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Relationship marketing dimensions predicting customer loyalty towards independent financial advisers

E VAN TONDER
(Workwell: Research Unit for Economic and Management Sciences,
North West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa)
[estellevantonder4@gmail.com]

M ROBERTS-LOMBARD
(Department of Marketing Management, University of Johannesburg)
[mornayrl@uj.ac.za]

Abstract
Independent financial advisers are in a great position to provide customised financial training and planning to their clients and through their services can assist the National Treasury in creating a more financially responsible nation. To succeed over the long term, however, it would be imperative for these advisers to build good relationships with their clients and ensure they remain loyal. As such, this article aims to provide more insight into relationship marketing dimensions that independent financial advisers could employ to create a loyal client base.
The study population consisted of all clients of independent financial advisers in the North-West Province of South Africa. The convenience non-probability sampling technique was applied and standard multiple regression analysis as well as the independent sample t-tests was used to analyse the findings obtained from the 139 self-administered questionnaires that were returned.
From the results it became evident that only commitment and customer satisfaction can be viewed as true predictors of customer loyalty.
Ultimately, the contribution of this article is to provide guidelines to independent financial advisers for maintaining a loyal client base that will enable them to strategise with their clients over the long term, achieve their saving goals, and become financially independent.

Key phrases
commitment; customer satisfaction; independent financial advisers; relationship marketing, supplier image and customer loyalty

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a well acknowledged fact that the South African population has a poor savings culture. Approximately two thirds of adults in this country do not save. The situation is worsened by the South African consumers' tendency to incur large amounts of debt, which they are often unable to settle. According to the National Credit Regulator, almost 9.6 million people (47% of the 20.2 million credit-active customers) in this country have compromised credit records.

Debt is weakening the South African consumer market and government is very concerned about the financial well-being of the population (The Banker 2013:Internet). As a result, the financial education of consumers was placed on the national agenda to assist in reversing the downward spiral in poverty. Educating consumers about proper financial planning is imperative for building a financially inclusive society in this country. Consumers need to be empowered to make responsible financial decisions and the National Treasury has been commissioned to oversee this matter. The National Treasury accordingly introduced the National Consumer Financial Education Strategy and in July 2013, the National Consumer Education Committee was instituted with the task of overseeing the implementation of the new strategy (The Banker 2013:Internet).

The National Consumer Education Committee plays an important role in the financial empowerment of consumers and makes a valuable contribution in this regard. The ultimate success of this committee however is dependent on the support they receive from the various stakeholders in the financial services industry. More specifically, according to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Treasury (2014:Internet), the key to the implementation of the national strategy is to ensure that the role players in the financial services industry plan, fund, execute, supervise and assess consumer financial education programmes and initiatives in line with the priorities defined by the national strategy.

Large financial corporations such as banks and insurance companies, are mostly held accountable to contribute to the financial education of consumers in South Africa. Smaller role players, such as independent financial advisers, could however also make a great contribution in this regard. Independent financial advisers generally own a small business, earn commission when selling the insurance products from financial companies, and are required to give "best advice" when recommending a product to a client (UK Association of Independent Financial Advisers 2001:Internet; Wright 2008:Internet).

These advisers are in a great position to provide customised training to clients to assist them in understanding their financial needs and plan accordingly. For independent financial advisers to succeed over the long term, however, it would be imperative to build good relationships with their clients and ensure they remain loyal to them. This is because consumers' financial needs change over time and the financial adviser could play an important part in educating the consumer to act and remain financially disciplined and reap the benefits over the long term.

To date, however, no formal research study has been conducted on the relationship marketing dimensions that could assist in fostering customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment. Assessing the association between key variables and customer loyalty, however, could provide a valuable source of information to assist independent financial advisers in maintaining a loyal client base and educating their clients over the long term. Accordingly, it is the aim of this article to address the above-mentioned research gap that exists within the independent financial adviser environment. The primary objective of the study was to explore relationship marketing dimensions predicting customer loyalty towards independent financial advisers. It was further decided that the study would be restricted to the North-West Province given the fact that according to the Department of National Treasury, this province should receive the highest priority in terms of financial planning education (Department of National Treasury 2013:7). The next section provides more insight into the relationship marketing concept and the dimensions that were investigated in this study.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING CONCEPT

According to Gupta and Sahu (2012:59) relationship marketing can be defined as "an approach to develop a long-term association with customers, measure the satisfaction level and develop effective programs to retain the customer with the organisation". Relationship marketing strategies are important to strengthen financial services relationships (Adamson, Chan & Handford 2003; Chiu, Hsieh, Li & Lee 2005; Roy & Shekhar 2010; Yap, Wong, Loh & Bak 2010) and the value of this approach has also been noted within the financial services environment in South Africa (Theron, Terblanche & Boshoff 2010:2). Increased competition within the business environment has necessitated both marketing academics and practitioners to search for creative new approaches to address customer needs. As such, many authors favour the application of relationship marketing (Chattananon & Trimetsoontorn 2009; Ndubisi & Wah 2005; Ward & Dagger 2007).

Relationship marketing strategies can greatly benefit an organisation. Relationship marketing is used by organisations as a fundamental strategy to create, uphold and improve relationship building with customers and to ensure that the relationship is beneficial to both the role players (Rootman, Tait & Sharp 2011:187). According to Theron, Terblanche and Boshoff (2012:32) the re-introduction of relationship marketing about three daces ago, lead to the establishment of new opportunities for service providers. They further argue that role players in the financial industry were progressive in their implementation of relationship strategies to strengthen their financial positions. Financial service providers perceived the management of customer relationships as an approach to gain a competitive advantage (Xu, Goedegebuure & Van der Heijden 2006:80-81).

Theron *et al.* (2010:387) further note that "soon after the re-emergence of relationship marketing, the antecedents driving it received prominence in academic and trade journals". This study specifically investigated dimensions such as trust, commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image that has been theorised as important when assessing customer loyalty (Van Vuuren 2011:18).

2.1 The dimensions of relationship marketing

2.1.1. Trust and commitment

The marketing literature provides encompassing support for the inclusion of trust in building relationships. Jumaev, Dileep-Kumar and Hanaysha (2012:41) state that "trust is the belief that a partner's word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfil his/her obligations in the relationship". They further argue that trust is a key virtue in relationship building since relationships characterised by trust are valued to the extent that parties will "desire to commit themselves to such relationships". Negi and Ketema (2010:115) support this argument by stating that parties to a relationship desire "predictable and obligatory behaviour" from the other party to such an extent that a high level of certainty is linked to futuristic benefits.

Considering this, it is important to note that the relevance of trust in relationship building has been well researched in the literature, and that the emphasis has moved to an understanding of the method in which trust is formed in a relationship (Theron *et al.* 2012:33). In their seminal work on the trust and commitment theory, Morgan and Hunt (1994:24) state that trust is so important that relationships that are characteristic of trust are greatly appreciated and that the role players would want to be committed to a relationship of this nature. Rauyruen and Miller (2007:24) are further of the opinion that in relation to customer loyalty, “to gain loyalty of customers, you must first gain trust”.

In contrast to the above mentioned views, Theron *et al*. (2012:31) have a slight different opinion and believe that “it is possible to build commitment without the presence of trust”. Theron *et al.* (2010:1005) in a study established that financial services decision-makers do not perceive trust as a factor that influences commitment in the relationship-building process. They found that both parties to a relationship (namely the financial service provider and the client) should be motivated to make an investment of time and other resources to secure the future continuation of the relationship.

Trust was not a requirement to secure commitment. The marketing literature refers to commitment as “the relative intensity of identification and affiliation with the service provider and the involvement in the relationship. In other words, commitment is the implicit or explicit pledge of continuity between relationship partners” (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987:13; Nyadzayo 2010:189). Rauyruen and Miller (2007:3) further argue that commitment can be regarded as fundamental to successful relationships and that commitment is also viewed as a key construct in relationship marketing.

In essence, the importance of trust in relationship building cannot be ignored. However, given the fact that the study was designed for the financial services industry (in which it has been empirically proofed that it is possible to build commitment without trust), the researchers decided to adapt the view of Theron *et al*. (2012:31) and to only focus on commitment as a factor that could influence the establishment of a long-term relationship.

2.1.2. Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction also seems to be a key dimension in marketing relationships (Amoako 2012:136; Balas & Tareef 2011:67; Ha & Lee 2010:1163; Theron *et al.* 2012:34). The sustainability of a business’ competitive advantage is to a large extent reliant on its ability to provide product offerings and services of high value that ultimately leads to satisfied customers. Customers who are satisfied with the business offering will demonstrate loyalty and recommend the business to other people.

Customer satisfaction is therefore regarded as an important ingredient of customer loyalty and can be viewed as one of the primary focuses of all marketing activities related to services marketing (Hu, Kandampully & Juwaheer 2009:115; Luo & Homburg 2007:133). Ndubisi, Malhotra and Chan (2009:8) note that “Satisfaction with the delivered product and services has been suggested and empirically documented as affecting the buyer’s decision to continue a relationship”. They further argue that when customers are dissatisfied, they are both willing to exit from the relationship and to criticise the business.

Adoyo, Ondoro, Ojera, Abong’o, Alia and Ntongai (2012:17) concur by stating that “the key to customer retention is customer satisfaction”. They further argue that there is much theoretical and empirical evidence that illustrates the linkage between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. “In consumer marketing, there is consistent evidence that satisfaction contributes to repurchase intentions, behavioral intentions, customer retention and customer loyalty”.

Nyadzayo (2010:125) defines customer satisfaction as “the consumer’s fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including elements of under-or over fulfilment.” Hu *et al.* (2009:115-116) suggest that customer satisfaction is experienced after a service has been made and is formed through a comparison between perceived quality and expected quality. The perception of service quality will impact the customer’s view of satisfaction, which in turn will affect future behaviour. Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) argue that performance satisfaction is vital to a relationship of satisfaction between a business and a customer and that the partners to such a relationship should ensure customer satisfaction during each business transaction.

2.1.3. Supplier image

Van Vuuren, Roberts-Lombard and Van Tonder (2011:4) state that “supplier image specifically has not been explored to the same extent as trust, commitment and customer satisfaction, but are as important in the establishment and maintenance of long-term relationships with customers”. Wang (2010:255) describes supplier image as the overall impression that the general public forms about an organisation. Van Vuuren (2011:75) concurs by arguing that supplier image refers to the perception that a customer has of the sum of all experiences from previous interactions with an organisation.

The image of a supplier can affect customer loyalty and is formed by the customer's perceptions of the quality received from the business. There is a direct relationship between the evaluations of service and product delivery and the perceived image the customer has of the business (Hoq, Sulatana & Amin 2010:72-73). Alwi (2009:3) agrees and argues that supplier image can be regarded as an important ingredient of loyalty, and that loyalty will develop if a favourable supplier image is formed. Favourable supplier image is imperative, not only to improve loyalty, but also to promote positive word-of-mouth. Friedman (2007:1) notes that supplier image can have dire consequences for the business if not managed correctly. Customers need to make correct associations about the supplier and its brands. Image will affect behavioural intention positively and a favourable image can lead to repeat patronage.

The image of a supplier must be retained and improved to ensure customer loyalty over the long term (Hu *et al*. 2009:117). The image of supplier is therefore formed based on the customers' evaluations of the business and can affect customer loyalty both directly and indirectly (Hawabhay, Abratt & Peters 2009:4).

2.1.4. Customer loyalty

Suresh, Ravichandran and Ganesan (2011:22) state that customer loyalty can be perceived as the predetermined ability of customers to select an organisation as their provider of preference, resisting all opportunities of persuasion by competing organisations. Negi and Ketema (2010:113) further state that customers will remain loyal to a particular organisation if they are of the opinion that they receive more value from the organisation compared to what is offered by competitors. Therefore an organisation should deliver high customer value to strengthen its customer loyalty levels.

According to Jumaev, Dileep-Kumar and Hanaysha (2012:37) loyal customers tend to purchase more often and thereby spend a large amount of money on the business. Loyal customers therefore will contribute to an increase in the value of an organisation and will also assist in keeping the cost associated with attracting new customers low. Loyalty consists of both a behavioural as well as an attitudinal component. Behavioural loyalty relates to customer's tendency to purchase a specific brand or service on a recurring basis.

When studying behavioural loyalty, the first question that requires answering is whether the customer is still active. The second question that would need to be addressed is whether the organisation has been able to maintain the customer's portion of spending. Attitudinal loyalty refers to customers who are highly involved with and committed to a supplier (Du Plessis, 2010:27) and is determined by studying the consumer's beliefs, feelings and purchasing intentions. This article focused on the attitudinal (intentional) loyalty of the customers of independent financial advisers.

2.2 Hypotheses formulated pertaining to relationship marketing dimensions

Against the background provided in the previous section, it seems that an understanding of the different variables (commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image) that influence consumer loyalty can be of strategic advantage and eventually lead to a sustainable competitive advantage for an organisation (Van Vuuren 2011:5). There is however a lack of information on the relationship between commitment, customer satisfaction, supplier image and customer loyalty within the financial adviser industry in South Africa. These relationships need to be further explored as such relationships could provide a means to improve customer loyalty for independent financial advisers in the North-West Province.

Accordingly, it is hypothesised in this study that:

- **HA^1:** There is a significant positive association between the relationship marketing dimension *commitment* and customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.
- **HA^2:** There is a significant positive association between the relationship marketing dimension *customer satisfaction* and customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.
- **HA^3:** There is a significant positive association between the relationship marketing dimension *supplier image* and customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.
- **HA^4:** The variables commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image all have an equal positive association with customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.

2.3 Relationship marketing dimensions and gender behaviour

Within the context of this study, it was decided to also focus on the relationship marketing dimensions and gender behaviour. The reason for this decision was that the provision of personal financial management services, inclusive of the provision of financial consulting services, has been dominated by the male gender for centuries.

The investment domain has always been portrayed as a muscular industry where terms such as "winning," "losing," "beating the market," "running of the bulls," "swimming with the sharks." are commonly used. Men find these terms appealing, but they are not necessarily inviting to women. Today, even most successful women will state that they have a clear lack of confidence about personal finance (Blaney 2010:48). The OECD report of 2013 indicated that women have less knowledge about financial management than their male counterparts in the majority of both developed and developing countries.

The following categories of women lack knowledge on financial matters the most, namely young women, widows, women with lower levels of education, as well as women in lower income brackets. Furthermore, women also illustrate a lower interest level in financial matters than men, and they have a lower level of confidence in their own knowledge on financial matters or their financial skills, especially regarding challenging financial issues.

Maltby, Chudry and Wedande (2003:154) concur with this argument by stating that women tend to illustrate a lower level of confidence about buying financial services products. They also experience higher levels of stress when making financial decisions compared to men. It can therefore be argued that the two gender groups (men and women) make use of different strategies in their personal financial management decision-making. Men spend, on average, more time in making decisions on financial matters, they use a number of different strategies more often, and avail themselves more frequently of different available sources of information.

It therefore appears that women do not illustrate the same characteristics as men when making decisions relating to financial matters. These differences are prevalent in terms of how women make their financial decisions, the services they employ, and how they prefer to obtain the information that they need.

Women also prefer to use a financial advisor to assist them in their financial planning decisions and show greater loyalty towards a financial planner once they have established a relationship with the individual. Furthermore, women prefer to obtain information relating to financial matters from a financial adviser, whilst men prefer to make use of economic and industry journals (Lawson, Borgman & Brotherton 2006: 21). Furthermore, the higher the level of education amongst women, the more they illustrate an awareness of financial matters (Schulaka 2009:7).

In light of the above discussion, it is clear that the financial industry should understand the different relationship marketing and relationship building needs of both men and women. There also appears to be a need for the financial services industry to obtain a great understanding of the different variables that influence the loyalty of customers based on their gender. Consequently, it is fifthly hypothesised in this study that:

- **HA^5:** There is a significant difference between the perceptions of males and females in the North-West Province with respect to the variables commitment, customer satisfaction, supplier image and customer loyalty.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Emanating from the research problem and literature investigation, the purpose of the survey conducted for this article was then to explore relationship marketing dimensions predicting customer loyalty in the independent financial adviser environment of the North-West Province of South Africa. The following secondary objectives were formulated to assist in addressing the primary research objective:

- to determine whether the relationship marketing dimensions commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image have a significant positive association with customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.
- to establish which one of the three independent variables can be viewed as the best predictor of customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.
- to determine whether there is a significant difference between the perceptions of males and females in the North-West Province with respect to the dependent and independent variables.

- to make recommendations regarding the relationship between commitment, customer satisfaction, supplier image and customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province.

4. METHODOLOGY

The empirical research conducted for this study was of an exploratory and quantitative nature. The study population consisted of all the clients of independent financial advisers in the North-West Province of South Africa. The North-West Province was selected due to the fact that according to the Department of National Treasury, this province should receive the highest priority in terms of financial planning education (Department of National Treasury 2013:7) and independent financial advisers could make a valuable contribution in this region.

Knowledge of the factors that predict customer loyalty could assist the independent financial advisers to establish good relationships with their clients and assist them with financial education and planning over the long term. The sample of the study comprised of all clients in the North-West Province who had purchased a financial services product from their independent financial advisers over the past decade. A ten-year period was regarded as appropriate, considering the fact that financial services products are not acquired on a regular basis.

The convenience non-probability sampling technique was applied to select the respondents from the target population. This method was chosen due to budget constraints and because a complete list of the population was not available. The respondents were selected based upon referrals of potential individuals that would qualify to participate in the study and were requested to complete a self-administered questionnaire that was based on scales previously tested and validated by Du Plessis (2010) as well as Van Vuuren (2011) in similar types of studies among respondents in the insurance and optometric industries. The respondents had to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements.

A five-point Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated “strongly disagree” and 5 indicated “strongly agree”. The first part of the questionnaire measured the demographic profiles of the respondents and the second part of the questionnaire focussed on the respondents’ customer satisfaction towards their independent financial advisers. The respondents’ perceptions with regard to the image of their financial advisers’ practices were measured next, after which the respondents' commitment towards the practice of their independent financial adviser was then assessed.

The final section of the questionnaire was devoted to determining the respondents' loyalty towards their independent financial advisers. The validity of the study was addressed by making certain that the content of the questionnaire was aligned to the research objectives of the study and measured what the study intended to measure.

A total of 139 questionnaires were completed (realised sample) and could be used in the analysis. After the data had been coded, captured and edited, SPSS version 18 was used to examine the findings. Cronbach alphas were determined to assess the reliability of the scales that were employed in the survey. Standard multiple regression analysis was used to determine if the three independent variables have a significant positive association with customer loyalty. Finally, independent sample t-tests were also applied to determine whether significant differences exist between the perceptions of males and females.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographic profile of respondents

Of the 139 respondents who participated in the study, 45.5% are males and 54.5% of the respondents are females. The majority of the respondents who completed the survey can further be classified into the African racial group (92.3%), followed by the white group (4.6%) and coloured group (2.3%), and lastly the Indian/Asian group (0.8%). Most of the respondents are married (57.7%), followed by the single group (35.4%), the divorced group (4.6%), the cohabitant group (1.5%) and the widowed group (0.8%).

The majority of respondents fell between the age group 36-47 years (49.2%), followed by the age groups 48-66 years (30.0%) and 18-35 years (20.8%). All the respondents who completed the survey were younger than 67 years of age.

The income bracket of R20 001-R25 000 per month received the most responses (30.0%), followed by the income brackets R15 001-R20 000 (20.8%), R25 001-R30 000 (17.7%), more than R30 000 per month (also 17.7%), R10 001-R15 000 (10.8%) and less than R10 000 (3.1%).

Most of the respondents had been with their independent financial adviser's practice for between 2-5 years (32.1%), followed by more than 10 years (26.7%), 5-10 years (26.0%) and 0-2 years (15.3%). Consequently, more than three quarters of the respondents (84.8%) had been with their financial adviser for longer than two years.

Life insurance policies were the products bought most from independent financial advisers in the previous ten years (44.4%), followed then by retirement annuity policies (36.3%), other investment products, such as an endowment policy, unit trust and shares (34.8%), medical aid (29.6%), short-term insurance policies (26.7%) and other products (7.4%).

5.2 Reliability

Table 1 depicts the Cronbach alphas that were determined to assess the reliability of the scales employed in the survey.

TABLE 1: Reliability statistics

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha
Commitment	0.898
Customer satisfaction	0.902
Supplier image	0.888
Customer loyalty	0.943

Source: Compiled from survey results

The listed values are all above 0.7, the minimum level of acceptable scale reliability (Pallant 2010:97). All measurement sets used in the study can therefore be regarded as reliable.

5.3 The relationship between independent variables and customer loyalty

Concerning the first research objective, standard multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether the relationship marketing dimensions commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image have a significant positive association with customer loyalty. The process commenced by ensuring the data adhered to all the requirements for performing the standard multiple regression analysis.

The sample size of 139 respondents was regarded as acceptable, given the fact that it is greater than the required minimum sample size of 50 + 8 (number of independent variables), as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007:123). Observations were made independently of each other. The data was further aligned in a linear fashion, but did not demonstrate multicollinearity. The Tolerance Value calculated for each variable was not less than 0.1 and the Variance Inflation Factor values calculated were not close to 10. All values fell within the boundaries as suggested by Pallant (2010:158). The researchers further combined the first and second values on the five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree and disagree options) to reduce the effect of the few outliers that were found in the data.

Consequently, based on the discussion thus far and the fact that the sample surveyed is relatively large (n = 139), it was possible to employ the standard multiple regression analysis technique to test the first four hypotheses formulated for this study. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated first to test the associations between the independent variables commitment, customer satisfaction, supplier image and the dependent variable customer loyalty. The results are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Correlations between independent and dependent variables

Factors	Factor 1 Commitment	Factor 2 Customer satisfaction	Factor 3 Supplier image	Customer loyalty
Factor 1	1	0.727**	0.645**	0.808**
Factor 2	0.727**	1	0.616**	0.688**
Factor 3	0.645**	0.616**	1	0.601**
Customer loyalty	0.808**	0.688**	0.601**	1
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: Compiled from survey results

The correlation matrix (Table 2) shows that all the variables are significantly correlated, at the $p<0.01$ level, thereby indicating that there is a statistically significant positive relationship among the variables that were investigated. Table 3 displays the findings of the regression analysis and indicates the amount of variance in customer loyalty that can be explained by the three independent variables.

The researchers relied on a 95% level of confidence in the analysis of the results, therefore a p-value of less than or equal to 0.05 implied that it is highly unlikely that the results are due to chance alone, according to the independent sample t-test. The regression model explained approximately 68% (R^2=0.678) of the variance in customer loyalty. Although the regression model was significant at p<0.000, it further appears that only the variables commitment and customer satisfaction can truly be viewed as predictors of customer loyalty. Table 3 indicates that commitment has a statistically significant positive relationship with the dependent variable customer loyalty at p = 0.000, and customer satisfaction has a statistically significant positive relationship with the dependent variable customer loyalty at p = 0.19. One unit increase in commitment will increase customer loyalty by 61.5% when considering Beta. Also, one unit increase in customer satisfaction will increase customer loyalty by 18.5% when considering Beta. The p-value for supplier image was greater than 0.05 and this variable could subsequently not be included in the multiple regression analysis model.

TABLE 3: Regression model

Dependent variable: Customer Loyalty			
Independent variables (Predictors)	**Beta**	**T**	**Sig.**
Factor 1: Commitment	0.615	7.679	0.000
Factor 2: Customer satisfaction	0.185	2.383	0.19
Factor 3: Supplier image	0.090	1.292	0.199
F (3,123)=86.319 Sig=0.000 R^2=0.678 Adjusted R^2=0.670			

Source: Compiled from survey results

Following these findings, the researchers then decided to repeat the multiple regression analysis, but only include the variables commitment and customer satisfaction in the equation. Two outlier cases were also excluded from the analysis. The results pointed out that customer satisfaction has a statistical significant positive relationship with customer loyalty at p = 0.004 (Beta = 0.212). Commitment also has a statistical significant positive relationship with customer loyalty at p = 0.000 (Beta = 0.659). The R Square value for the revised model is 0.676.

Subsequently, given the findings on the relationships between the different variables, it can be concluded that hypothesis 1 and 2 formulated for the study can be accepted and hypothesis 3 and 4 should be rejected.

5.4 Significant differences between the perceptions of males and females

The third research objective formulated for the study was to determine whether there is a significant difference between the perceptions of males and females with respect to the dependent and independent variables. The statistical results are displayed in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Comparison between perceptions of male and female respondents

Factor number	Variables	Mean score		t- value	Sig.	Difference in perception (M-F)	Ranking (Based on least difference)
		Males	Females				
1	Commitment	2.39	2.58	-1.560	0.121	-0.19	2
2	Customer satisfaction	2.55	2.68	-1.135	0.258	-0.13	1
3	Supplier image	2.67	2.89	-2.166	0.032	-0.22	3
	Customer loyalty	2.28	2.61	-2.391	0.018	-0.33	4

Source: Compiled from survey results

Table 4 contains the mean scores that were obtained with regard to the independent and dependent variables. Given the fact that the statements for each construct were rated on a five-point Likert scale where five indicated a high level of agreement, it can be concluded that both the male respondents as well as the female respondents overall were reluctant to agree with the statements that were measured in the questionnaire. However, it also seems that the female respondents reacted more positively towards the statements, since the mean scores of the female respondents were higher than the mean scores for the male respondents. Independent sample t-tests were performed to determine if there is a significant difference between the perceptions of the respondents with regard to the variables measured. The data complied with all the underlying assumptions required to conduct the independent sample t-test evaluation. The observations obtained for the survey are not dependent of each other, the data is normally distributed and more than 30 respondents participated in the study. It was also possible to assume equal variance, as Levene's test for equality of variances showed that the p-value for all variables investigated were greater than 0.05.

The results displayed in Table 4 indicate that there are only statistical significant differences between the perceptions of the respondents with regard to the variables supplier image and customer loyalty. More particularly, there was a statistically significant increase in the score of the supplier image construct from males (M = 2.67, SD = 0.51) to females (M = 2.89, SD = 0.64), t (128) = -2.166, $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Secondly, there was also a statistically significant increase in the score of the customer loyalty construct from males (M = 2.28, SD = 0.69) to females (M = 2.61, SD = 0.82), t (125) = -2.391, $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in the scores, displayed in Table 4, further shows that the difference in perceptions between males and females is the largest with regard to the variable customer loyalty.

The practical significant differences between the various scores were also tested to assess whether the findings would be useful within an applied context. The effect sizes calculated, using eta squared, for the supplier image and customer loyalty constructs were respectively 0.035 and 0.044. Considering these results and the guidelines provided by Pallant (2010:243), the actual difference in mean scores between the groups (with regard to the supplier image and customer loyalty constructs measured) can be regarded as relatively small.

Consequently, following the above-mentioned discussion, the fifth research hypothesis that was formulated for the study, namely that there is a significant difference between the perceptions of males and females in the North-West Province with respect to the variables commitment, customer satisfaction, supplier image and customer loyalty, should be rejected. Statistical significant differences were only found with regard to the variables supplier image and customer loyalty and the differences are relatively small.

6. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Following the empirical findings, a number of observations can be made that will assist in addressing the fourth research objective formulated for the study.

6.1 Relationship building priorities of independent financial advisers

Based on the answers obtained from the respondents it seems that it was not possible to build a regression model that included all the independent variables measured. The

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients calculated pointed out that high significant bivariate correlations could be found between all the variables investigated. High bivariate correlations though do not necessarily mean that there is an underlying fundamental relationship between all the variables investigated.

The results of the regression analysis showed that only commitment and customer satisfaction can be viewed as true predictors of customer loyalty within the context of the study. According to the final model one unit increase in commitment will increase customer loyalty by 65.9% when considering Beta, and one unit increase in customer satisfaction will increase customer loyalty by 21.2% when considering Beta.

Consequently, it appears that independent financial advisers would need to make a great effort to gain the commitment of their clients, since this variable ensures almost two thirds of the change in customer loyalty. To accomplish this task, it is essential for independent financial advisers to be flexible and address the needs of their customers.

A thorough investigation must be conducted into the needs and preferences of customers and independent financial advisers must capture information each and every time the customer interacts with him or her. If an independent financial adviser is flexible when serving customers or remembering their uniqueness, the level of customer commitment towards the independent financial adviser may increase. These findings corroborate with the results of another survey that was conducted by Ndubisi in 2007 (Ndubisi 2007:104).

Independent financial advisers could also foster commitment by demonstrating that they are truly concerned about the financial well-being of their clients and contact them at least once a year to review their financial situation and make the necessary adjustments to their financial portfolios. Financial advisers should further ensure a quality service is provided; promises are kept and through financial education make certain their clients understand the importance of saving and would remain with the financial adviser to obtain assistance in this regard.

Similarly (and consistent with the literature review), customer satisfaction also appears to be important to assist in fostering customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction, however should receive second priority, since it only contributes one fifth to the change in customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction will be achieved if the service provided matches or are greater than the level of service the customer expects from the financial adviser. A service blueprint could for example be used as a tool to map all the processes and contact points with the customer and to ensure the level of service provided are of high quality. Independent financial advisers could further make use of an incentive programme to motivate their supporting staff to deliver a good service and address any concerns which their clients might have.

Customer satisfaction could also be created by ensuring that clients are treated in a professional manner, providing personalised attention to each client, being willing to listen to and address the concerns of clients, treating the client as an individual and not just as a number and by providing sound financial advice and administrative services.

It was also quite interesting to observe that the variable supplier image does not have a significant association with customer loyalty, as these results are in direct contrast with the literature review. A possible explanation could be that within the context of the independent financial adviser environment, the respondents might only have met with the independent financial adviser in their own homes. The respondents therefore might never have had a chance to evaluate the practice of the independent financial adviser. The variable supplier image therefore should not receive priority in the relationship-building strategies of the advisers.

6.2 Relationship building strategies based on gender differences

The female respondents in general reacted more positively towards the statements measured, since their mean scores were slightly higher than the mean scores of the male respondents interviewed. According to the independent sample t-tests calculated, statistical significant differences could only be found between the perceptions of the male and female respondents, with regard to the variables supplier image and customer loyalty.

The variable supplier image did not have a significant influence on customer loyalty. The effect sizes calculated for commitment and customer satisfaction however were relatively small. A further research study would be required to verify whether the sets of criteria that males and females apply when evaluating the business of an independent financial adviser, are in fact different.

Consequently, at this point, it could therefore only be concluded that independent financial advisers should build relationship strategies that will ensure an inclusive and collaborative approach towards the financial planning of both gender groups.

A strategy of engagement in the financial planning process must be a departure point in the initiation of relationship-building strategies. To strengthen relationship building, both male and female customers must have certainty that their financial advisers understand their comprehensive financial picture and do have the necessary skills and knowledge to assist them with the planning of their financial strategy.

7. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The survey conducted for this article provided valuable information regarding the dimensions of relationship marketing that do predict customer loyalty towards independent financial advisers. The empirical findings, however, should be considered within the context of some limitations to the study.

Firstly, the study followed a convenience sampling approach and interviewed mostly respondents of the African population. The results cannot be generalised to the entire population of independent financial adviser clients in the North-West Province. A future research study would need to be conducted on a broader scale and should include a representative proportion of all the racial groups in the North-West Province.

Secondly, it should also be determined whether different racial groups each has a unique set of relationship marketing dimensions that will predict customer loyalty. The set of criteria that males and females apply when evaluating the business of an independent financial adviser could also be further explored.

Finally, a mixed-method approach that will include both quantitative and qualitative research techniques could be followed to provide more insight into the respondents' perceptions towards their financial advisers and understand the true motivation behind the reasons why the clients would want to remain loyal towards their financial advisers.

8. CONCLUSION

The study conducted for this article explored relationship marketing dimensions predicting customer loyalty within the independent financial adviser environment. It has been argued in the literature that commitment, customer satisfaction and supplier image has a positive relationship with customer loyalty.

The empirical findings, though, did not fully support the literature review. Within the context of the independent financial adviser environment in the North-West Province, it was found that only commitment and customer satisfaction can be viewed as true predictors of customer loyalty. Consequently, for these financial advisers it would be important to make an effort in gaining the commitment of their clients and ensure they are satisfied with the service provided. The commitment strategy should receive first priority, since it was found that the commitment variable explain almost two thirds of the change in customer loyalty.

It was further discovered that the female respondents were slightly more loyal towards their financial advisers than the male respondents, but the effect sizes calculated were relatively small. Further research is therefore required to verify whether the sets of criteria that males and females apply when evaluating the business of an independent financial adviser, are in fact different.

In conclusion, the contribution of this article is to provide guidelines to independent financial advisers for maintaining a loyal client base. The implementation of these initiatives could result in independent financial advisers being able to strategise with their clients over the long term to behave more financially responsible, achieve their saving goals, and become financially independent.

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