014:321). Standard deviation states the average distance the values are distributed from the mean (Hair et al., 2013:272).	Table 4.2 to 4.11

For this study, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for each statement that measured the research constructs. The demographics of this research study is presented by means, frequencies and percentages.

3.7.2 Assessing reliability, validity and practicality of scales

The researcher must strive to choose or develop a good quality measuring instrument because it determines the quality of data collected (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015:241). The characteristics of a good measuring instrument are determined by its reliability, validity and practicality (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:257).

Reliability refers to consistency or stability of a measurement of behaviour to yield the same results every time it is administered (Cozby & Bates, 2015:100). Reliability implies the robustness of the questionnaire to produce consistent findings at all different times, conditions, samples and with different interviewers (Saunders et al., 2016). Thus, reliability means that results are reproducible whenever the survey is conducted (Faarup & Hansen, 2010:23). Random error is accidental in nature, hard to predict and beyond the control of the researcher and can be countered by a larger sample size (Clow & James, 2014:164). Random error can produce inconsistency in scale measurements and must, therefore, be carefully designed for repetition and free of random error (Hair et al., 2013:165).

The reliability of a survey questionnaire can be determined by using the following techniques (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:260; Cozby & Bates, 2015:103; Hair et al., 2013:165):

- **Test-retest.** A measurement is considered to hold stability when the same set of questions are provided to the same respondent at different times to produce the same answers and outcomes. The correlation equivalent can be calculated to determine the similarity. With a higher correlation value, the results can be judged as more reliable.
- **Equivalent forms** refer to a technique researchers use by creating two similar yet two different scale measurements for each construct. This is administered to either the same sample of respondent or two samples of residents from the same target population. Reliability of the scale instrument is then determined by calculating the mean and the correlation of the two administrations.
- **Internal consistency reliability** assesses the degree that the individual questions about a construct or variable are correlated. Thus, the questions making up the scale should concur to measure the same issue. The focus is therefore on the core consistency of the structure of the construct. The *split-half technique* can be employed where the scales being

used on the questionnaire are split into odd and even numbers and tested. If it correlates at a level of 0.6 and higher, it is reasonably reliable. The *Cronbach's alpha coefficient* calculates the average of the combination of split-half reliabilities for a measurement scale. Coefficient α above 0.8 can be considered as very reliable and between 0.7 and 0.8 as fairly reliable (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:249).

For this research, the reliability the constructs trust, commitment, product quality, delivery, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market were measured by calculating the Cronbach's alpha values.

The validity of a measure refers to the accuracy or the degree to which the score represents the construct (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:250). The validity of measurements refers to whether a questionnaire actually measures what it is supposed to measure (Saunders et al., 2016:450). Validation is determined in different forms (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:257; Hair et al., 2013:167; Cozby & Bates, 2015:107; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:251; Clow & James, 2014:271):

- **Face validity** is concerned whether the instrument logically appears to assess the meant variable by judging the question regarding the theoretical definition of the construct.
- **Content validity** determines the degree the items on a questionnaire is linked to the totality of content that defines the variable under study. In other words, content validity refers to the ability of the instrument to capture all facets, attitudes and knowledge about the construct. The literature review assists in determining how other researchers treated the specific construct in their research of the specific topic.
- **Criterion validity** refers to the ability of the measure to be in correlation with other measures of the same construct. Criterion validity can be sub-classified into concurrent validity and predictive validity.
 - *Concurrent validity* is where the “new” measure is tested at the same time with an “older” measure and are strongly correlated.
 - *Predictive validity* is where the scores from the instrument predict future behaviour on the criteria measured.
- **Discriminant validity** is concerned with the uniqueness of a measure and should not correlate too highly with a measure of a construct that is theoretically not the same.
- **Convergent validity** refers to the degree to which the score of one measure correlates with the score of another measure of the same construct.

Construct validity exists where a measure reliably and honestly characterises a unique concept and take the factors above in consideration. Construct validity also considers how well and logical it connects to the underlying theory and previous empirical research.

The validity of an instrument ensures that the score indicators are accurate to enable the researcher to make good interpretations. Well written research reports include evidence of validity by citing literature, including the actual questions or the opinion of experts about the validity of the instruments (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015:242).

For this study, the content and face validity were considered. The questionnaire was entirely developed by adapting scales used in previous research as discussed in the literature study in Section 2.6, 2.7 and 3.5.4. Furthermore, the questionnaire was pilot tested as discussed in Section 3.5.3.3 and careful consideration was given to the selection of the measurement items to ensure they are aligned to the research objectives of the study.

3.7.3 Performing the multiple linear regression modelling

Regression analysis is a statistical technique used by researchers to model the relationship between a dependent variable (Y) and one or more independent variables (X) (Malhotra, 2015:372). The statistical technique of bivariate regression analysis produces a linear relationship equation line of the relationship between two variables, the independent (predictor) variable and the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2013:322). The multiple regression model is a statistical technique that combines a number of predictor variables (X) to increase the precision of prediction of a principle or outcome variable (Y) (Cozby & Bates, 2015:258).

Many problems and questions are not influenced by only one stand-alone independent variable, but various variables can influence the dependent variable. The multiple regression analysis is the suitable model to use in those cases to explain their combined and simultaneous influence on the dependent variable. A regression coefficient is calculated for each independent variable to explain the relationship between it and the dependent variable. The coefficient is then standardised called beta (β) which range between 0.00 and 1.00. As an example for this study the construct of commitment had a standardised β of 0.155, which mean that with an increase of one "unit", B2B customer loyalty will increase with 15.5% (Hair et al., 2013:327; Zikmund & Babin, 2010:390; Bordens & Abbott, 2014:498;(Saunders et al., 2016:548).

In this study, multiple regression analysis was used to explain the relationship between the independent variables of trust and commitment as well as the relationship value constructs

(product quality, delivery, service support, supplier know-how, personal interaction and time-to-market) on the dependent variable B2B customer loyalty.

3.8 STAGE 6: PREPARE THE RESEARCH REPORT AND FORMULATE CONCLUSIONS

The research report is the formal document presented to communicate the research results with substantiated conclusions on the research findings. The report is usually directed to management or those that instructed it (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:400). According to Hair (2013:342), the research report describes the findings and results to achieve four major goals. Firstly, to successfully communicate the results of the research study. Secondly, to make interpretations and give well-argued recommendations. Thirdly, to confirm the credibility of the research project. Lastly to serve as a future reference document for management decisions. The research results will be reported in the next chapter (Chapter 4).

Chapter 5 will provide more insight into the final conclusions and recommendations of this study.

3.9 SUMMARY

This chapter covered the research methodology followed for the empirical research through every stage of the marketing research process. The research process was defined regarding six stages. These stages deal with the research problem, research design, collection methods and questionnaires, taking samples and data collection, analysis and interpretation and lastly the compilation of a research report with conclusions. The most important aspects were highlighted, and their applicative relevance for this research study was discussed.

The next chapter presents the results and main findings obtained from the field study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 provided an extensive explanation of the research methodology pursued in this study. This chapter aims to report on the results that were obtained from the survey. The response realisation rate is examined first, after which the demographic profile of the respondents is examined. The subsequent section provides more insight into the descriptive statistics relating to the statements measured. After judging the reliability and validity of the research scales employed, the final part of this chapter is devoted to an assessment of the theoretical model proposed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings of this study.

4.2 RESPONSE REALISATION

This research study was carried out among ISAs (ISAs) working in the crop protection industry of South Africa. A complete list of all ISAs in South Africa was not available. Therefore, a non-probability purposive sampling approach was followed to select the respondents of the study. The researcher specifically approached respondents that form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to complete the survey. Five peers and colleagues, working as area managers in the crop protection industry were recruited as fieldworkers to attend area sales meetings. The fieldworkers were trained and requested to approach respondents who are familiar with them, who also form part of the target population and who would have the necessary knowledge and experience to participate in the survey. The fieldworkers had to request these respondents (sample elements) to complete the self-administered survey.

Table 4.1 below indicates the response realisation rate that was obtained for the study.

Table 4:1: Response realisation

Number of ISAs affiliated to CropLife SA who qualified for this study	919
Minimum sample size required	114
Number of completed questionnaires	121
Response rate: $121/114 \times 100$	106%

Table 4.1 summarises that a total of 114 respondents were required to participate in the study, as explained in Section 1.7.2.6. In the end, 121 completed questionnaires were obtained.

None of the questionnaires was rejected due to uncompleted questions. Thus, a response rate of 106% was realised.

The sample of 121 realised falls within the minimum sample range as recommended by Pallant (2010:150) for analysis of eight constructs. The 121 completed questionnaires are therefore adequate for the intention of this research study.

The next section provides more insight into the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in the survey.

4.3 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Most surveys include elements to determine the characteristics of the respondents such as age, sex, marital status, occupation, income, and education. These characteristics are collectively referred to as demographics. These variables are commonly used to predict whether a characteristic of a participant correlate with or predict responses in the survey (Bordens & Abbott, 2014:258). It is therefore important to create a demographic profile of respondents involved in this research study to obtain a thorough understanding of the research findings. Tabel 4.2 summarises the demographic variables measured in real valid percentages.

Table 4:2: Summary of demographic variables

Demographic Variable		Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Province of employment:	Eastern Cape	0	0
	Gauteng	1	0.9
	KwaZulu Natal	0	0
	Limpopo	37	33.3
	Mpumalanga	15	13.5
	North West	20	18.0
	Northern Cape	6	5.4
	Orange Free State	24	21.6
	Western Cape	6	5.4
	Other (please specify):	2	1.8

Demographic Variable		Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	111	94.1
	Female	7	5.9
Years of experience in the crop protection industry	0-5 years	29	24.4
	6-10 years	22	18.5
	11-15 years	18	15.1
	16-20 years	17	14.3
	More than 20 years	33	27.7
Marital status	Single	6	5.0
	Married	106	89.1
	Living with a partner	4	3.4
	Divorced or separated	0	0
	Widowed	3	2.5
Home language	Afrikaans	114	96.6
	English	4	3.4
	isiXhosa	0	0
	isiZulu	0	0
	Sesotho	0	0
	Setswana	0	0
	ISwati	0	0
	Ndebele	0	0
	Tshivenda	0	0
	Xitsonga	0	0
Calculated age group	≤ 24 years	2	1.7
	25 – 34 years	18	15.4
	35 – 44 years	31	26.5
	45 – 54 years	26	22.2
	55 – 64 years	29	24.7
	65+ years	11	9.4
Annual sales of crop protection products	R0.6m – R3m	20	19.6
	R3.01m – R7m	23	22.5
	R7.01m – R12m	24	23.5
	R12.01m – R20m	20	19.6
	R20.01m – R85m	15	14.7

Table 4.3 gives a descriptive indication of the age of the respondents and their yearly sales of crop protection products.

Table 4:3: Age and turnover

	n	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	117	24	77	47.5	12.6
Annual sales turnover	102	R600,000	R85,000,000	R13,290,196	R15,529,464

From Table 4.1 and Table 4.3 it can be seen most ISAs intercepted and who participated in the study are from Limpopo Province (33.3%), followed by the Free State (21.6%). A smaller number of participants mainly work in the Northwest (18%), Mpumalanga (13.5%), Northern Cape (5.4%), Western Cape (5.4%) and Gauteng (0.9%). The fieldworkers were not able to obtain any feedback from respondents in the Eastern Cape and Kwazulu Natal regions. The first reason being that the colleagues of the researcher acting as fieldworkers are not present in those provinces. Secondly, the physical distance from the fieldworkers posed a time and financial constraint. The respondents who participated in this study appear to be fairly homogeneous in their demographics. This industry is a male-dominated industry which was confirmed by 94.1% of the respondents indicating their gender as male. The majority of the participants (96.6%) are Afrikaans speaking and married (89.1%). As far as their experience in the selling of crop protection products is concerned, 57.1% have more than 10 years' experience.

The ages of the ISAs that participated in this study range between 24 and 77 years with a mean age of 47.47 years and a standard deviation of 12.6 years. The majority of the respondents (82.9%) were older than 35 years. Regarding annual sales turnover, the range is between R600,000 and R85,000,000 with a mean turnover of R13,290,196. The majority of respondents (80.4%) in this study reported their annual sales to be more than R3m.

Main finding 1: The typical biographical profile of the ISA that participated in this study were a 47 ½ year old Afrikaans speaking married male, with more than 10 years' sales experience and annual sales of more than R3 m.

4.4 RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND RELATIONSHIP VALUE

The intention of Section B1 of the survey questionnaire was to collect information from the participating ISAs regarding the relationship quality and relationship value constructs.

4.4.1 Relationship quality

The aim of the first part (statements 1.1 - 1.10) was to measure the relationship quality constructs. The ten statements measured the respondents' level of trust (1.1 – 1.6) and commitment (1.7 – 1.10). To establish the respondents' level of agreement with each statement a five-point Likert scale was used where 1 signifies “strongly disagree” and 5 signifies “strongly agree”.

4.4.1.1 Trust

The 121 participating ISAs' level of trust in their preferred supplier was measured with six individual statements. Table 4.4 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviation (SD).

Table 4.4: Respondents' level of trust

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.1	This supplier is sincere and honest.	1	4.21	0.859
1.2	This supplier keeps his promises.	2	4.13	0.879
1.3	This supplier informs me honestly of any problems which might affect me.	2	4.03	0.882
1.4	This supplier is concerned about me and my interests.	0	3.90	0.970
1.5	The information this supplier give is reliable.	2	4.23	0.730
1.6	This supplier is an expert in the products I sell.	0	4.28	0.809

From Table 4.4 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.6, “*This supplier is an expert in the products I sell*” (mean = 4.28; SD = 0.809) and the least with statement 1.4, “*This supplier is concerned about me and my interests*” (mean = 3.90; SD = 0.970). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' level of trust towards his preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions.

Main finding 2: Regarding the respondents' level of trust towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the supplier was an expert in the products sold by the ISA.

Main finding 3: Regarding the respondents' level of trust towards a preferred supplier, there was least agreement that the supplier has the ISA's interest at heart.

4.4.1.2 Commitment

The 121 participating ISAs' level of commitment to their preferred supplier was measured with four individual statements. Table 4.5 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4.5: Respondents' level of commitment

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.7	I am very committed to my relationship with this supplier	0	4.17	0.823
1.8	I am very faithful to this supplier.	1	4.08	0.846
1.9	I try to maintain a long-term relationship with this supplier.	1	4.39	0.702
1.10	The relationship I have with this supplier is worth making the maximum effort to preserve it	2	4.24	0.792

From Table 4.5 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.9, "*I try to maintain a long-term relationship with this supplier*" (mean = 4.39; SD = 0.702) and the least with statement 1.8, "*I am very faithful to this supplier*" (mean = 4.08; SD = 0.846). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' level of commitment towards his preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions.

Main finding 4: Regarding the respondents' level of commitment towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISAs would attempt to maintain a long-term relationship with the supplier.

Main finding 5: Regarding the respondents' level of commitment towards a preferred supplier, there was least agreement by ISAs that they are faithful to the supplier.

4.4.2 Relationship value

The aim of the second part (statements 1.11 - 1.36) was to measure the relationship value constructs. The thirty-six statements measured the respondents' perceptions of product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market of their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier. To establish the respondents' level of agreement with each statement a five-point Likert scale was used where 1 signifies "strongly disagree" and 5 signifies "strongly agree".

4.4.2.1 Product quality

The 121 participating ISAs' perception on product quality of their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with six individual statements. Table 4.6 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4:6: Respondents' perceptions on product quality

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.11	Provides better product quality	0	3.95	0.835
1.12	Meets quality standards better	0	3.97	0.826
1.13	Offers more reliable products	0	3.94	0.849
1.14	Have fewer products that are rejected	3	3.97	0.938
1.15	Provides more consistent product quality over time	2	4.08	0.835
1.16	Have fewer variations in product quality	2	3.96	0.933

From Table 4.6 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.15, *"Provides more consistent product quality over time"* (mean = 4.08; SD = 0.835) and the least with statement 1.13, *"Offers more reliable products"* (mean = 3.94; SD = 0.849). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' perception of their preferred supplier's product quality in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 6: Regarding the respondents' perception about the product quality of a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the preferred supplier produces more consistent quality over time than the alternative supply proposition.

Main finding 7: Regarding the respondents' perception about the product quality of a preferred supplier, there was least agreement that the preferred supplier produces more reliable products than the alternative supply proposition.

4.4.2.2 Service support

The 121 participating ISAs' perception of the service support received from their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with four individual statements. Table 4.7 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4:7: Respondents' perceptions on service support

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.17	Provides better services and product support	1	3.88	0.931
1.18	Is more available when information is needed	2	3.87	0.898
1.19	Provides more appropriate information	1	3.87	0.869
1.20	Responds faster when information is needed	2	3.87	0.947

From Table 4.7 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly that all statements were on average equal (mean = 3.87; SD = 0.911). The following main finding can be reported concerning to the respondents' perception of their preferred supplier's service support in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 8: Regarding the respondents' perception about the service support provided by the preferred supplier, there was mostly concurrent agreement that the preferred supplier gives better service and product support, is more available when information is needed, have the appropriate information and responds faster on request for information than the alternative supply proposition.

4.4.2.3 Delivery performance

The 121 participating ISAs' perception on the delivery performance given by their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with three individual statements. Table 4.8 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4:8: Respondents' perceptions on delivery performance

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.21	Performs better in meeting delivery due dates	1	3.77	0.847
1.22	Has fewer delivery errors	2	3.82	0.974
1.23	Has more accurate deliveries (no missing or wrong products)	2	3.93	0.909

From Table 4.8 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.23, "Has more accurate deliveries (no missing or wrong products)" (mean = 3.93; SD = 0.909) and the least with statement 1.21, "Performs better in meeting delivery due dates" (mean = 3.77; SD = 0.847). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents'

perception of their preferred supplier's delivery performance in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 9: Regarding the respondents' perception about the delivery support received from a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the preferred supplier's deliveries were more accurate than the alternative supply proposition.

Main finding 10: Regarding the respondents' perception about the delivery support received from a preferred supplier, there was least agreement that the preferred supplier meets due delivery dates better than the alternative supply proposition.

4.4.2.4 Personal interaction

The 121 participating ISAs' perception on the value of personal interaction experienced with their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with six individual statements. Table 4.9 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4.9: Respondents' perceptions of the value of personal interaction

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.24	Is easier to work with	2	3.97	0.906
1.25	Gives me a greater feeling of being treated as an important customer	4	3.94	0.967
1.32	Have a better working relationship with this supplier's representative	1	3.89	0.915
1.33	Interact better with this supplier's representative	0	3.89	0.902
1.34	Can address problems more easily with this supplier	0	3.98	0.922
1.35	Can discuss problems more freely with this supplier	0	4.02	0.870

From Table 4.9 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.35, "Can discuss problems more freely with this supplier" (mean = 4.023; SD = 0.870) and the least with statements 1.32 and 1.33, "Have a better working relationship with this supplier's representative" (mean = 3.89; SD = 0.915) and "Interact better with this supplier's representative" (mean = 3.89; SD = 0.9025). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' perception of their interaction with their preferred supplier's representatives in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 11: Regarding the respondents' perception about interaction with the representatives of the preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA can discuss problems more freely with the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.

Main finding 12: Regarding the respondents' perception about interaction with the representatives of the preferred supplier, there was least agreement that there is better interaction and a better working relationship with the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.

4.4.2.5 Supplier know-how

The 121 participating ISAs' perception on the value of the perceived supplier know-how of their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with five individual statements. Table 4.10 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4:10: Respondents' perceptions on the value of supplier know-how

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.26	Knows better how to improve existing products	2	3.88	0.885
1.27	Performs better at introducing new products	3	3.86	0.945
1.28	Knows better how to help drive innovation in spraying programs / products	3	3.83	0.927
1.29	Knows better how to provide assistance in new product development	3	3.82	0.939
1.36	Have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of this supplier	0	3.98	0.885

From Table 4.10 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 1.36, *"Have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of this supplier"* (mean = 3.98; SD = 0.885) and the least with statements 1.29, *"Knows better how to provide assistance in new product development"* (mean = 3.82; SD = 0.915). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' perception of the know-how of their preferred supplier in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 13: Regarding the respondents' perception about the know-how of the preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.

Main finding 14: Regarding the respondents' perception about the know-how of the preferred supplier, there was least agreement that the preferred knows better how to assist in the development of new products than the alternative supply proposition.

4.4.2.6 Time-to-market

The 121 participating ISAs' perception on the contribution made by the preferred supplier regarding the time to get products into the market in comparison with an alternative supplier, was measured with two individual statements. Table 4.11 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4:11 Respondents' perceptions on the contribution to get to the market

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
1.30	Performs better in helping to get new products faster into the market	2	3.76	1.023
1.31	Helps more in delivering the products faster to the market	2	3.76	0.892

From Table 4.11 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly that both statements were on average equal (mean = 3.76; SD = 0.958). The following main finding can be reported concerning to the respondents' perception of their preferred supplier's ability and time to get new products to the market in comparison with an alternative supplier of crop protection products.

Main finding 15: Regarding the respondents' perception about the preferred supplier's ability to get products into the market, there was mostly concurrent agreement that the preferred supplier is better at being helpful and faster to get products to the market than the alternative supply proposition.

4.5 B2B CUSTOMER LOYALTY

The intention of Section B2 of the survey questionnaire was to collect information from the participating ISAs regarding the B2B customer loyalty dependent variable.

The aim of the third part (statements 2.1 - 2.4) was to measure the levels of customer loyalty of the ISAs towards their preferred supplier. The four statements measured the ISAs' level of loyalty. To establish the respondents' level of agreement with each statement a five-point Likert scale was used where 1 signifies "strongly disagree" and 5 signifies "strongly agree".

The 121 participating ISAs' level of loyalty in their preferred supplier was measured with four individual statements. Table 4.12 summarises the findings regarding missing values, the means and standard deviations (SD).

Table 4.12: Respondents' level of B2B customer loyalty

	Statement	Missing	Mean	SD
2.1	I intend to continue selling this supplier's products in the future	0	4.38	0.698
2.2	The next time a farmer needs the same type of product I shall sell this suppliers' product to the farmer again	0	4.48	0.647
2.3	I shall continue selling products from this supplier more frequently in the future	0	4.37	0.697
2.4	I will probably sell products from this supplier again	0	4.45	0.670

From Table 4.12 it can be seen that the participating ISAs agreed mostly with statement 2.2, "The next time a farmer needs the same type of product I shall sell this suppliers' product to the farmer again" (mean = 4.48; SD = 0.647) and the least with statement 2.3, "I shall continue selling products from this supplier more frequently in the future" (mean = 4.37; SD = 0.697). The following main findings can be reported concerning to the respondents' level of customer loyalty regarding their preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions.

Main finding 16: Regarding the respondents' customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA would continue to recommend and sell the supplier's product if needed by the farmer.

Main finding 17: Regarding the respondents' customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier, there was least agreement that the ISA would recommend and sell the supplier's product more frequently in future.

4.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY ASSESSMENT

Reliability tests were performed to ensure that the data set would be valid and reliable.

4.6.1 Reliability test

As discussed in Chapter 3 the reliability of a scale is assessed from dependability and consistency of the measure or questionnaire over time. To evaluate the reliability of the data, the Cronbach alpha (α) coefficient was calculated for each construct. The α coefficient measures whether multiple questions were consistent with each other actually measuring a single underlying construct. This internal consistency should relate to each other at a positive high level (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015:242). Generally, scales producing alpha coefficients of above 0.80 are considered to be highly reliable (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:249). Table 4.13 shows that the measures of the variables of customer loyalty, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market can be regarded as highly reliable.

Table 4:13: The Cronbach's alpha values

Construct	Cronbach's α values
Customer loyalty	0.902
Trust	0.906
Commitment	0.913
Product quality	0.930
Service support	0.920
Delivery performance	0.892
Personal interaction	0.923
Supplier know-how	0.913
Time-to-market	0.906

4.6.2 Validity testing

Validity refers to the determination of the degree the researcher succeeded in measuring what was tried to be measured (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:234). Validity is an assessment of the truthfulness of a measuring instrument and indicates whether the instrument actually measures what it asserts to claim (Jackson, 2009:70).

Content validity of a measuring instrument refers to whether the investigating questions adequately cover the relevant items under study (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:257), and establish whether the questions sample adequately from the intended domain under

investigation (Pallant, 2010:7). Thus, content validity assesses whether the content (substance) of a specific topic is satisfactorily covered by the scales applied. This can be attained by accurately defining what is being measured, literature research on questions to be included and by consulting experts on the subject at hand (Jackson, 2009:70; McDaniel & Gates, 2015:236).

Face validity is a judgement call whether the questions seems to measure what it supposed to be measured. Alternatively, the extent to which a measuring instrument appears valid on its surface. The subjective agreement by researchers, experts on a topic and people familiar with the market constitutes face validity (McDaniel & Gates, 2015:235; Jackson, 2009:70).

The validity of this study was ensured primarily by including questions derived from a literature study of the different constructs. Consequentially, definitions and questions included were tested numerously in previous research (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006a; Čater & Čater, 2010; Gil-Saura et al., 2009). Secondly, the questionnaire was also scrutinised and criticised by colleagues of the researcher in the crop protection industry, which led to some minor changes. Lastly, the validity was tested by doing a pilot test consisting of 6 respondents corresponding to the sampling frame to determine whether questionnaire was adequately understood and would contribute to the research objectives of the study.

Main finding 18: All the measurement scales measuring the constructs of customer loyalty, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market can be considered as highly reliable as they all exhibit very good internal consistent reliability, face validity and content validity.

4.7 OVERALL MEAN SCORES

After the reliability and validity of the measuring instruments are assessed, the overall mean scores can be calculated for the use in testing of the hypotheses. Table 4.14 presents the overall mean scores for the research constructs investigated in this study.

Table 4:14: Overall mean scores

Concept	Statements	Overall mean score
Customer loyalty	Statements 2.1 – 2.4	4.42
Commitment	Statements 1.7 – 1.10	4.22
Relationship quality	Statements 1.1 – 1.10	4.17
Trust	Statements 1.1 – 1.6	4.13
Product quality	Statements 1.11 – 1.16	3.98
Personal interaction	Statements 1.24, 1.25, 1.32 – 1.35	3.95
Relationship value	Statements 1.11 – 1.32	3.90
Supplier know-how	Statements 1.36, 1.26 – 1.29	3.88
Service support	Statements 1.17 – 1.20	3.87
Delivery performance	Statements 1.21 – 1.23	3.84
Time-to-market	Statements 1.30 – 1.31	3.79

The overall mean scores for the constructs vary between 3.79 and 4.42. The overall mean scores for all the concepts are strongly positive, given that all the constructs were measured on the five-point Likert scale where 1 signifies “strongly disagree” and 5 signifies “strongly agree”.

Main finding 19: The overall mean score for respondents’ level of relationship quality (trust and commitment) perceived towards a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents trust their preferred suppliers and are committed to them

Main finding 20: The overall mean score for respondents’ level of relationship value drivers (product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) perceived being driven by a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents value these “soft factors” offered by their preferred suppliers.

Main finding 21: The overall mean score for respondents' level of B2B customer loyalty perceived towards a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents are loyal to their preferred suppliers.

4.8 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND B2B CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Regarding the secondary objective 4 (Section 1.6.2) and to predict the impact of the different variables on B2B customer loyalty, a standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the relationship quality constructs (trust and commitment) and relationship value constructs (product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) have a meaningful positive connection with B2B customer loyalty. As suggested by Pallant (2013: 129-131, 156-157, 163-168), the data has to adhere to some requirements to conduct a standard multiple regression analysis. Accordingly, a preliminary analysis was conducted first to inspect the data and ensure the underlying requirements were met.

4.8.1 Preliminary analysis

The investigation evidenced that appropriate procedures were followed in the execution of the field study to prevent problems associated with multiple regression analysis. As indicated in Table 3.5, interval scales were used to assess the measurement items for all constructs in the proposed model. Information on the independent variables as well as the dependent variables was obtained from the same set of respondents and considering the literature review it was expected that the independent variables would have a positive and significant effect on the dependent variable. The respondents were furthermore requested to complete a self-administered questionnaire, and the fieldworkers ensured that the respondents did not interact with other respondents when completing the questionnaire at the meeting.

Following the field study, the sample size of 121 respondents could also be deemed as acceptable for further analysis. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013:123) suggest a minimum sample size of $50 + 8(\text{number of variables})$ which implies a sample size of 114 for this research project.

Multicollinearity was examined next, by assessing the Tolerance Values and Variance Inflation Values (VIF) for each construct and by determining the Pearson correlation coefficients between the constructs investigated. Multicollinearity transpires when a very strong linear

relationship exists between two or more predictor variables in the case of regression-based analysis (Hahs-Vaughn, 2017:52). This is troublesome as this makes it difficult to establish the individual effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The simplest diagnostic is to use correlation coefficients to determine the presence of multicollinearity (Saunders et al., 2016:548). The Pearson correlation coefficient measures the strength of the linear association between two variables, varying between 1.00 and -1.00 where 0.00 suggests that the variables are linearly independent (Hair et al., 2013:316; Darlington & Hayes, 2017:53). Tolerance can be defined as 1 minus the squared multiple correlations and the value ranges from 0 to 1. The opposite of tolerance is the variance inflation value (VIF) which is calculated by dividing 1 by the tolerance. Therefore, a very low VIF and/or high tolerance values indicates collinearity (Martin & Bridgmon, 2012:414).

Multicollinearity is generally evidenced when a variable is highly correlated with other variables (greater than 0.9) and the Tolerance Value is less than 0.1 or the VIF value greater than 10 (Pallant, 2013:157, 164). The initial investigation revealed that the Tolerance Values for all factors were greater than 0.1 and the Variance Inflation Values (VIF) were less than 10. Upon closer inspection of the results, however, it became evident that the Pearson correlation coefficient of the supplier know-how constructs correlated highly with the correlation coefficients of product quality (0.836), service support (0.840) and time to market (0.885) at $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, the Tolerance Value for this construct was also close to 0.1 (0.123) and the VIF value close to 10 (8.147). Following these results, the decision was made to exclude the supplier know-how construct from the research model, as the measurement scale of Ulaga and Eggert (2006) employed in this study, unfortunately, appeared to be problematic and resulted in multicollinearity concerns.

The model was re-assessed and excluded the supplier know-how construct. The Tolerance Values and VIF values improved and now ranged between 0.226 - 0.490 and 2.040-4.429 respectively. The Pearson correlation coefficient between all constructs was also positive and significant ($p < 0.05$), and ranged between 0.155 and 0.812, thereby evidencing that the multicollinearity problems were addressed.

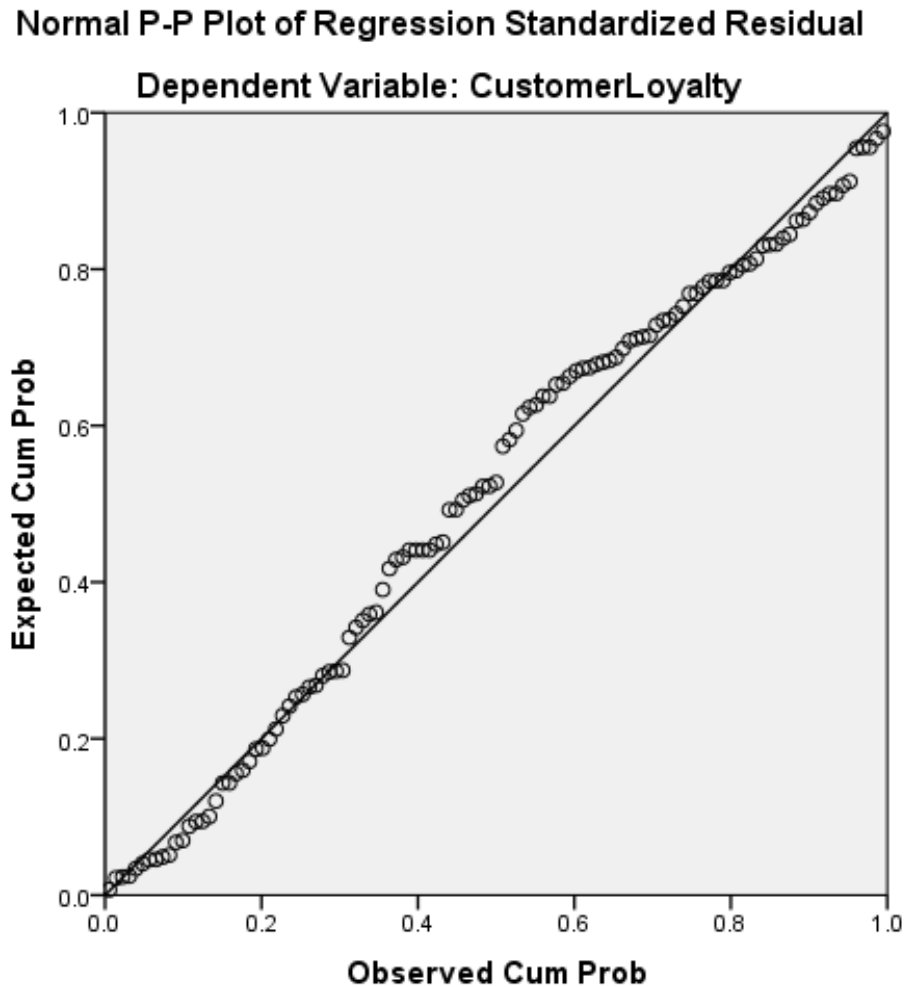
The next step entailed an investigation of the Mahalanobis Distance value to address potential problems that may emanate from outlier cases. Mahalanobis distance measures a single multivariate observation's distance from the centre (mean) of the population's observations (Manly & Navarro Alberto, 2017:87). The Mahalanobis distance statistic quantifies unusual patterns in the regressor scores (Darlington & Hayes, 2017:484). Considering the investigation of seven independent variables, the Critical ratio for $\alpha = 0.001$ is 24.322 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013:952). The maximum Mahalanobis Distance value for the regression model that excludes

supplier know-how, however, exceeded this critical ratio (32.290). Two outlier cases subsequently had to be deleted to ensure the Mahalanobis Distance value (21.927) of the regression model fell below the critical ratio as specified.

The final model that excluded the supplier know-how constructs as well as the two outlier cases then delivered satisfactory results.

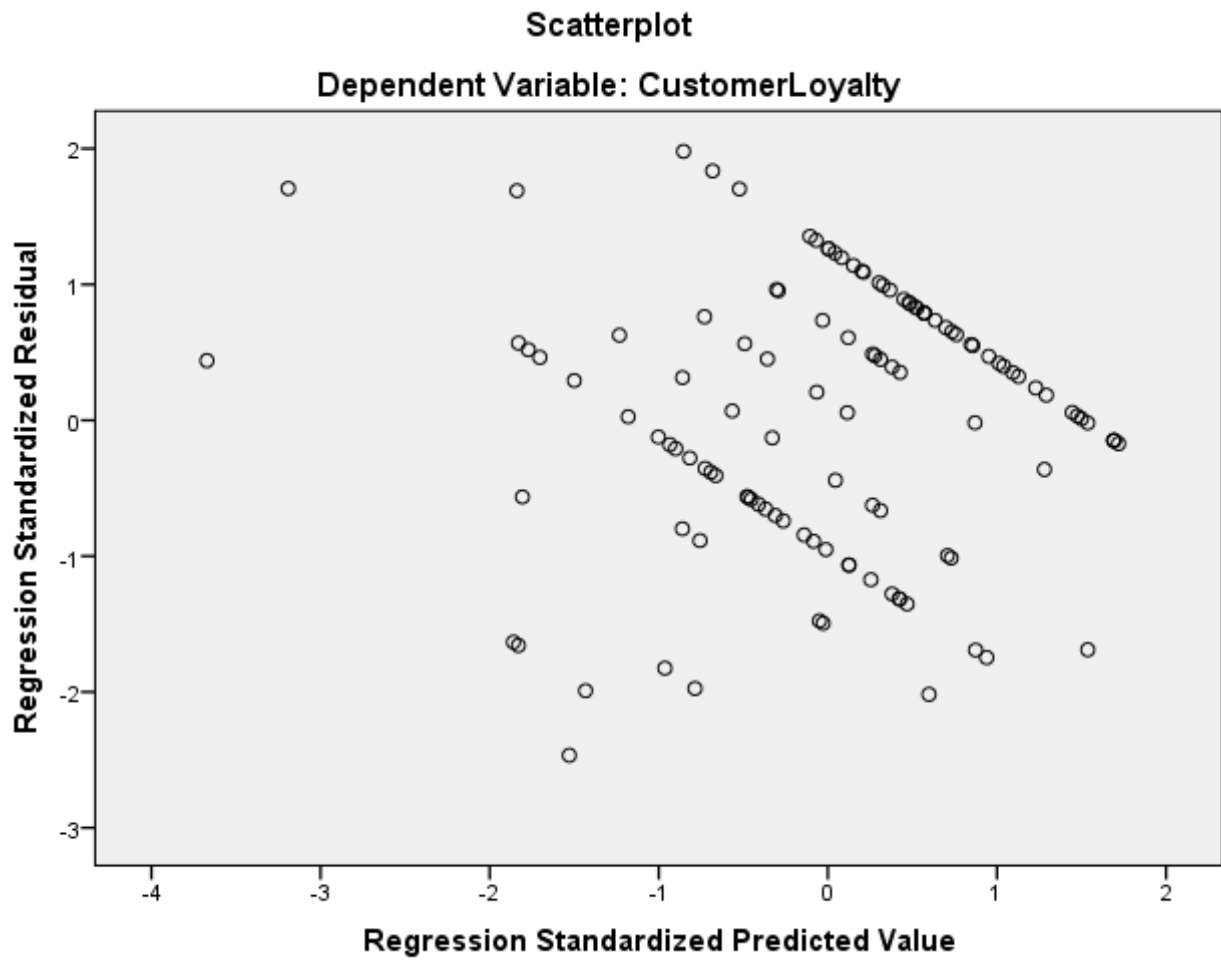
Residuals refer to the difference between the obtained and the predicted scores of a dependent variable. Three important assumptions are made when conducting the multiple regression model namely that they are linear relationships, homoscedasticity and normal distribution. Residual analysis visually appraises these assumptions to verify that the regression model selected is suitable. Linearity assumes that the relationship between the variables is linear. Therefore, residuals should be scattered in a line. Normality assumes that population distribution covered by a sample is normally distributed. Therefore, the residuals should be scattered normally about the predicted dependent variable scores. Homoscedasticity or equal variance assumes that the standard deviations of errors of prediction are roughly the same for all the predicted dependent variable scores. Therefore, these residuals should be scattered in form a square or band pattern. (Bordens & Abbott, 2014:465; Hair et al., 2013:329; Pallant, 2010:153; Levine et al., 2014:518).

As indicated in Figure 4.1 the Normal Probability Plot of the Regression Standardised Residual more or less forms a straight diagonal line which suggests no major deviations from normality and provides evidence of linearity (Pallant, 2010:157-158).

Figure 4.1: Normal Probability Plot of the Regression Standardised Residual

The Scatterplot results in Figure 4.2, appears to be approximately rectangular distributed, where most of the scores are plotted around the centre (in close proximity to 0), thereby providing further evidence of homoscedasticity.

Furthermore, although the Scatterplot results still highlight a few outlier cases, the decision was made to retain them as the revised model presented a Mahalanobis Distance value of 21.927 that is below the Critical value of 24.322, as required for a regression model with seven independent variables ($\alpha = 0.001$).

Figure 4.2: Scatterplot of suggestion of homoscedasticity

The revised model also did not provide any multicollinearity problems. As indicated in Table 4.15 below, the Tolerance Values and VIF values ranged between 0.227-0.577 and 1.734-4.403, respectively. These findings were subsequently greater than 0.1 (Tolerance value) and less than 10 (VIF value).

Table 4:15: Collinearity statistics

Independent variable	Tolerance value	Variance Inflation Value (VIF)
Trust	0.525	1.903
Commitment	0.577	1.734
Product quality	0.265	3.770
Service support	0.227	4.403
Delivery performance	0.274	3.650
Personal interaction	0.359	2.783
Time-to-market	0.271	3.685

Consequently, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to test the associations between the independent variables and B2B customer loyalty in the revised model. The results are displayed in Table 4.16.

Table 4:16: Correlations between independent and dependent variables

Factors	B2B CL	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7
B2B Customer loyalty (CL)	1							
Trust (F1)	0.538	1						
Commitment (F2)	0.501	0.634	1					
Product quality (F3)	0.416	0.392	0.229	1				
Service support (F4)	0.418	0.368	0.267	0.782	1			
Delivery performance (F5)	0.402	0.345	0.189	0.809	0.789	1		
Personal interaction (F6)	0.492	0.376	0.289	0.685	0.762	0.684	1	
Time-to-market (F7)	0.394	0.369	0.206	0.767	0.809	0.743	0.739	1

From Table 4.16, it can be seen that the Pearson correlation coefficient of all constructs were also lower than 0.9, positive and significant ($p < 0.05$), and ranged between 0.189 and 0.809.

Considering the results of the preliminary analysis discussed in this section, and the suitability of the revised model that exclude supplier know-how as well as two outlier cases, the investigation was continued, and the impact of the remaining independent variables on B2B customer loyalty was examined.

4.8.2 Multiple regression analysis

To make sense of the relationship between the dependent B2B customer loyalty variable and the different independent constructs, a multiple regression analysis was undertaken. Chapter 2 discussed that the relationship quality and relationship value factors might influence B2B customer loyalty.

To determine how good a multiple regression model fits the data the coefficient of multiple correlation (R) is calculated, which represents the collective effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable and indicates the quality of prediction. The strength of the association is measured by R and can be any value from 0 to +1. The closer R is to one, the stronger the linear association is (Kothari, 2004:143; Leard Statistics, 2013). The intensity of

association in the multiple regression is measured by squaring the multiple correlation coefficient (multiple R) also called R^2 or coefficient of multiple determination. The R^2 refer to the percentage the regression model explains in the variation of the dependent variable. By adding additional variables, R^2 becomes saturated as it gets nearer to 1, whereby additional variables do not contribute to the model. Therefore, R^2 is recalculated to accommodate the number of independent variables and is called *adjusted R^2* (Malhotra, 2015:373; Pardoe, 2006:).

Furthermore, regression analysis is a technique to analyse the relationships between a dependent variable (Y) and one or more independent variables ($X_1, X_2, \dots X_n$). Multiple regression is the statistical technique to develop a mathematical equation of the relationship between a single dependable construct and two or more independent constructs. The statistical software produces an optimised correlation between both the dependent variable and the various independent variables, called the beta (β) coefficient or weight (Malhotra, 2015:372). Cooper and Schindler (2014:660) define multiple regression as a statistical tool that develops self-weighting estimates (β) to predict values for a dependent variable using independent variables, ultimately testing and explaining a causal theory.

The β -coefficient have to be standardised to determine the relative importance of the independent variables in the regression results because the different variables are expressed in different measuring units. This is achieved by dividing the difference between each predictor variable value and its mean by the standard deviation of that predictor variable. The beta weight, which ranges between 0 and 1, is, therefore, the average amount the dependent variable increases by one unit, given all other predictors are constant (Martin & Bridgmon, 2012:421; Burns & Bush, 2014:418; Hinton et al., 2014:332).

To assess whether a specific independent variable is making a useful contribution to the model its significance (p-value) is tested. The generally accepted rule is to reject the null hypothesis at a p-value of 0.05 or less. At a p-value of 5% (0.05), there is only a chance of 5% that the results produced would occur in a random distribution. Therefore, it can be said that there is a 95% probability that the variable affects the dependent variable (Princeton University, 2007).

The general equation for the multiple regression:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 \dots \beta_k X_k$$

Therefore, the following equation estimates B2B customer loyalty of this multiple regression model:

$$\text{B2B customer loyalty} = \text{Constant} + \beta_{\text{trust}} + \beta_{\text{commitment}} + \beta_{\text{product quality}} + \beta_{\text{service support}} + \beta_{\text{delivery}} + \beta_{\text{personal interaction}} + \beta_{\text{time-to-market}}$$

After the construction of a suitable regression model, it can be used, firstly, to describe the relationship between B2B customer loyalty and the various relationship quality and relationship value constructs. Secondly, the future intensity of B2B customer loyalty can be predicted based on future values of the different independent variables. Lastly, to control or maximise future B2B customer loyalty, the independent variables can be managed. (Bowerman et al., 2015:3). Table 4.17 presents the summary of the multiple regression model.

Table 4:17: Model summary for B2B customer loyalty

Multiple R	0.653 ^a
R square (R ²)	0.427
Adjusted R square	0.390
Standard error	0.449
a. Predictors: (Constant), Time-to-market, Commitment, Delivery performance, Trust, Personal interaction, Product quality, Service support	

The coefficient of multiple correlation ($R = 0.653$) represents the collective effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable and indicates a more than moderate (0.5) association. The coefficient of multiple determination ($R^2 = 0.427$) measures the proportion of 42.7% of the variation in the dependent variable (B2B customer loyalty) that can be explained statistically by the independent variables.

Main finding 22: The regression model explains 42.7% of the variation in B2B customer loyalty.

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) which tests whether the model is significantly better in predicting B2B customer loyalty than using the various overall means as a best guess is summarised in Table 4.18.

Table 4:18: ANOVA for regression model to predict B2B customer loyalty

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p-value
Regression	16.353	7	2.336	11.588	0.000 ^a
Residual	21.975	109	0.202		
Total	38.328	116			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Time-to-market, Commitment, Delivery performance, Trust, Personal interaction, Product quality, Service support					

The F-ratio presents the ratio of improvement in prediction of fitting the model. If the F-statistic is greater than 1, the regression model is more accurate than pure correlation analysis. Therefore, this model has an F-value of 11.588, which is very unlikely to have occurred by chance ($p < 0.001$). These results mean that this regression model significantly improves the ability to predict B2B customer loyalty (Field, 2005:7).

Main finding 23: This multiple regression model significantly improves the prediction of B2B customer loyalty.

The multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify the independent variables that exert a significant influence on B2B customer loyalty. Table 4.19 contains the coefficients or β -values for the constructs produced by the regression analysis in the B2B customer loyalty model.

Table 4:19: β -values obtained from multiple regression model

	Unstandardized β	Standard Error	Standardized β	t	p-value
Intercept	1.396	3.52		3.971	0.000
Trust	0.231	0.094	0.247	2.471	0.015*
Commitment	0.232	0.088	0.251	2.632	0.010*
Product quality	0.041	0.112	0.052	0.367	0.714
Service support	-0.030	0.107	-0.042	-0.277	0.782
Delivery performance	0.064	0.101	0.088	0.634	0.527
Personal interaction	0.216	0.091	0.287	2.369	0.020*
Time-to-market	-0.020	0.087	-0.032	-0.229	0.819

* Significant at $p < 0.05$

The multiple regression analysis indicates significant ($p < 0.05$) and positive relationships between the independent variables *Trust* ($p = 0.015$), *Commitment* ($p = 0.010$) and *Personal Interaction* ($p = 0.020$) of the ISAs and *B2B Customer Loyalty*. Considering the standardised Beta values for these constructs, one unit increase in trust, commitment and personal interaction would result in an increase of B2B customer loyalty of 0.247, 0.251 and 0.287 respectively (Burns & Bush, 2014:412). Table 4.17 further indicate that the remaining variables in the proposed model did not have a positive and significant impact on B2B customer loyalty as the p-values for these variables all exceeded 0.05.

Hence, the following main finding can be derived from the multiple regression analysis.

Main finding 24: The independent variables trust, commitment and personal interaction are the only predictor variables that demonstrate a statistical significant and positive relationship with B2B customer loyalty in the proposed model.

Finally, considering the research results, it is further possible to conclude on the research hypotheses proposed for this study. Specifically, since only the variables trust, commitment and personal interaction have positive and significant relationships with the dependent variable B2B customer loyalty, only H_1 , H_2 and H_6 could be accepted. Table 4.20 presents a summary of the main findings which can be reported about the alternative hypotheses from the correlations obtained in the regression analysis.

Table 4:20: Summary of findings concerning the hypotheses

Hypothesis		Finding
H_1	Trust positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Do not reject
H_2	Commitment positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Do not reject
H_3	Product quality positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Reject
H_4	Service support positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Reject
H_5	Delivery performance positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Reject

Hypothesis		Finding
H ₆	Personal interaction positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Do not reject
H ₇	Supplier know-how positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Inconclusive
H ₈	Time-to-market positively and significantly predicts ISA customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier of crop protection solutions	Reject

Table 4.20 indicates that hypothesis H₇ was judged as inconclusive. As discussed in Section 4.8.1, the supplier know-how construct was excluded from the standard multiple regression analysis, as multicollinearity problems were detected. A possible reason for the multicollinearity problems is the high interaction of the supplier know-how construct with the product quality (0.847), delivery support (0.814), service support (0.853) and time to market (0.886) variables, as seen in the Pearson correlation values after the outliers were accounted for. It further did not appear feasible to merely merge the measurement items of the supplier know-how construct with the measurement items of the other scales. As discussed in Section 4.8.1, previously validated measurement scales were adapted for the purpose of this study and as evidenced by main finding 18 all exhibit very good internal consistent reliability, face validity and content validity. Therefore, regrouping of the measurement items that were exclusively designed to measure each construct would result in an incorrect assessment of the variables of this study. Hence, the decision was made to rather exclude the supplier know-how construct from the standard multiple regression analysis and which subsequently resulted in an inconclusive result regarding H₇. With high collinearity, a regression model lacks robustness. It, therefore, renders hypothesis testing inconclusive (Sunde & Brodie, 1993:51; Cho et al., 2006:489; Mare et al., 2014:191).

The following main findings can, therefore, be reported about the alternative hypotheses formulated for this research study.

Main finding 25: Trust has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.

Main finding 26: Commitment has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.

Main finding 27: Personal interaction has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.

4.9 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

This section summarises all the main findings from the empirical research, formulated in this chapter. The summary of all the main empirical research results is structured according to the secondary objectives set out for this research study (Chapter 1, Section 1.5.2). Table 4.21 presents a summary of the secondary research objectives and the empirical findings.

Table 4:21: Summary of main empirical research results according to the secondary objectives

Secondary objective 1: To provide an overview of research literature related to relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value.	
Refer to the literature review in Chapter 2.	
Secondary objective 2: To develop a sample profile of ISAs who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in the Republic of South Africa during the past two years and who participated in this research study.	
Main finding 1	The typical biographical profile of the ISA that participated in this study was a 47½ year old Afrikaans speaking married male, with more than 10 years' sales experience and annual sales of more than R3m.
Secondary objective 3: To measure the perception levels of ISAs regarding the constructs measured in this study (trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market)	
Main finding 2	Regarding the respondents' level of trust towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the supplier was an expert in the products sold by the ISA.
Main finding 3	Regarding the respondents' level of trust towards a preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that the supplier has the ISA's interest at heart.
Main finding 4	Regarding the respondents' level of commitment towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISAs would attempt to maintain a long-term relationship with the supplier.
Main finding 5	Regarding the respondents' level of commitment towards a preferred supplier, there was the least agreement by ISAs that they are faithful to the supplier.
Main finding 6	Regarding the respondents' perception of the product quality of a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the preferred supplier produces more consistent quality over time than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 7	Regarding the respondents' perception of the product quality of a preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that the preferred supplier produces more reliable products than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 8	Regarding the respondents' perception of the service support provided by the preferred supplier, there was mostly concurrent agreement that the preferred supplier gives better service and product support, is more available when information is needed, have the appropriate information and responds faster to request for information than the alternative supply proposition.

Secondary objective 3: To measure the perception levels of ISAs regarding the constructs measured in this study (trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market)	
Main finding 9	Regarding the respondents' perception of the delivery support received from a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the preferred supplier's deliveries were more accurate than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 10	Regarding the respondents' perception of the delivery support received from a preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that the preferred supplier meets due delivery dates better than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 11	Regarding the respondents' perception of interaction with the representatives of the preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA can discuss problems more freely with the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 12	Regarding the respondents' perception of interaction with the representatives of the preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that whether there are better interaction and a better working relationship with the ISA and the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 13	Regarding the respondents' perception about the know-how of the preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of the preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 14	Regarding the respondents' perception about the know-how of the preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that the preferred knows better how to assist in the development of new products than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 15	Regarding the respondents' perception about the preferred supplier's ability to get products into the market, there was mostly concurrent agreement that the preferred supplier is better at being helpful and faster to get products to the market than the alternative supply proposition.
Main finding 16	Regarding the respondents' customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier, there was mostly agreement that the ISA would continue to recommend and sell the supplier's product if needed by the farmer.
Main finding 17	Regarding the respondents' customer loyalty towards a preferred supplier, there was the least agreement that the ISA would recommend and sell the supplier's product more frequently in future.
Main finding 18	All the measurement scales measuring the constructs of customer loyalty, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market can be considered as highly reliable as they all exhibit very good internal consistent reliability, face validity and content validity.
Main finding 19	The overall mean score for respondents' level of relationship quality (trust and commitment) perceived towards a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents trust their preferred suppliers and are committed to them.

Secondary objective 3: To measure the perception levels of ISAs regarding the constructs measured in this study (trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market)	
Main finding 20	The overall mean score for respondents' level of relationship value drivers (product quality, service support, delivery support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) perceived being driven by a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents value these "soft factors" offered by their preferred suppliers.
Main finding 21	The overall mean score for respondents' level of B2B customer loyalty perceived towards a preferred supplier of crop protection products is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents are loyal to their preferred suppliers.
Secondary objective 4: To assess whether the selected relationship quality and relationship value variables investigated in this study significantly and positively predicts business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold by ISAs during the last two years	
Main finding 22	The regression model explains 42.7% of the variation in B2B customer loyalty.
Main finding 23	This multiple regression model significantly improves the prediction of B2B customer loyalty.
Main finding 24	The independent variables trust, commitment and personal interaction are the only predictor variables that demonstrate a statistically significant and positive relationship with B2B customer loyalty in the proposed model.
Main finding 25	Trust has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.
Main finding 26	Commitment has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.
Main finding 27	Personal interaction has a significant and positive influence on B2B customer loyalty.

4.10 SUMMARY

This chapter discussed and interpreted the empirical research results obtained from this study. This chapter starts off with a presentation of the sample realisation, followed by the sample profile of ISA participants from this research study.

The respondents' perception about their preferred supplier was explored and tested by the empirical results obtained from the questionnaires. Statistical analysis results presented in Chapter 4 include frequencies and percentages, means and standard deviations, internal consistency reliability through Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The face and content validity were also assessed.

Before further analysis, the data was "scrubbed" to exclude two outliers and the supplier know-how construct. Consequently, the overall means were calculated, a correlation analysis

conducted, and a multiple regression model was tested to compare the posited hypotheses with the obtained data.

In conclusion, a table with the main findings was constructed in comparison with the secondary objectives formulated in Chapter 1. The following chapter concludes the research study and contains conclusions and recommendations obtained from this study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 ends this research study by reaching various conclusions from the research results in Chapter 4 and the theoretical context presented in Chapter 2. This chapter also proposes recommendations based on the conclusions reached. Chapter 5 starts with an overview of this research project, after which conclusions and recommendations are presented pertaining the secondary objectives. Hereafter, a table is provided with the goal to link the research objectives, theoretical context, questionnaire, research hypotheses, main findings, conclusions and recommendations of this research. The chapter concludes by stating the limitations of this research and some recommendations for future research.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Crop protection is concerned with the science and management of plant pests and diseases in crops, which can lead to substantial losses for farmers and a risk to food security (Oerke, 2006:31). The role of crop protection will increase in an attempt to feed the growing South African population (Schreuder, 2002:4).

The crop protection industry, however, is characterised by fierce competition between the original patent holding organisation and generic suppliers of crop protection products to secure the loyalty of the ISAs who do the marketing to the farming community. The customer relationship with the end-user farmers is owned by the commissioned ISAs and not the suppliers (Myburgh, 2014:11). The success of a crop protection supplier in the market depends greatly on the loyalty of the ISAs and their willingness to repeatedly recommend a specific supplier's products to the farmer. Therefore, the ISA plays an influential role in the decision-making process of the end-user (Greyling, 2015). Hence, it appears that suppliers will benefit substantially by building solid relationships with the ISAs. The benefits of relationship marketing practices have been well documented across different forms of B2B relationship categories and are advantageous to the whole supply chain by pooling resources and competencies (Hollensen, 2015:363).

Customer loyalty is driven by the appreciation for the relationship, but is also preserved and nurtured regarding dependence and termination cost (Yang, 2015:118). Therefore, the more the parties collaborate, communicate and transfer expertise will it result in potential sales, loyalty and repeat customers (Bagdonienė & Žilionė, 2009:4). Customer loyalty departs from

the premise that the relationship is more valuable than the transactional exchange (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009:16).

The suppliers of crop protection products may experience similar benefits from relationship marketing practices previously described by other types of B2B relationship efforts. It may be possible to develop higher levels of B2B customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions by ISAs from employing practices from the relationship marketing domain.

Standard relationship marketing theory by scholars such as Morgan and Hunt (1994), Ulaga and Eggert (2006) and Gil-Saura et al. (2009) explain that suppliers would benefit in the long term by focusing on relationship quality and relationship value factors. The foundation of relationship marketing is based on the concept of trust and commitment. Additional to these relationship quality concepts, other “soft factors” add value to the relationship. These underlying relationship value drivers within the B2B context are identified amongst others as product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time to market and personal interaction. Therefore, suppliers can build strong strategic partnerships with customers without the problem of “selling on price” in a market under intense price pressure (Čater & Čater, 2009:593). Therefore, suppliers should value long-term sustainable relationships to increase sales and profits, where better communication leads to innovation and opportunities (Gil-Saura et al., 2009:605).

B2B customer loyalty towards suppliers, relationship quality and relationship value in the crop protection environment have not been investigated before. There is also a lack of research on its applicability to a unique distribution model such as the ISA system in South Africa which this research project intended to address.

Chapter 1 of this research project gives an introduction and a background of this research project. It suggests that building high-quality relationships between suppliers and ISAs may lead to higher levels of B2B customer loyalty. This chapter further theorises that despite numerous research conducted in the field of customer loyalty, relationship quality and relationship value, there seems to be an absence of research on relationship marketing and those relating variables in the crop protection industry with its system of ISAs. Hence, a conceptual model as depicted in Figure 1.1 has not been proposed previously regarding the crop protection industry and B2B customer loyalty.

Consequently, a research problem was formulated for this research study. The research problem for this study states that it is important for suppliers of crop protection products to gain the loyalty of ISAs to promote and recommend their product ranges in preference to

numerous other suppliers to gain a competitive advantage. Suppliers should differentiate themselves from the tiresome price narrative by adding value for the ISAs by collaboration and building long-term quality relationships. Extant literature suggests that the relationship marketing concept of relationship quality and its constructs, trust and commitment, can strengthen B2B customer loyalty. Furthermore, Ulaga and Eggert (2006) suggest that other value-adding relationship drivers (product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) may also contribute to B2B customer loyalty.

Thus, the primary objective of this research study is to investigate the factors predicting business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions as stated in Section 1.5.1. The primary objectives are supported by the secondary objectives stated in Section 1.5.2.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECONDARY OBJECTIVES

The conclusions, implications and recommendations resulting from the literature review (Chapter 2) and the empirical results (Chapter 4) found, are discussed regarding the secondary objectives formulated for this research project.

5.3.1 Secondary objectives 1a to 1c

The secondary objectives 1a to 1c is presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Secondary objective 1

Secondary objective 1	
To provide an overview of research literature related to:	
1a)	Relationship marketing, relationship quality and relationship value.
1b)	The main constructs of this research study, namely, trust, commitment, product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time to market, personal interaction and B2B customer loyalty.
1c)	The relationships between the main constructs of this research study.

The secondary objectives 1a to 1c for this research study were realised as follows:

- Secondary objective 1a, which relates to the main theories of this study is addressed in Chapters 1 and 2, Section 1.4 and Section 2.5.

- Secondary objective 1b, which relates to the main constructs of this research study, is addressed in Chapter 1 and 2. It covered the variables of B2B customer loyalty (Section 2.2), trust (Section 1.4.3.1.1, Section 2.6.3.1), commitment (Section 1.4.3.1.2, Section 2.6.3.2), product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction supplier know-how and time to market (Section 1.4.4.1.1 to 1.4.4.1.6, Section 2.7.4).
- Secondary objective 1c, which relates to the relationships between the constructs and B2B customer loyalty was conceptualised in Chapter 1 (Section 1.5).

No main findings were formulated for secondary objectives 1a to 1c. Nonetheless, the understanding into the field of relationship marketing obtained from achieving the secondary objectives contributed to the conclusions and recommendations made for the rest of the research project.

5.3.2 Secondary objective 2

The secondary objective 2 is presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Secondary objective 2

Secondary objective 2
To develop a sample profile of ISAs who have sold the crop protection solutions of their preferred suppliers in the Republic of South Africa during the past two years and who participated in this research study.

To realise secondary objectives 2, demographic information was gathered from Section A of the survey questionnaire. This section of the survey probed the ISA's geographical location, gender, work experience, marital status, home language, year born and an annual sales turnover of crop protection products.

Section 4.3 (main finding 1) deals with the demographic information gathered for this research study. It confirms that the majority of respondents who participated in this study can be described as a 47½ year old Afrikaans speaking married male, with more than 10 years' sales experience and annual sales of more than R3m.

Main conclusion 1 is that the typical ISA that participated in this study works more than 10 years in the crop protection industry. They are Afrikaans speaking males, middle-aged (51% between the age of 45 and 65 years), married and sell less than R20m (85% of respondents) worth of crop protection products annually.

The **implication** is that these ISAs are from an older generation who experienced the process of value erosion where many of the patented original crop protection products became generic. They are knowledgeable and well experienced in the recommendation and selling of these remedial products. They work outdoors and value it. They would typically relate to the more middle-class, conservative or traditional values found in the rural farming communities such as the virtues of justice, prudence, fortitude, temperance, hard work, family and tradition (The Conservative New Ager, 2013).

Recommendation 1: ISAs are highly motivated self-starters. They are tenacious, disciplined, value personal interaction and is above all very loyal. A supplier of crop protection products should appoint key-account managers, technical managers and area managers with similar interests, values and the ability to develop and maintain relationships. Suppliers should also officially state and sincerely display their dedication for relationship marketing.

In addition to ISAs being on a tight program to service their farmers regularly, suppliers must realise that their clients are not the necessarily the end-user of the crop protection products, but the ISA in his capacity as the decision maker on the farm. Therefore, more value can be derived in planning quality interaction with the ISAs that have minimal influence and interference on his daily work program, such as the insistence to visit farmers to promote products. Social interaction away from the workplace such as outdoor activities (hunting, fishing, 4x4, etc.) seems to be really valued, as can be confirmed by the researcher's own experiences.

5.3.3 Secondary objective 3a

The secondary objective 3a is presented in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Secondary objective 3a

Secondary objective 3a
To measure the levels of trust of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 reveals that trust is a vital ingredient to maintain business relationships. Therefore, buyers have more trust and confidence in people than in organisations, and every contact encounter is an opportunity to instil more trust (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002:236). It can be argued that trust is the key component of successful relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Arnott, 2007; Palmatier et al., 2008). From the findings of the literature study the following definition was developed:

Trust is the belief by the independent sales agent that his preferred supplier of crop protection products will act fair, compassionate and in the best interest of the supply relationship.

Additional to the findings in the literature study, important findings were made from the empirical study as well. Concerning the ISA's level of trust towards his preferred supplier of crop protection products, it was mostly agreed that the supplier is an expert on the products sold by the ISA (main finding 2, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.1). It was also found that ISAs were the least in agreement that the preferred supplier had their interest at heart (main finding 3, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.1). However, concerning main finding 3, the mean value is still 3.9. About all the trust statements (1.1 – 1.6) with an average mean score of 4.13 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7) it showed overall that the ISAs trust their preferred supplier.

From the literature review, it became clear that trust in the supplier is a vital ingredient for long-term orientation and relationship marketing success which is based on the integrity of the supplier and his benevolent intentions. Therefore, based on the main findings on trust from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 2 is that the majority of ISAs trust their preferred supplier of crop protection products and value their expertise, sincerity, honesty and reliability. However, there seems to be a hint of doubt whether the supplier is always concerned about the well-being and interests of the ISAs.

The **implication** is that ISAs make choices whether to trust a supplier or not. Trust is gained over time and consists of communication, continuous building and maintenance of the relationship between the supplier and the ISA. Trust depends greatly on the supplier's integrity, reliability and ability to make good on his promises and his concern for the interests for the ISA as indicated by statement 1.4 of the questionnaire.

Recommendation 2: Supplier of crop protection products should be truthful and honest with the ISAs recommending and distributing their products, even if the truth is sometimes painful. It is critical for suppliers to honour the pledges and promises made to the ISAs. Furthermore, suppliers should establish communications channels with the ISAs to iron out problems and confront challenges. Better communication will contribute to a perception that the supplier acts fair and in the best interest of the supply relationship. It is also noted that ISAs value reliable information and expertise. Therefore, suppliers should pay attention to the packaging of their information and continuous training in relationship marketing of their human interface with the ISAs.

Because ISAs earn their livelihood through sales commissions, trust is earned not by vilifying products of competing suppliers and puffing up of their own products but by maximising the ISA's income. Therefore, suppliers should communicate and demonstrate that they have the ISA's interest at heart.

5.3.4 Secondary objective 3b

The secondary objective 3b is presented in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Secondary objective 3b

Secondary objective 3b
To measure the levels of commitment of ISAs towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 reveals that commitment is a fundamental prerequisite to maintain long-term business relationships and stands as a pivotal construct in relationship quality (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:23). High levels of commitment will limit the ISAs endeavours to explore competing alternatives. Committed ISAs will always be biased in favour of the current supply relationship when evaluating alternatives. Commitment has a direct effect on the behaviour of the ISAs and the revenue generated by the supplier. From the findings of the literature study the following definition was developed:

Commitment is defined as the independent sales agent's passion to uphold his long-term association with a valued supplier of crop protection products.

Additional to the findings in the literature study, important findings were made from the empirical study as well. Concerning the ISA's levels of commitment towards his preferred supplier of crop protection products, it was mostly agreed on the importance of maintaining a long-term relationship with the supplier (main finding 4, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.2). It was also found that ISAs was the least in agreement that the ISAs were faithful to their preferred supplier (main finding 5, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.2). However, regarding the main finding 5, the mean value is still 4.08. About all the commitment statements (1.7 – 1.10) with an average mean score of 4.22 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7) it showed overall that the ISAs are deeply committed to their preferred supplier.

From the literature review, it is clear that commitment to the supplier is important for repetitive custom and a constant revenue stream. A steady stream of purchases is advantageous to manage inventories, improve efficiencies and lower the cost of production (Stanko et al.,

2007:1096). Therefore, based on the main findings on a commitment from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 3 is that the majority of ISAs are faithful and very committed to their relationship with their preferred supplier of crop protection products, and will make extra effort to maintain the longevity of the supply relationship.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products to recommend in solving the farmer's problem. Commitment represents the long-term effort, vow and obligation to keep a profitable business relationship intact, where the ISA constantly recommends the product range of his preferred supplier of crop protection products. Furthermore, suppliers have to realise that they cannot be everything to everybody but have to show commitment by choosing a preferred ISA so to demonstrate mutual attractiveness.

Recommendation 3: For a supplier of crop protection products to improve the commitment levels of ISAs, it is important to let them feel "part" of the supplier's operations. This can be attained by building attachments to the business and barriers to hinder the exit from the relationship. Attachment can be construed through co-branding and the advancement of brand loyalty. Collaboration and joint development of products can also deepen the relationship and joint commitment of the parties. Barriers to exodus include joint ventures with the distributor principals and investment in the businesses of distributors and ISAs.

Furthermore, suppliers should acknowledge that commitment is an important building block for profitable and mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, it may be important for suppliers that their human interfaces (managers) are formally trained in the principles of relationship marketing. All marketing strategies should be developed with the goal to improve and solidify relationships between ISAs and their preferred suppliers.

5.3.5 Secondary objective 3c

The secondary objective 3c is presented in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: Secondary objective 3c

Secondary objective 3c
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the product quality provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that product quality is the minimum condition for a supply relationship to be initialised. Therefore, a need fulfilling product must

first exist before the supply relationship can be realised (Čater & Čater, 2010:6). Product quality refers to the superiority and excellence of a product as experienced by the buyer (Zeithaml, 1988:3). The product quality construct represents the extent in which the supplier's product fulfil the buyer's needs (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:123). In so far as product quality relates to crop protection, it refers to the consistent reliability of the supplier's product range.

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perception of ISAs about the quality of the preferred supplier's product range, it was mostly agreed that the preferred supplier delivers more consistent products over time (main finding 6, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.1). It was also found that the ISAs was least in agreement that the preferred supplier's products are more reliable than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 7, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.1). Nonetheless, main finding 7 still has a mean value of 3.94. Concerning all the product quality statements (1.11 – 1.16) with an average mean score of 3.98 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier's products to be reliable, consistent and of better quality than the alternatives available in the market.

From the literature review, excellence and high product quality from the supplier are important to satisfy the buyer's need before a supplier-buyer relationship can be established. Therefore, based on the main findings on product quality from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 4 is that the majority of ISAs perceive that the products from their preferred supplier are of better quality, more consistent and reliable over time than the alternatives available in the market. Product quality can be described as the foundation of the supply relationship. The ISA must have the confidence, his reputation being at stake, to recommend a product from the preferred supplier, knowing that it would solve the problem and satisfy the needs of the farmer.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products from various alternative suppliers which can be supplied to a farmer to protect a crop. The first level of differentiation from other suppliers is to ensure higher standards, more reliability and better product quality, to ensure preferred supplier status by the ISA. Poor efficacy of crop protection products can ruin not only the reputation of the ISA but terminate the supply relationship as well. Most crop protection products are hazardous and poisonous; therefore, safe handling and packaging are of utmost importance to avoid injury or even death.

Recommendation 4: By the prescription of safe, reliable and high-quality products in association with the supplier and his brand, the ISA can maintain a positive image, reputation and integrity as a dependable consultant. The supplier should strive to continuously improve its product range in terms quality, safety and reliability. The supplier should continuously improve the core offering (primarily original product quality) to defend the supply relationship (Geiger, 2015:130).

The supplier should continuously emphasise the quality, reliability and safety of their products to the ISA, as it tends to get lost in the other “noise” of the marketplace.

5.3.6 Secondary objective 3d

The secondary objective 3d is presented in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6: Secondary objective 3d

Secondary objective 3d
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of delivery provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that delivery performance relates to delivery speed, reliability, product availability and flexibility in delivery schedules (Doney & Cannon, 1997:48). Therefore, delivery performance also evaluates the accuracy of orders, exchange procedures and the timeliness (just-in-time) of deliveries (Ulaga, 2003:685). Minimal supply disruption and accurate satisfaction of the buyer’s needs will contribute greatly to supplier attractiveness (Tanskanen & Aminoff, 2015:134-135).

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perception of ISAs about the delivery performance of the preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed that the preferred supplier is more accurate in their deliveries than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 9, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.3). It was also found that the ISAs was least in agreement that the preferred supplier is better in honouring delivery due dates than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 10, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.3). Nonetheless, main finding 10 still has a mean value of 3.77. Concerning all the delivery performance statements (1.21 – 1.23) with an average mean score of 3.84 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier’s delivery performance to be better at meeting delivery dates and make fewer delivery errors than the alternatives available in the market. It is noteworthy, however that delivery performance received the second lowest overall mean score of all the relationship value constructs.

From the literature review, the ease of availability of products from the supplier to the buyer such as delivery performance and accurate, timeously order execution by the supply chain to the farm contribute to competitive advantage. Therefore, based on the main findings on delivery performance from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 5 is that the majority of ISAs perceive that the delivery performance from their preferred supplier is executed more accurately and more on time than the alternatives available in the market. The main function of the ISA is the recommendation and actual supply of crop protection products where the farmer's crops which are randomly under attack from pests and disease. Therefore, it is critical to the ISA to have the relevant crop protection product available for recommendation and delivery, usually at short notice. With vast distances between the rural farming areas and the metropolitan warehouses of the suppliers, delivery performance can be a challenge. Delivery performance presents an opportunity for suppliers to outperform their competitors.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products from various alternative suppliers which can be supplied to a farmer to protect his crop. The availability of a product or the lead time to get it to the farm can seriously jeopardise the ISAs chances to get the sale if the farmer decides to order from a rival ISA. Short and sweet: If the product is available, it will sell!

Recommendation 5: In many cases, the competitive advantage (for both ISA and the supplier) is vested in the party which can react the fastest and most efficiently on the farmer's problem. Therefore, suppliers should recognise that the placement (4P's) of their products are a serious consideration, the closer to the farm, the greater likelihood of sales. Suppliers should thoroughly assess the delivery performance of their opposition to evaluate and strategise how to outperform them, as this presents itself as an opportunity.

Suppliers should investigate the likelihood of investing in consignment stock, placed strategically in the supply channel to optimise reaction and delivery time. Consignment done correctly can save both buyer and supplier on inventory, warehousing and transportation costs. Furthermore, consignment stock erects barriers for competing product and suppliers because of availability. Secondly, suppliers should collaborate intensely with distributors and their ISAs to budget, forecast, anticipate and commit on future use of products, to plan timeous production and delivery.

Because suppliers of crop protection products are physical and transactional removed from the actual end-user of their products, literally hundreds of kilometres away, the urgency of an order is not always apparent. Therefore, supplier's staff should be sensitised and incentivised to walk the proverbial extra mile to get product orders as accurate and as quick as possible to the depot of the ISA or even assist the ISA to get it directly to the farm if possible.

5.3.7 Secondary objective 3e

The secondary objective 3e is presented in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7: Secondary objective 3e

Secondary objective 3e
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the quality of service support provided by their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that service support encompasses the service-like elements which accompany the physical product. In the case of fierce competition, the service can be of more value to the buyer than the product itself (Cann, 1998:394). The servitization of products adds value to the offering, from merely a product to an extensive bundle of products and services which accompanies it (Baines et al., 2009:551). Service support entails the responsiveness of suppliers to react and assist in the whole supply chain by exchanging information, giving feedback and addressing concerns which may be complex and technically challenging. Service support demands the supplier's involvement in assisting the buyer in activities such as marketing and doing tasks on behalf of the buyer (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:123).

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perception of ISAs about the service support offered by their preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed equally that the preferred supplier gives better service and product support, is more available when information is needed, have the appropriate information and responds faster on request for information than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 8, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.2). With reference to all the service support statements (1.17 – 1.20) with an average mean score of 3.87 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier's level of product and service support to be better, to be more available, responsive and have the appropriate information when needed. It is noteworthy, however that delivery performance received the second lowest overall mean score of all the relationship value constructs.

From the literature review, it appears that the bundle of accompanying services, tools and products available to the ISA can greatly enhance the competitiveness of both the ISA's position to the farmer and attractiveness of the supplier of crop protection products to the ISA. Therefore, based on the main findings on service support from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 6 is that the majority of ISAs perceive that the product and service support they receive from their preferred supplier is better, more responsive and more relevant than the alternatives available in the market. The secondary function of the ISA is to furnish his farmer with the relevant technical information, demonstrations and give access to other services (laboratories, consultants, websites, drones, etc.) to substantiate and confirm his recommendation to the farmer. Therefore, it is important for the ISA to differentiate himself from his competitors by choosing a supplier based on the level types and quality of service received. Service support presents an opportunity for suppliers to outperform their peers.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products from various alternative suppliers which can be supplied to a farmer to protect his crop. The type, novelty and quality of service and support received by the ISA is an important element of supplier attractiveness.

Recommendation 6: As stated, service support is a potential opportunity for suppliers in the crop protection industry. Therefore, a proper assessment and evaluation of the service and support offered by their competitors would identify areas for improvement and the opportunity to differentiate from other suppliers.

The field of crop protection is not only scientifically challenging, complex and competitive but also carry high responsibility regarding the recommendations made regarding the farmer's crop. Therefore, the ISA needs all the support they possibly can get to differentiate themselves from their rival ISAs. Thus, suppliers should rather research the type and scope of service support needed and valued by the ISA, than assuming some or other frivolous concepts. Suppliers can pose the question to themselves: *"Do we know what kind of service and support is valued by the ISA, or do we think we know?"*

Suppliers can also invest in annual conferences for ISAs where speakers are invited to talk on various topics such as motivation, organisation, sales, crop production and integrated pest management to name a few. Otherwise, can suppliers invest in third-party consultants to assist ISAs especially in technical and sales support?

A supplier should instil an organisational culture in their employees that quality service and support to their ISAs are not negotiable, because service represents the "human" side of the

supplier. This includes being reachable and available even after normal office hours in peak season, assisting with marketing campaigns, knowledge sharing, information availability and walking the proverbial extra mile for the ISA.

5.3.8 Secondary objective 3f

The secondary objective 3f is presented in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8: Secondary objective 3f

Secondary objective 3f
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding their personal interactions with their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that personal interaction represents the human and social contact of the supplier's personnel with the ISA and is highly valued. The interaction contributes to problem-solving, communication and understanding of the goals and challenges of buyer-supplier partnership (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:125). The contact and interaction between the supplier and buyer eventually constitute the relationship (Hollensen, 2015:365). Therefore, bonds develop between organisations, but the success thereof is managed by people (Ulaga, 2003:686). Long-term personal relationships between the role-players are important for inter-organisational cooperation, the establishment of friendship, trust, commitment and the building of customer loyalty (Pesamaa & Hair, 2007:612).

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perceptions of ISAs about their personal interaction with their preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed that they could discuss their problems more freely with their preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 11, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.4). It was also found that the ISAs was least in agreement that they interacted better and have a better working relationship with the preferred supplier's representative (main finding 12, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.4). Nonetheless, main finding 12 still has a mean value of 3.89. With reference to all the personal interaction statements (1.24, 1.25, 1.32 – 1.35) with an average mean score of 3.95 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier's representatives to be helpful and easy to work with. It is noteworthy, however that personal interaction received the highest overall mean score of all the relationship value constructs.

From the literature review, it appears that the personal interaction, face-time and other contact between the ISA and the representative of the preferred supplier eventually constitute the

buyer-supplier relationship. Therefore, based on the main findings on personal interaction from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 7 is that the majority of ISAs perceive that personal interaction with the representatives of the supplier is highly appreciated and valued by the ISAs. Consequently, the selection of employees to represent the supplier is critical regarding a whole package of personality, traits, virtues, attitude, skills and knowledge.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products from various alternative suppliers which can be supplied to a farmer to protect his crop. The supply relationship constitutes the relationship between the ISA and the representative of the supplier essentially. The supplier's representative is the physical link between the ISA and the supplier. Therefore, the supplier's representatives can make or break the relationship between the ISA and the supplier.

Recommendation 7: Personal interaction between the ISA and the employees of the supplier is of critical importance for a long-term business relationship between the supplier and the ISA. Therefore, suppliers should determine and research the ideal profile for a supplier's representative to represent them, striking a balance in interpersonal, technical and strategic skills (Powers et al., 2014:206). Current and future employees in this position should be tested, weighed and developed to compliment the ideal profile.

Suppliers should consciously invest in and develop their representatives' interpersonal skills such as sales techniques, communication, presentations, negotiations, conflict resolution and teamwork to complement their hard skills such as knowledge and occupational skills. Suppliers can greatly benefit by the deliberate adoption of relationship marketing policies and training their representatives and marketing personnel in the field of relationship marketing.

Suppliers should develop their future marketing plans and campaigns in such a way that personal interaction with the ISAs is optimised. This is typically achieved in the crop protection industry on more social avenues such as study tours, hunting and fishing excursions, golf outings and other outdoor activities away from the offices of both the supplier and ISA.

5.3.9 Secondary objective 3g

The secondary objective 3g is presented in Table 5.9.

Table 5.9: Secondary objective 3g

Secondary objective 3g
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the know-how (knowledge) of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that the supplier's know-how entails the valuable information and expertise owned by the supplier that can be applied in the buyer's operations (Koufteros et al., 2005:104). Supplier's know-how also refers to the knowledge base and expertise of the supplier (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:123). Supplier know-how is accumulated from previous experience in the market (Wu & Wu, 2015:184) and when shared and managed properly, it can benefit the whole supply chain (Cai et al., 2013:2072). Therefore, the technical expertise and market insights of the supplier is very valuable to the ISAs.

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perceptions of ISAs about the know-how of their preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed that they have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of their preferred supplier than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 13, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.5). It was also found that the ISAs was least in agreement that the preferred knows better how to assist in the development of new products than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 14, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.5) Nonetheless, main finding 14 still has a mean value of 3.82. Concerning all the supplier's know-how statements (1.36, 1.26 – 1.29) with an average mean score of 3.88 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier to have a wealth of knowledge and know-how that can be accessed by the ISAs.

From the literature review, it appears that the knowledge and experience of the preferred supplier and the willingness to provide access to it are highly valued by the ISAs. Therefore, based on the main findings on personal interaction from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 8 is that the majority of ISAs rely greatly on the knowledge (know-how) of the preferred supplier. The supplier's representatives are commonly the first port of call for advice on problem-solving, farmer complaints, product improvement, new product development, spray program integration and the market environment.

The **implication** is that the ISA has a choice of generic products from various alternative suppliers which can be supplied to a farmer to protect his crop. The ISAs will be influenced by his perception of the most knowledgeable supplier for advice and consultation. This, will inevitably lead to a recommendation in favour of that specific supplier and increase the supplier's attractiveness in this regard.

Recommendation 8: Due to the unregulated and independent nature of the distribution models in the crop protection industry, the pooling of knowledge and experience are also very fragmented and informal. Add to this the impact of an everchanging marketing and natural environment (seasons and pests), the value of knowledge and experience is apparent. Therefore, suppliers have an opportunity in setting up databases with crop protection and other problem solutions by debriefing, interviewing and recording role-players such as ISAs and supplier representatives to formalise and consolidate the knowledge base.

Suppliers could create (or outsource) a knowledge centre with a dedicated hotline, e-mail service or WhatsApp line for their preferred ISAs to contact and send a request, questions and photos of problems and diseases to identify possible problem solutions, therefore. This can also be achieved by developing smartphone applications to better interact and transfer knowledge to ISAs.

Suppliers should pursue all avenues that accumulate knowledge and institutionalise it in their organisation to increase supplier attractiveness. Therefore, the recruitment, training and keeping of knowledgeable personnel and representatives are vital.

ISAs and their farmers operate in an environment characterised by information overload and cheap generic information and products. Therefore, suppliers should actively pursue avenues to train and engage ISAs exclusively to transfer knowledge and influence buying decisions. This can be achieved through conferences, training sessions and conducting study tours for ISAs.

5.3.10 Secondary objective 3h

The secondary objective 3h is presented in Table 5.10.

Table 5.10: Secondary objective 3h

Secondary objective 3h
To measure perceptions of ISAs regarding the time to market performance of their preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold during the last 2 years.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 1 and 2 reveals that the supplier's time-to-market performance entails preferred supplier's capacity to develop, test and validate new products and introduce it to the market faster than the competition (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006:126). Time to market is important for competitive advantage, price premiums, faster break-evens and higher profits and ROI (Hollensen, 2015:409). Businesses which can introduce new products swiftly can react quickly to changing demand to maintain market share (Feng et al., 2014:730). Therefore, new products (especially patented products) is extremely important for the ISAs to differentiate their product offering from alternative generic offerings.

Additional to the findings in the literature review, other important findings were also made from the empirical study. Regarding the perceptions of ISAs about the time-to-market performance of their preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed equally that the preferred supplier was both faster and more helpful to bring new products to the market than the alternative supply proposition (main finding 15, Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2.6). Concerning all the supplier's time-to-market performance statements (1.30 and 1.31) with an average mean score of 3.79 (Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their preferred supplier be more helpful and faster in bringing new products to the market. It is noteworthy that time-to-market performance scored the lowest average mean of all the constructs measured in this research study.

From the literature review, it appears that the effort by the supplier to bring new products to the market is acknowledged and appreciated by the ISAs. Therefore, based on the main findings on time-to-market performance from the empirical study the following main conclusion, implication and recommendations can be made:

Main conclusion 9 is that the majority of ISAs acknowledge the role that the preferred supplier plays in the research, development and introduction of new products to the market. However, it appears that the ISA is either not involved or does not benefit that regularly and directly from new products introduced in the market. This is mainly attributed to new active ingredients being discovered and new products being developed by multinational companies who are based in the first world, far removed from the world of the ISA.

The **implication** is that the supplier's new product development and time-to-market are therefore too far removed from the ISAs to realistically collaborate.

Recommendation 9: It is standard practice in the crop protection industry for suppliers to introduce products in the market unilaterally. Especially, local South African manufacturers

and suppliers can make a concerted effort to involve distributors, and their ISAs in the choice, design and research of new products can create a competitive advantage for both the supplier and the ISAs. This can automatically lead to ISAs being loyal to the products they “co-own”.

5.3.11 Secondary objective 4

The secondary objective 4 is presented in Table 5.11.

Table 5.11: Secondary objective 4

Secondary objective 4
To assess whether the selected relationship quality and relationship value variables investigated in this study significantly and positively predicts business-to-business (B2B) customer loyalty towards preferred suppliers of crop protection solutions in the R.S.A. whose products were sold by ISAs during the last 2 years

The literature cited in Chapter 1 makes the argument that B2B customer loyalty makes economic sense because loyal customers buy more and are less costly to service than to attract new customers. Consequently, B2B customer loyalty relating to this research was defined as:

B2B customer loyalty relates to the unwavering and continuous recommendation, prescription and sales, by the independent sales agent, of the preferred supplier's product range to the farmer notwithstanding the counter offers, lower prices and shenanigans in an overtraded generic market.

Chapter 1 further revealed relationship marketing practices aim to establish long-term business relationships requiring social contact, interaction, and collaboration between stakeholders. These practices contribute to relationship value and relationship quality leading to B2B customer loyalty.

In Chapter 2 of the literature study, it was revealed that the variables in relationship quality (trust and commitment) and relationship value (product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market performance) might predict customer loyalty in the B2B (buyer-supplier) trading environment.

The following main findings regarding B2B customer loyalty can be derived from the literature review (Chapter 1, Section 1.4.1; Chapter 2, Section 2.6 and 2.7):

- Relationship quality (trust and commitment) has previously been found to have a significant and positive impact on B2B customer loyalty.

- Relationship value (product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) has previously been found to have a significant and positive impact on B2B customer loyalty.

In addition to the main findings from the literature review, a number of important findings were also identified from the empirical part of the study: The main findings 16 through 28 were articulated regarding secondary objective 4 of this research project. Regarding the perceptions of ISAs about their loyalty towards their preferred supplier, it was mostly agreed that the ISA would continue to recommend and sell the supplier's product if needed by the farmer (main finding 16, Chapter 4, Section 4.5). It was also found that the ISAs was least in agreement that the ISA would recommend and sell the supplier's product more frequently in future (main finding 17, Chapter 4, Section 4.5). Nonetheless, main finding 17 still has a mean value of 4.3. With reference to all the B2B customer loyalty statements (2.1 – 2.4) with an average mean score of 4.42 (main finding 21, Chapter 4, Section 4.7), it showed that ISAs perceived their loyalty towards a preferred supplier to be firmly above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that respondents are very loyal to their preferred suppliers.

Furthermore, findings of relationship quality and relationship value were made. It was found that the ISA's perception of relationship quality (trust and commitment) towards a preferred supplier of crop protection products (4.17) is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that the respondents trust their preferred suppliers and are committed to them (main finding 19, Chapter 4, Section 4.7).

It was also found that the ISA's perception of relationship value drivers (product quality, service support, delivery performance, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market) is above the mid-point of the measurement scale, which indicates that the respondents value these "soft factors" offered by their preferred suppliers (main finding 20, Chapter 4, Section 4.7).

The measurement scales used to evaluate the variables of relationship quality (trust and commitment) and relationship value (product quality, delivery performance, service support, personal interaction, supplier know-how and time-to-market performance) can be considered as reliable as they all exhibit very good internal consistent reliability, face validity and content validity. However, after the primary analysis of the data gathered, outliers and multicollinearity issues transpired which were addressed by removing two cases as well as the independent variable supplier know-how as explained in Section 4.8.1. Following this action, the data

appeared suitable for further investigation, and the Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were conducted as discussed in Section 4.8.2.

The empirical results indicated that there exist a significant and positive relationships between the seven remaining constructs investigated, as indicated in Table 4.14. All the independent variables considered in this research correlate statistically significant with B2B customer loyalty, suggesting a moderate to strong positive effect in all instances.

After the multiple regression analysis was performed, the empirical results indicated that only trust, commitment and personal interaction significantly and positively predicts B2B customer loyalty (main finding 24, Chapter 4, Section 4.8.2). According to the literature review, all the relationship quality and relationship value constructs have a positive and significant effect on B2B customer loyalty. The empirical results confirmed that relationship quality (trust and commitment) are significant predictors of B2B customer loyalty.

In so far relationship value is concerned, only personal interaction seems to have a significant and positive impact on B2B customer loyalty in favour of a supplier of crop protection solutions. Therefore, the more suppliers are trusted, the more ISAs are committed, and the better the interaction between the parties is, the more loyal, ISAs will become towards their preferred suppliers of crop protection products. Furthermore, the empirical research did not support the findings of the literature review in so far as product quality, delivery performance, service support, supplier know-how and time-to-market are concerned in regard to their influence in predicting B2B customer loyalty.

The regression model explains 42.7% of the variation in B2B customer loyalty and significantly improves the prediction of B2B customer loyalty (main finding 22 and 23, Chapter 4, Section 4.8.2).

Main conclusion 10 is that there is a significant and positive direct relationship that exists between all the constructs in this research study. However, of the eight constructs tested only trust, commitment and personal interaction showed to directly predict B2B customer loyalty.

The **implication** is that it appears that there is a golden reciprocal triangle between trust, commitment and personal interaction in a B2B business relationship. This is supported by negative proverbs such as “out of sight, out of mind” and “far from the eyes, far from the heart” which implies that relationships, trust and commitment is nourished through human interaction. Furthermore, it appears that ISAs perceive trust and commitment as “vital ingredients” in the B2B customer loyalty recipe.

Therefore, suppliers of crop protection products should focus and even extent their interaction with the ISAs who recommend and sell their products. This translates to the empirically confirmed fact that the ISA would “want or like” to stay, even at a higher cost, in a relationship with a trusted supplier of crop protection products than to search for alternatives.

Recommendation 10: For suppliers of crop protection products to ensure continued customer loyalty from the ISAs of crop protection products, they should take specific steps to firstly assess the frequency and way the firm and its employees interact with ISAs.

Wong and Sohal (2002:44) suggest that interpersonal relationships are vital to reaching high levels of trust and commitment. This, leads to loyalty to the representative of the supplier and can be described as customer intimacy. Rapport is built over time and needs continuous work, and it is important to acknowledge the representative’s value-creating behaviour (Terho et al., 2012:7). Therefore, suppliers should engage in strategies and activities that maximise contact and interaction with ISAs:

- The role of mobile technology and social media in the interaction with ISAs should not be underestimated. Social media can be described as digital network-based interaction and overlap personal interaction. The question is how can the supplier’s representative use technology and social media to engage ISAs and to create value for ISAs? Social media is an enabler for representatives to create value through information sharing, customer service and trust building (Agnihotri et al., 2012). It is then suggested that suppliers should not only create content to be shared online and on social media but also train their personnel in the abilities and effective use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp.
- Interaction-orientated ISAs values the interaction process of socialising. Therefore, besides the normal interaction of business meetings and visits, opportunities must be created to get the ISA away from the marketplace with its distractions to socialise. ISAs would always value outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking and 4x4-ing. Another activity that can be used to increase interaction is to attend sports events such as rugby and cricket matches, or a golf day sponsored by suppliers. Agricultural study tours to other countries and regions are golden opportunities for engagement and interaction.

Covey (2006:27) states that trust “*affects the quality of every relationship, every communication, every work project, every business venture, every effort in which we are engaged*”. This is supported by the empirical outcomes of this study suggesting that trust building, enhancing policies and strategies must be actively pursued:

- Suppliers should honestly evaluate their “self-trust” by asking themselves: Are we credible? Are we believable? This consists of a checklist of the 4 cores of credibility: Integrity, intent, capability and results. Integrity refers to openness, and honesty even if it is painful. Intent refers to the supplier’s agenda where trust grows where motives are forthright, benevolent and mutually beneficial. Capabilities refer to confidence inspiring abilities such as talent, attitude, skills, knowledge and style. Results relate to a positive reputation of getting the right things done as promised (Covey, 2006:77, 93-94).
- To build trust, suppliers should invest in both the economical and the social component of the supply relationship. This can be achieved by selling with a customer-orientated attitude by the representative of the supplier, who demonstrates genuine desire to help ISAs to make good purchasing decisions by assessing the ISA’s needs and offer products and solutions to fulfill those needs (Saxe & Weitz, 1982:343; Doney et al., 2007:1110)

To keep ISAs committed and make switching from a supplier “more difficult” for ISAs, suppliers of crop protection products could curtail ISAs to explore alternatives (Tsiros et al., 2009:268). This is very difficult in a generic market to achieve. The leading question on commitment is why the ISA would stay a customer of the supplier? Why does the ISA want to be in a business relationship with his preferred supplier of crop protection products?

- Once again suppliers will benefit from formally adopting relationship marketing strategies which produce long-term business relationships. Therefore, training of the supplier’s personnel and representatives in this field is essential (Roghanian & Gheysari, 2013:160).
- Commitment can be achieved by simple relationship investments such as giving the ISAs access to consignment stock or sharing in warehousing or depot costs or idiosyncratic investments such as professional sales training programs for ISAs (Gundlach et al., 1995:83).
- Spiffs literally mean to be attractive in sale jargon. Spiffs are direct payments to ISAs as an incentive to sell or reach a target of a supplier’s crop protection products. Other incentives may include sales contests, prizes, and team selling rewards (Coughlan & Joseph, 2012:475).
- The vast majority of ISAs work on a commission only basis. Therefore, the supplier must ensure that a reasonable sales margin (commission) is available for the ISA, otherwise, the ISA would leave the supplier’s product range for a better offering (Coughlan & Joseph, 2012:477).

Main conclusion 11 is that the other relationship value constructs (product quality, delivery performance, service support, supplier know-how and time-to-market) do not contribute to the prediction of B2B customer loyalty, but still present opportunities for improving the overall service delivery as they were regarded as important by the respondents. Suppliers should, therefore, be aware of the dangers of ignoring them by concluding that they do not contribute to customer loyalty of the ISA.

The **implication** is that ISAs do emphasise the value constructs product quality, service support, delivery performance and time-to-market enough to determine B2B customer loyalty. These constructs represent the whole servitization and add-ons which could potentially bound the ISA to the preferred supplier when confronted with an attractive counter proposition.

Recommendation 11: For suppliers to advance their service to the ISAs, suppliers must deliberately reevaluate, benchmark and continuously improve the servitization of their value proposition to the ISA to avoid becoming a “me too” supplier.

- To get feedback, ISAs can be requested to participate in service quality research with well-established scales such as SOCO, SERVQUAL and SERVPERF to measure and manage the whole business relationship (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007:858).
- Informal research in the form of interesting semi-structured interviews by the supplier with different ISAs can be conducted to determine what is really their realistic expectations and wish lists.
- Suppliers of crop protection products should then deliberately seek to instil a culture of service and customer orientation with the necessary personnel training and implementation.

5.4 LINKS BETWEEN THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, QUESTIONNAIRE SECTIONS, HYPOTHESES, MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, the formulated secondary objectives of this research study are linked to the main findings to determine whether the primary objective of the research study was achieved. Table 5.12 illustrates the links between research objectives, theoretical background, questionnaire sections, hypotheses, main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Table 5.12: Links between the research objectives, theoretical background chapters, questionnaire sections, hypotheses, main findings, conclusions and recommendations

	Objective	Theoretical background	Questionnaire section	Hypotheses	Main finding	Main conclusion	Recommendation
Primary objective	Secondary objective 1a	Chapter 1 Section 1.4.2	The formulation of hypotheses 1 to 8 was due to the theoretical background presented in Chapter 1 and 2.			The conclusions and recommendations formulated for secondary objectives 2 to 4 are informed by the theoretical background as presented in Chapter 1 and 2	
	Secondary objective 1b	Chapter 1 Section 1.4.3.1.1 Section 1.4.3.1.2 Section 1.4.4.1.1 to 1.4.4.1.6 Chapter 2 Section 2.2 Section 2.6.3.1 Section 2.6.3.2 Section 2.7.3.					
	Secondary objective 1c	Chapter 1 Section 1.5					
	Secondary objective 2	Demographic profile Chapter 1 Section 1.3	Section A Statement 1 - 7		Chapter 4 Section 4.3 Main finding 1	Main conclusion 1	Recommendation 1
	Secondary objective 3a	Trust Chapter 2 Section 2.6.3.1	Section B Statement 1.1 – 1.6		Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.1.1 Main finding 2 & 3	Main conclusion 2	Recommendation 2
	Objective	Theoretical background	Questionnaire section	Hypotheses	Main finding	Main conclusion	Recommendation
	Secondary objective 3b	Commitment Chapter 2	Section B Statement 1.7 – 1.10		Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.1.2	Main conclusion 3	Recommendation 3

	Section 2.6.3.2	
Secondary objective 3c	Product quality Chapter 1 Section 1.4.4.1.1 Chapter 2 Section 2.7.4.1.1	Section B Statement 1.11 – 1.16
Secondary objective 3d	Delivery performance Chapter 1 - Section 1.4.4.1.2 Chapter 2 - Section 2.7.4.1.2	Section B Statement 1.21 – 1.23
Secondary objective 3e	Service support Chapter 1 - Section 1.4.4.1.3 Chapter 2 - Section 2.7.4.2.1	Section B Statement 1.17 – 1.20
Secondary objective 3f	Personal interaction Chapter 1 -Section 1.4.4.1.6 Chapter 2 - Section 2.7.4.2.2	Section B Statement 1.24, 1.25, 1.32 – 1.35

Main finding 4 & 5		
Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.2.1 Main finding 6 & 7	Main conclusion 4	Recommendation 4
Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.2.3 Main finding 9 & 10	Main conclusion 5	Recommendation 5
Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.2.2 Main finding 8	Main conclusion 6	Recommendation 6
Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.2.4 Main finding 11 & 12	Main conclusion 7	Recommendation 7

	Objective	Theoretical background	Questionnaire section	Hypotheses	Main finding	Main conclusion	Recommendation
	Secondary objective 3g	Supplier know-how Chapter 1 - Section 1.4.4.1.4 Chapter 2 - Section 2.7.4.3.1	Section B Statement 1.36, 1.26 – 1.29		Chapter 4 Section 4.7 Section 4.4.2.5 Main finding 13 & 14	Main conclusion 8	Recommendation 8
	Secondary objective 3h	Time-to-market Chapter 1 - Section 1.4.4.1.5 Chapter 2 - Section 2.7.4.3.2	Section B Statement 1.30 & 1.31		Chapter 4 Section 4.7 & Section 4.4.2.6 Main finding 15	Main conclusion 9	Recommendation 9
	Secondary objective 4	B2B customer loyalty Chapter 2 - Section 2.2	Section B Statement 2.1 – 2.4	H1 to H8	Chapter 4 Section 4.5 – 4.8 Main finding 16 - 27	Main conclusion 10-12	Recommendation 10-12

The information in Table 5.12 confirms that both the primary and secondary objectives of this research study was achieved.

5.5 LIMITATIONS

Research is not faultless and has its limitations and suggestions must be made of their possible influence on the results (Burns & Bush, 2014:444). Problems such as nonresponse error or sampling procedures must be stated (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:404). Possible limitations regarding the literature review and the empirical section of the study is discussed in the following subsections.

5.5.1 Limitations in literature study

- To the best knowledge of the researcher, no previous studies were conducted to specifically measure B2B customer loyalty and the perception levels of relationship quality (trust and commitment) and relationship value (product quality, service support, delivery performance, supplier know-how, time-to-market and personal interaction) as perceived by ISAs in the South African crop protection industry. This meant the researcher had to make do with theoretical material based on other industries, own experience and interviews with relevant role-players.
- About the relationship quality variables, the researcher didn't focus on the whole spectrum as was identified in Section 2.6.1. Only the trust and commitment variables were considered, given the context of this study.
- About the relationship value variables, the researcher only focused on the constructs identified as value drivers by Ulaga and Eggert (2006) to replicate the study.

5.5.2 Limitations of the empirical research

- Time and budgetary constraints played a role in this research study.
- The researcher decided to conduct this research on the crop protection industry in South Africa based on the assumed access to the ISAs. This optimistic assumption was a mistake, demonstrated by the non-participation (Wenkem and Laeveld Agrochem) and geographical distribution of the participants over the 9 provinces of South Africa.
- Given the researcher eventually ended up predominantly with his own "clients", namely ISAs (87.3% of respondents) in the provinces of Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West,

Gauteng and the Free State, the results cannot necessarily be generalised to other provinces of South Africa.

- As a result of using a non-probability sampling method to obtain the sample from the population, the results are not representative of the entire population. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised regarding the total population of ISAs operating in the crop protection industry.
- The scales used to measure supplier know-how did not communicate the concept sufficiently to the responding ISAs. It appears if the elements of the supplier know-how construct are also present in the other relationship value constructs. The researcher, however, decided to keep the original scales and items as they are unique to this very important supplier know-how construct, rendering the hypothesis inconclusive.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following recommendations for future research are suggested:

- Notwithstanding the limitations as mentioned in Section 5.5, this study can be viewed as a move to fill a gap in marketing research in the South African crop protection industry. Research in the industry about ISAs, in particular, their loyalty, perceptions and behaviour are very limited. This research can be viewed as the foundation for future research in the field of B2B customer loyalty regarding commissioned intermediaries such as ISAs.
- Given that the ISA is not a “true” buyer but an agent in the B2B buyer-supplier relationship, other antecedents of relationship quality and relationship value must be considered. Therefore, the inclusion of qualitative research in future is essential to identify possible new constructs or other questions, was confirmed by excluding the questions and scales proposed by Ulaga and Eggert (2006a) for supplier know-how from the multiple regression model.
- A comparative study can be done to investigate B2B customer loyalty of ISAs in other agri-business settings such as animal health, animal feeds, fertilisers and seeds to determine whether statistical similarities exist between the different industries.
- Since the research study only explores customer loyalty, relationship quality and relationship value from the ISA’s perspective, it might be worthwhile to extend the study to ISA’s customers (farmers) to understand the whole crop protection supply chain better.

- In the light of this study only explaining the role of trust, commitment and personal interaction in B2B customer loyalty, including constructs of supplier attractiveness in future questionnaires can increase insight in this field.

5.7 SUMMARY

This chapter provides a conclusion to this research study. The chapter started with an overview regarding the main focus of the research project. This was followed by attending to the secondary objectives by presenting the main findings (Chapter 4), drawing conclusions, highlighting implications and making appropriate recommendations. Table 5.12 follows, presenting the links found that connect the research objectives, theoretical background sections, questionnaire statement numbers, hypotheses, main findings, conclusions and recommendations. This research study is concluded with Section 5.5 and 5.6 by stating the limitations of the research project as well as recommendations for possible future research.

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ANNEXURE A: QUESTIONNAIRE

CUSTOMER LOYALTY STUDY

Dear Respondent,

I am an MBA student at the North-West University in Potchefstroom. As part of the requirements for my degree, I need to conduct a study to investigate the customer loyalty behaviour of sales representatives towards their preferred supplier of crop protection solutions.

It would be greatly appreciated if you could kindly take 10 minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire. Taking part in the survey is completely voluntary. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Should you have any further questions about the study, you are welcome to contact me at:

stoffel0512@gmail.com

(083)379-9202

Sincerely,

Stoffel Nel

Section A

		Answer in this column (x)
1. I work mainly in:	Eastern Cape	
	Gauteng	
	KwaZulu Natal	
	Limpopo	
	Mpumalanga	
	North West	
	Northern Cape	
	Orange Free State	
	Western Cape	
	Other (please specify):	
2. Please indicate your sex	Male	
	Female	
3. How many years have you been recommending and selling crop protection solutions?	0-5 years	
	6-10 years	
	11-15 years	
	16-20 years	
	More than 20 years	
4. Please indicate your marital status	Single	
	Married	
	Living with a partner	
	Divorced or separated	
	Widowed	
5. What is your home language?	Afrikaans	
	English	
	isiXhosa	
	isiZulu	
	Sesotho	
	Setswana	
	ISwati	
	Ndebele	
	Tshivenda	
	Xitsonga	
Other, please specify:		
6. In which year were you born?	19 _____	
7. Annual sales turnover in crop protection products	R _____	
Please think about a preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions whose products you have actively sold in the last 24 months and then answer the questions below:-		

SECTION B

Statements relating to preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree”, indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements, thinking of your preferred supplier of crop protection solutions:

In general:

Statements	Strongly disagree  Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
1.1 This supplier is sincere and honest.					
1.2 This supplier keeps his promises.					
1.3 This supplier informs me honestly of any problems which might affect me.					
1.4 This supplier is concerned about me and my interests.					
1.5 The information this supplier gives is reliable.					
1.6 This supplier is an expert in the products I sell.					
1.7 I am very committed to my relationship with this supplier.					
1.8 I am very faithful to this supplier.					
1.9 I try to maintain a long-term relationship with this supplier.					
1.10 The relationship I have with this supplier is worth making the maximum effort to preserve it.					

Compared to other alternative suppliers, my preferred (main) supplier:

Statements	Strongly disagree  Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
1.11 Provides better product quality.					
1.12 Meets quality standards better.					
1.13 Offers more reliable products.					
1.14 Have fewer products that are rejected					
1.15 Provides more consistent product quality over time.					
1.16 Has fewer variations in product quality.					
1.17 Provides better services and product support					
1.18 Is more available when information is needed.					
1.19 Provides more appropriate information.					
1.20 Responds faster when information is needed.					
1.21 Performs better in meeting delivery due dates.					
1.22 Has fewer delivery errors.					
1.23 Has more accurate deliveries (no missing or wrong products).					
1.24 Is easier to work with.					
1.25 Gives me a greater feeling of being treated as an important customer.					
1.26 Knows better how to improve existing products.					
1.27 Performs better at introducing new products.					
1.28 Knows better how to help drive innovation in spraying programs / products.					
1.29 Knows better how to provide assistance in new product development.					
1.30 Performs better in helping to get new products faster into the market.					
1.31 Helps more in delivering the products faster to the market.					

Compared to other suppliers, I:

Statements	Strongly disagree  Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
1.32 Have a better working relationship with this supplier's representative.					
1.33 Interact better with this supplier's representative.					
1.34 Can address problems more easily with this supplier.					
1.35 Can discuss problems more freely with this supplier.					
1.36 Have greater access to the knowledge (know-how) of this supplier.					

Statements relating to customer loyalty behaviour:

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 where **1 is "strongly disagree"** and **5 is "strongly agree"**, indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements, thinking of your preferred (main) supplier of crop protection solutions:

In general:

Statements	Very low  Very high				
	1	2	3	4	5
2.1 I intend to continue selling this supplier's products in the future.					
2.2 The next time a farmer needs the same type of product I shall sell this suppliers' product to the farmer again.					
2.3 I shall continue selling products from this supplier more frequently in the future.					
2.4 I will probably sell products from this supplier again.					

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

ANNEXURE B: LANGUAGE EDITING



Dynamic Language &
Translation Specialists

Antoinette Bisschoff
71 Esselen Street, Potchefstroom
Tel: 018 293 3046
Cell: 082 878 5183
antoinettebisschoff@mweb.co.za
CC No: 1005/017794/23

Saturday, 23 September 2017

To whom it may concern,

Re: Letter of confirmation of language editing

The dissertation by CB Nel was language edited. The referencing and sources were not checked as per request. Final corrections remain the responsibility of the author.

Antoinette Bisschoff

Officially approved language editor of the NWU since 1998
Member of SA Translators Institute (no. 100181)

Precision ... to the last letter

ANNEXURE C: DECLARATION AND PERMISSION TO SUBMIT



Higher Degrees Administration

SOLENN DECLARATION AND PERMISSION TO SUBMIT

1. Solemn declaration by student

I, **Christoffel Bouwer NEL**

declare herewith that the thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation/article entitled **(exactly as registered/approved title)** **Identifying factors that predict business-to-business customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions**

which I herewith submit to the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, is in compliance /partial compliance with the requirements set for the degree:

MBA

is my own work, has been language-edited in accordance with the requirements and has not already been submitted to any other university.

I understand and accept that the copies that are submitted for examination become the property of the University.

LATE SUBMISSION: If a thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation/article of a student is submitted after the deadline for submission, the period available for examination is limited. No guarantee can therefore be given that (should the examiners' reports be positive) the degree will be conferred at the next applicable graduation ceremony. It may also imply that the student would have to re-register for the following academic year.

Signature of student

Christoffel B. Nel
Digitally signed by
Christoffel B. Nel
Date: 2017.10.10
15:42:22 +02'00'

University number

24297259

Signed on this **10th** day of **October** of 20 **17**

2. Permission to submit and solemn declaration by supervisor/promoter

- The undersigned declares that:

the student is hereby granted permission to submit his/her mini-dissertation/ dissertation or thesis:

Yes ☒ No ☐

- that the student's work has been tested by me for plagiarism (for example by Turnitin) and a satisfactory report has been obtained:

Yes ☒ No ☐

Signature/ Supervisor/Promoter

Date

Digitally signed by Estelle van Tonder
Date: 2017.10.13 11:39:44 +02'00'

13 October 2017

Original details: Multiple Acknowledgement 199121077-2017-10-10-15:42:22 +02'00' SOLENN DECLARATION AND PERMISSION TO SUBMIT 10 July 2017

File reference: 7.1.11.3.20

SOLENN DECLARATION AND PERMISSION TO SUBMIT

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ANNEXURE D: TECHNICAL EDITING

BJB

Tegniese Versorging / Technical Editing

PO Box 2272

Potchefstroom

2520

Mr Stoffel Nel
Regional Sales Manager
Oro Agr
Northern Region

Dear Mr Nel

TECHNICAL EDITING OF YOUR DISSERTATION

This letter serves to confirm that we edited your dissertation for the MBA Mini-dissertation at the North-West University

"Identifying factors that predict business-to-business customer loyalty towards suppliers of crop protection solutions"

This editing included the following:

- figures,
- tables,
- the layout of the text as well as
- the aspects of the contents.

Sincerely yours

EP Beukes
E Oosthuizen
October 2017