Event communication and its importance within an online marketing strategy in Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

Customer behavior has significantly changed in the last years and companies had to change to face these transformations, which led to an increase of online companies. At the same time, considering customer needs and expectations is a major strategic focus for companies, which led to increase importance for customer relationship. To adapt to these market evolutions, online marketers are continually looking for ways to form online relationships with their customers, convinced that it will also enhance their performance. Even if the latest trends and advances made the online scene more comfortable, there is a disadvantage for this type of companies as they are not located in geographic proximity and have no face-to-face communication with their customers, which is important especially during the first step of the formation of relationships (Benedicktus et al., 2010). As well, it is more difficult in an online relationship to understand the needs and expectations of the customers, who are supposed to be at the center of the company. Indeed, having a direct contact with customers and communicate a message appropriated with their profiles is one of the best way of communication (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). It is then a high challenge for online companies to establish a strong strategy allowing to maintain customer relationships. In a business, the concept of relationship includes all the operations covered by the domain of marketing which aims to establish, develop and maintain profitable and mutual exchange with the final purpose that the different parties achieve their objectives (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The purpose of customer relationship is to combine relational exchanges and overall performance through an emphasis on customer satisfaction and loyalty. These two factors depend on the experience the customers encountered with the brand or the product. Therefore, it is important that customers live successful experience and companies have to focus more on experiential marketing. Experiential marketing involves all the activities which aim to create interactions between the customers and the brand or products through the stimulation of customers’ emotions and feelings (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). This approach can be compared to an experiential tool, which is event marketing. Both of these approaches have an impact on customer relationships.
The first part of this thesis work provides a theoretical framework for the challenges of relationship marketing in an online framework. It firstly describes the importance of customer relationships and continues by illustrating the main focuses of such relationships. Finally, it explains the importance of customer experience and the role of event marketing.

The second part of this work outlines the analysis methodology. Research method employed is introduced and the steps of the analysis are illustrated.

The third part analyses and discusses the findings according to the method presented in the methodological part.

Finally, the last part provides a conclusion for this work.
1. THEORETICAL PART

1.1 CHALLENGES OF THE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN ONLINE TRADING MARKET

Due to the fast evolution of the online market, the means developed to improve the online scene made online relational-based exchange preferable. However, online traders can encounter difficulties due to their lack of physical contact with buyers. Then, it is relevant to study the challenges of the relationship marketing in online trading market.

Customer relationship includes the marketing operations targeting the implementation and maintain of successful relationships between a company and its customers. To establish and maintain long-term customer relationships, both customer and company must benefit (Berry, 1995). According to Zhu et al. (2012), online relationships are very similar as offline relationships as the psychology and customer needs for this relationship are involved.

1.1.1 CONCEPT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND ITS IMPORTANCE

A significant factor of success for a corporation is the relationship marketing (RM), based on the theory of social exchange and that emerged in the discussions and research in the 1980s. The concept focuses on the exchanges that corporations maintains with their clients. Contributing to the success of a business, it has come to the fore of the corporate culture since the beginning of the century.

However, relationship marketing is far from being a new concept of business practices. Gummesson (2008) outlines the difference between the term and the phenomenon in order to show that the relationship marketing is only a recent term that describes a phenomenon which supports business from the outset.

The growing interest for relationship marketing led to various different opinions concerning the definition attributed to this concept, as well as its branch and function in the overall marketing. Extensive research in this sector also led to numerous relational concepts and structures to illustrate the buyer-seller relationship.
The concept of relationship marketing was first introduced by Berry (1983) in a simple way to understand how businesses were linking and working within their markets by a process that attracts, maintain and enhance the relationship of an organization with its customers. Relationship marketing was later widely defined by Morgan & Hunt (1994) as all the activities covered by the marketing field aiming to establish, develop and maintain successful relationships. This definition outlined the three different phases that allow to manage relationships while remaining general concerning the extent and target of this relationship building. The notion was refined by Grönroos (1996) who extended the stages from identifying to terminating relationships, as well as the target of relational marketing that includes all parties involved in the company (customers and other stakeholders). The scope of relationship marketing was then defined as a profitable and mutual exchange with the ultimate aim that all the parties reach their goals. More recently, Palmatier (2008) stated that the purpose of relationship marketing is to enhance performance. The central idea is that relationship marketing is the combination of relational exchanges and global performance.

After having been a central interest both for academics and professionals in the 1990s, relationship marketing increased in popularity and marked the business world became the major discussion topic creating debate in business management over the twenty past years (Egan, 2003).

The growing popularity of relationship marketing can be explained by multiple environment factors (Mulki and Stock, 2003). This comports the desire of businesses to be service-oriented, niche-oriented, information-oriented, their wish to use information technology and to be worldwide nature. The competition in strategic network has been a driving force that increase the importance of relationship marketing (Hunt and Morgan, 1994). Corporations began to seek “shares of wallet” instead of market shares and customers more than the products were at the centre of the companies’ management, highlighting the importance of the value of each customer (Palmer and Bejou, 1994).

Then it is essential for any company to engage in relationship marketing by understanding and managing customer relationships day-to-day in the current dynamic business environment (Zhang, Watson, Palmatier, Dant, 2016). As well, identifying and observing the customer lifecycle is important in order to determine the different steps to establish and maintain a durable relationship.
In the beginning and middle of the 20th century, transactional marketing was the most used approach (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000). It is a strategy that focus on the exchange of goods and money between sellers and buyers with the aim to attract more and more customers. A retail environment suggests then a more “transactional approach”. However, transactional marketing implies short-term relationships with little emphasis on customer service and therefore low commitment and loyalty to the brand (Cowles, 1994). By the end of the 20th century, marketing trends changed and retailers became aware that relationships can be more efficient on the long run than can be pure transactions (Frazier, Spekman & O’Neal, 1988) and seems to bring more benefits as customers’ satisfaction and loyalty. In the online market, relationship marketing becomes then more challenging than ever as retailers have no direct contact with their customers and relations have to be established virtually.

Table 1. Differences between transactional marketing and relationship marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transactional marketing</th>
<th>Relationship marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on</strong></td>
<td>Obtaining new customers</td>
<td>Customer retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation to</strong></td>
<td>Service features</td>
<td>Customer benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timescale</strong></td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer service</strong></td>
<td>Little emphasis</td>
<td>High emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer commitment</strong></td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer contact</strong></td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality</strong></td>
<td>Operations concern</td>
<td>The concern of all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Payne, 1994
One of the main motivating factor in relationship marketing is that it leads to customer retention. A good marketing strategy aims to gain market shares while relationship marketing rather aims to focus on the customer (Payne, 1994). If long-term customer relationship is an aspect of relationship marketing, it is equally a prerequisite for customer retention. Relationship marketing helps to create customer retention through customer satisfaction (Fornel, 1992).

Customer retention has been an important talking point and subject of studies which causes a decrease of costs and an increase of sales (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Then relationship marketing offered a new approach to businesses by highlighting the importance of maintaining sustainable customer relationships and the low cost of its benefits (Schneider, 1980). Indeed, firms became aware that developing continuing relationships with their customers would be a huge monetary benefit. First, by driving to on-going purchases and monetary payoffs, and then because customer retention is far less costly than generating leads by launching advertising and communication campaigns. Then, businesses focused more on customer retention than on customer acquisition and placed the customers at the centre.

Finally, a successful (or not) relationship between a firm and its customers will have a positive (or negative) effect on the customer’s opinion of the entire firm (Lawler, 2001). Then, one of the main challenges of relationship marketing is to increase customer retention and loyalty by satisfying the customer thanks to a good communication.

The online market continuously faces new challenges and evolutions. Then relationship marketing becomes more and more important for these businesses to get a competitive advantage. Relational marketing is also a global process that is used by the firms to differentiate from the others in front of the increase in global competition and in the customer requirements regarding quality. It is all activity that engages the establishment, development and maintenance of a sustainable customer relationship.

As businesses realizes the importance of relational marketing, they are offered opportunities to continue to implement strategies that develop customer relationship. According to Kotler (2016), relational marketing tools focus directly on the improvement of this relationship, tools that allow to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the firm. As well, Rasul (2017) argued that the fundamental basis of relational marketing is the customer feedback that brings information about the experience of the customer towards the product or service received. Through the
evolution of relational marketing, this new approach emerged focused on the customer and its view.

Changes in the online industry suggest companies to shift their marketing strategy. Online retailers provide comparable products, similar prices and promotion, and same distribution channels as their competitors (Berry & Gresham, 1986). On the Internet, marketing channel differs from the traditional one, but the importance of the relationship marketing is still the same. Customers base their purchase decision only on the information that are provided on the website and that allow them to evaluate or choose the right product (Bilgihana, Bujisic, 2015). Customers also prefer to buy to an accessible firm with which they are at ease. Then, companies have to establish a strong relationship with the customers to differentiate themselves through good communication skills.

As customer needs and expectations are constantly evolving, firms must concentrate all their marketing skills on the customer with the right channels and at the right moment, and then to gain a high return on their marketing investment (Luo & Kumar, 2013). As it is important to know the needs and expectations of the customer when building relationships, firms need a strong strategy to understand and anticipate customer behaviour (Latusek, 2010).

The importance attached to relationship marketing lasted over the years (McKenna, 1991), first due to its success but also because of the emergence of a new phenomenon known as “word of mouth”, developed with the arrival of the Internet. Indeed, the development of the Internet and the emergence of the social networks created a new place for customers to post reviews or comments and led to the word-of-mouth advertising process. As well, today’s customers can give their opinion instantaneously on the Internet. Then customers and the new technologies are at the centre of the concerns and firms have to integrate them in their daily operations. This represents a challenge for corporations as the speed of dissemination of customers’ view has increased with the new technologies.

An issue in using online services is that customers have no face-to-face contact with others. Czepiel (1990) stated that social factor often overrides the economic factor. That means that customers often base their purchasing decision on company with which they have strong relationship rather than on the price offered. Even in online environment where there is no interpersonal interaction, users still desire social contact (Sheth &
Parvativar, 1995). Organizations must compensate this lack of direct interaction in order to maintain long-term relationships with their customers. Bendapudi & Berry (1997) stated that concepts and practices of relationship marketing allow to establish strong relationships with customers on an online retail market. Then it is important to identify the marketing benefits of a good customer relationship strategy.

1.1.2 RELATIONAL AND MARKETING ELEMENTS OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

1.1.2.1 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

It is important to focus on customer satisfaction for corporations which plans to improve the quality of their products and services and to increase the customer loyalty to remain competitive. The more the customers are satisfied, the more competitive the company is (Awwad, 2012). Customer satisfaction becomes then a main focus for companies. A main difference between traditional marketing and relationship marketing is that a good marketing strategy aims to gain market shares while relationship marketing rather aim to focus on the customer (Payne, 1994). Oliver (1999) stated that customer satisfaction is the level to which the customer expectations regarding the service or product provided are satisfied and it reflects the correlation between expectation and performance. An online retailer has to implement a good relationship marketing strategy to perform best and make the user live a good experience. According to Fornell (1992), customer satisfaction is an accumulated attitude based on experience. Indeed, customers that have a good experience with an organization during the purchasing process will be satisfied. It is therefore important for online retailers to five importance to user experience. Customer satisfaction is the feeling that results from the comparison between the customer’s expectations and the real performance of the service or product for which he paid. That means that customer satisfaction is the result of the difference between the performance that the customer perceives and its expectations. Customer satisfaction is then the degree of content or disappointment resulting from the comparison between customer anticipation and the actual characteristics of the product or service. As well, the degree of pleasure met with a product results from this comparison between personal expectation and the performance
perceived (Oliver, 1999). Fornell (1992) argued that customer satisfaction is defined on the experience of the customer with the product or service, connected to his expectations concerning its quality. Then, customer satisfaction results not only in the fulfillment of their needs but also in exceeding their expectations. Identifying the customers’ needs and expectations is important to increase customer satisfaction. It means that a company has to understand and listen to the needs and expectation of the customers concerning the firms or the product or service, and then try to meet them. Customer satisfaction has been considered as a key factor to maintain long-term customer relationships (Fornell, 1992). Then, online companies should enhance customer satisfaction to maintain long-term relationships with their customers through loyalty.

1.1.2.2 CUSTOMER LOYALTY

One of the main motivating factor in relationship marketing is that it leads to customer loyalty. Relationship marketing help to create customer loyalty through customer satisfaction (Fornell, 1992). Brown (1952) made a connection between customer loyalty and the purchase behavior of customers. Customer loyalty is an important tool that creates profit and is the strength of the relationship between a customer’s behavior and the firm he purchases. Oliver (1999) defined customer loyalty as a strong commitment to consume or buy a specific service or product again and again despite all the marketing attempts and influences that could change this behavior. Chen (2001) stated that customer loyalty is the loyalty that a customer adopts towards a product or service and that it is a two-dimensional concept involving the attitude approach and the behavior approach. According to Chen (2001), customer is loyal when he is satisfied from a product or service and is willing to repurchase and disseminate a positive word-of-mouth about it. Customer loyalty is the determination to consume, repurchase and spread a good message about a specific brand. Reichheld (1996) maintained that by creating customer value, a corporation gets higher loyalty from customers. This loyalty contributes to the corporation success as it creates higher profits and growth. Then creating customer value leads to the corporation success. Various researches in relationship marketing show the importance of customer loyalty and defined it as a key value based on the idea of customer life value. Finally, a successful (or not) relationship
between a firm and its customers will have a positive (or negative) effect on the customer’s opinion of the entire firm (Lawler, 2001). Then, one of the main challenges of relationship marketing is to increase customer loyalty by satisfying the customer thanks to a good communication (Yoganathan, Jebarajakirthy & Thaichon, 2015; Radionova, 2015).

1.2 OPPORTUNITIES OF THE EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING IN THE ONLINE WORLD

Relationships in online businesses have a disadvantage as this kind of business have no direct contact with their customers. Then, online organizations have to intensify their marketing efforts in order to implement strong relationships with their customers. A main tool to maintain a good customer relationship is the experiential marketing, which allows to create a link between the customers and the brand or products through the creation of emotions and feelings (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Beyond that, the event marketing as a form of experiential promotional engine encourages to maintain a relationship between the brand and the customers through direct contact (Masterman & Wood, 2015).

1.2.1 CONCEPT OF EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING

The concept of consumer experience appeared in the 1980s and changed the traditional view of customer behaviour that described them as rational decision makers, as this new experiential approach defined the consumer as emotional (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) stated that experience was an interaction between an individual and a product or brand, involving emotional and sensitive significance in customer behaviour.

Pine & Gilmore (1998) defined experience as a new economic service that allows to strengthen the value of a product by providing memorable experiences. According to Smilansky (2009), experiential marketing is a concept that allows to identify the needs and aspirations of the customers and to satisfy them through an experience that give a personality to the brand and value to the customers. It helps a
company to create experience and provide emotions to the customers who can participate in developing the product or service. The stimulation of these emotions encourages the customer to maintain a sustainable relationship with the firm. Indeed, experiential marketing has a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Experiential marketing allows the brand to know deeper their customers through the implementation of experiences and therefore allows the brand to better satisfy them (Heinonen et al., 2010).

In the online context, experiential marketing allows to strengthen the relationship between the brand and the customers. If the customer lives an experience through its purchase, he will be more likely to keep good memories and have good opinion about the brand. Then it is not only about knowing the customers’ needs and expectations but also about making the customers live an experience.

Table 2. Differences between traditional marketing and experiential marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TRADITIONAL MARKETING</th>
<th>EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOCUS</strong></td>
<td>Centred on the characteristics and functions of the product</td>
<td>Centred on the consumer experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCT</strong></td>
<td>Category and competing products are closely defined</td>
<td>Consumption is a holistic experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CUSTOMER</strong></td>
<td>Customer is a rational decision-maker</td>
<td>Consumer is an irrational and emotional individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>METHOD</strong></td>
<td>Analytical methods and tools, quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>Eclectic methods and tools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Frochot & Batat, 2013
However, on the online market, experiences involve some issues to retailers due to the characteristics of online shopping. When talking about user experience in the online environment, two kinds of experience can be differentiated.

The first one, online user experience, concerns the challenges of anything that is physically intangible and focus on the design of the online environment which create positive effects on customers and increase their response (Dailey, 2004). Factors that usually affect the offline shopping experience (as the shopping environment, time restraint) also play a role in the assessment of the online experience. The atmosphere and design of a web environment can influence user behaviour by affecting its emotions through visual cues (colour, layout, shade etc.). Then online retailers can influence browsing and purchases through these tools that affect user pleasure.

The second one, offline customer experience, has a wider scope and concerns any direct or indirect contact that a customer has with a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). It involves the broad multichannel experiences that the customer lives as part of the whole organization strategy, for example the organization of events during which customers can live an experience. In a psychological context, customer experience is a holistic response of the customer from its relationship with the retailer which may implies different degree of customer involvement.

Schmitt (1999) argued that experiential marketing aims to create experience for the customers and defined five tools called strategic experiential modules (SEMs): sense (S), feel (F), think (T), act (A), relate (R).

- “Sense marketing” aims to stimulate the senses of the customers (in online companies, it is sight and sound);
- “Feel marketing” aims to create moods and emotions in the mind or body of the customer through affective experience;
- “Think marketing” targets cognitive and creative skills by implementing a debate or problem;
- “Act marketing” targets customer’s physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyle by showing them alternative ones;
- “Relate marketing” is based on social experiences that encourages the identification to a group or culture and the self-improvement.

Online retailers can then use these tools in order to create experience for customers by altering their cognitive skills and emotions.
According to Schmitt, these SEMs are set by experience providers (ExPros) which are the different links that exist between the organization and the consumers. In the online market, it can be the communication tools, the identity of the firm, the general aspect of the product, the marketing efforts aiming to strengthen the brand image (as the implementation of events), the websites and the people representing the firm with who the customers can be brought to interact with. Faburel (2012) stated that the development of the video 3D, the augmented reality and holograms brought new opportunities and ideas to establish an interaction between the brand and the customers. According to the International Experiential Marketing Association, it makes the customers able to engage with the brand. It is the experiences lived by the customers through the stimulation of emotions that leads them to enjoy the experience. This concept is similar in both online and offline markets, but what varies is the ways to optimize these experiences (Kearney, 2002). According to Kearney (2002), the online experience is limited to the interactions that the customers have with the business. To
develop this customer experience, there are four steps to follow: developing a relevant
customer value proposition, creating the online experience framework, employing
communication tools (e.g. the 7Cs), marrying the online and offline experiences.
Then, customer experience is a psychological construct which is manifesting as a
holistic response from the customer to the online retailer. When implementing a strong
experiential marketing strategy, a firm maximizes its chances to provide experience to
the customers who will associate positive emotions to the brand.

1.2.2 EVENT MARKETING AS A TOOL OF EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING

According to Schreiber & Lenson (1994), customers are looking for more interactivity
in their lives. Event marketing has then appeared as a way to involve target groups and
create emotions (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006). To organize an event as a communication
tool is closely related to the experiential marketing as the participants who attend the
event live an experience. Events are experiential, interactive, targeted, relational;
characteristics that are strongly relevant in the online environment and part of the
experiential marketing field (Schmitt, 1999). It is employed to reach a firm’s goals
through event-related experiences and communication (Sneath et al., 2005).
In the online market, organizations have no direct contact with their customers. This
might represent a weakness than offline retailers don’t face. Indeed, it is easier to
maintain long-term relationships when having a face-to-face contact.
Event marketing is all the interactions in which the customers are actively engaged and
that results on their emotions, feelings and attachment to the brand (Whelan &
Wohlfeil, 2006). According to Whelan & Wohlfeil, event marketing is constituted by
four main characteristics: Experience orientation (customers must provide active
participation in experiencing the products or brand), self-initiation (events must be
staged according the habits and desires of the target consumers), interactivity (events
are a rallying point for interaction and dialogue between the brand and its customers)
and dramaturgy (required during the event to create emotions and feelings to the
consumers). By providing this platform where customers can meet the experiences they
need, firms enable the creation of relationship with customers that improve the brand
attachment and value (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006). Firms are then more likely to
implement strategies and develop more adapted products in order to satisfy their
customers and increase their loyalty. Event marketing enables the implication of customers towards the brand, its products and community by promoting activities that highlight the importance of experience and the brand values (Close et al., 2005). It makes participants more sensitive to the message and values communicated during the event and enhance their implication. Then event marketing allows online retailers to implement events during which they will be able to meet their customers in person and establish break down the barriers established by the online environment (Masterman & Wood, 2015).
2. METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

The aim of this part is to describe the methodological approach that I undertook to get an in-depth understanding of the issues stated below.

This chapter will present the data collection method adopted and sample studied, the process of data analysis and limitations that I faced during my methodological approach.

Through my research I intend to offer an analysis of customer relationships, experiential marketing and an insight of event marketing in an online context. The research on the topic and my theoretical review led me to form the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** I hypothesize that online companies need to create strong relationships with their customers.

**Hypothesis 2:** I hypothesize that experiential marketing permits to improve the customer relationship of an online company.

**Hypothesis 3:** I hypothesize that event marketing allows an online company to create personal relationships with their customers.

2.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

The literature review of theory and research related to relationship marketing, experiential marketing and event marketing led to the development of the three hypotheses previously mentioned. Interview data from professionals who work within online companies will be analysed to test these hypotheses.

2.1.1 METHOD CHOSEN

The first step of my methodology was to choose the most appropriate data collection method. Taking my topic and hypotheses in consideration, it was more convenient to use a qualitative method allowing to gather a wide range of information. This stage of
reflection led me to choose the interview method in order to address properly the issues stated.

The interview is one of the most data collection methods used in the management sciences field (Romelaer, 2005). Its purpose is to gather data and highlight information that allows to verify whether or not the hypotheses formed and to generate new ones.

There are two main kinds of interview, differentiated by their directivity level (Romelaer, 2005). The non-directive interview allows to gather a lot of information as the interviewee freely expresses his opinion on a topic. However, there is no real canvas and it might be more complicated to analyse the data collected. I therefore chose the second type of interview, semi-directive, which stands apart from the first one as it relies on a structured organization aiming to guide the interviewee’s answers. As my research relies on a relatively precise issue and was subject to previous developments in relationship and experiential marketing, it seemed to be more appropriate. Indeed, interviews are effective at investigating issues in an in-depth way. They are useful to analyse a specific topic, its issues and challenges. It also allows to collect expert’s opinion and thoughts about a topic with explanations to support it.

2.1.1.1 BENEFITS OF THE METHOD

It is worthwhile interviewing experts when conducting a research as it allows the researcher to get information that is not necessarily available or accessible when using other methods (Blaxter et al., 2006). Indeed, an interview offers significant benefits. First, it adds a human dimension to impersonal data; an interview is not a simply method to collect data but also a natural way of interaction between people, which seemed me important regarding the relational dimension of my topic. Besides, as my topic necessitated company’s perspective, interviews were one of the most accessible sources of information and insight. Interviews provide precise information about personal perceptions and opinions, and help to obtain details about the interviewee experience. Interviews encourages mutual understanding as ambiguities can be clarified and misunderstood questions can be rephrased, which is also important for an exploratory research such as this one. As a consequence, more complete answers and more accurate data answering to the issues raised are collected. Wording and questions can be tailored to the situation and to the interviewee, which implies more precise
answers and allow more detailed questions to be asked. Additionally, respondents own answers are recorded and can be reviewed as many times as the interviewer needs to, in order to produce a more accurate analysis of the data. This method also allows an easier comparison of the data collected during the different interviews that might be done.

2.1.1.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD

Limitations of the method chosen however can pose some problems. First, the size of the sample is limited to the number of people interviewed and to the area where interviews are conducted. As they are time-consuming for both interviewee and interviewer, it can be difficult to organize a large number of interviews. Then the sample size is limited and it may be a difficult task to obtain reliable data if there are only a small number of respondents.

Besides, the answers of the respondent can be shaped by the conventions, by the questions asked and by what they think the interviewer will approve or not (Hammersley & Gomm, 2008). These answers can also be biased depending on how the interviewer addresses the questions. The respondent can misunderstand the issue raised and conversely, the interviewer can misinterpret the response given. The interviewee might also reveal only what he wants to without giving all the information and give some information based on his perceptions and experience, which might be at certain distance from reality. Therefore, quality of information collected during various interviews may differ significantly (Kumar, 2005). The interviewer should be aware of these biases and that they can probably lead to biased results, and then should be able to counter these biases.

Additionally, the person interviewed might have a limited point of view and have not necessarily all the information to properly address the issue or to give a satisfactory answer. He may also have incomplete knowledge or bad memory. Then the quality of data collected may depend on the interviewee’s skills.
2.1.2 SAMPLE AND INTERVIEW PROCESS

2.1.2.1 PARTICIPANTS

The choice of the sample and approach that are used vary significantly, reflecting the purpose and issues that drive the study (Punch, 1998). In choosing the sample of interviewees I used a purposive method to establish a better correspondence between research questions and interviews. Indeed, interviewees were selected by myself to participate in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPANY</th>
<th>INTERVIEWEE</th>
<th>DURATION</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>CEO &amp; Founder of the company</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Jewellery brand made in France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Head of the marketing department</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>French brand of clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>CEO &amp; Founder of the company</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
<td>French brand of t-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Head of the relations and influence department of France</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>Media group retailing cooking magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; communication manager</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>Concept of “boxes” containing a surprising selection of cosmetics, sold online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Sample of the experts interviewed
Two of the participants were professional contacts; I contacted the others via LinkedIn and email containing all details and information about the interview purpose. Qualitative study was carried out under individual interviews and companies concerned were all located in Paris and its region. Concerning the sample, 4 managers and CEO of online companies interrogated. As highlighted in the table above, I ensured that managers operating in different online retail businesses were interrogated to increase the validity of the results.

2.1.2.2 INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interviews took place in March 2018 and each of them lasted approximately 40 minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted via Skype and the last one was conducted face-to-face in Paris and recorded through a Dictaphone, with the agreement of the interviewee. Semi-directive interviews were conducted with a series of questions previously prepared and scheduled. However, these questions were adapted depending on the progress of the interview. I also asked some additional questions to obtain more in-depth information when needed. The questions were asked in order to lead the interviewee to give his opinion and insights about the issues raised, based on the experience he had within the company he worked in. All the questions were open-ended questions, which allowed the respondent to provide much information. Once the interviews were done, the first step was to transcribe the data from the Dictaphone and copied he notes taken during the Skype interviews. Then I analysed the data through similarities and differences. The next step was to interpret the information collected by categorizing the results, which necessitated various reviews of each interview and allowed at the same time to verify the transcribed information.

2.1.3 LIMITATIONS

If we previously discussed the limitations of the method used, I also encountered some limitations in my personal research and approach.
First, five professionals interviewed are not representative of the whole industry. Although they have experience to answer the issues and can share their expert views on the topic, their opinions do not represent those of all online retailers.

Besides, as I detailed before some of the interviews were conducted via Skype, which was a limit in my approach. When you conduct a face-to-face interview, it is possible to collect all the information given with a Dictaphone. Although Skype is an helpful software to communicate from a great distance, it is more convenient to conduct face-to-face interviews.

Furthermore, one of the difficulties of this research was to remain objective during the data collection and try to obtain as much precisions as possible from the interviewee in order to avoid skewing the results during the analysis process.
3. ANALYSIS OF THE PRACTICAL PROBLEM

This part presents the results of the different topics covered during the interviews. The section aims to verify the hypotheses previously stated. For this purpose, findings will be illustrated by describing the results of the interviews.

**Hypothesis 1:** I hypothesize that online companies need to create strong relationships with their customers.

We came to understand from various theories that online companies face difficulties in developing customers’ relationship, as their business model does not allow face-to-face contact between them. This lack of physical contact creates many disadvantages for this type of companies when implementing customer relationships.

The purpose of this hypothesis is to figure out if online companies really need to create strong relationships with their customers, and if they are willing to implement tools and methods in order to establish these relations. To answer this issue, I chose five different online companies based in France. For each company, I interrogated either a manager or the CEO. The aim was to collect responses that could be analysed in order to answer this hypothesis. First, some questions were asked to understand the nature of the relationships connecting these companies with their customers. All the companies’ representatives surveyed declared that the main means of communication used were social networks, Internet (including e-mails and companies website) and phone calls. The head of relations and influence department of a global media explained that customers’ behaviour changed in their relationships with the brands. The former is now proactive in its relationship with the latter, mainly due to the advent of social networks: customers then comment and share the experience lived with the brand. Additionally, these companies’ customers are individuals between 16 and 65 years old, which, in France, represent the main users of social networks. All the participants interviewed declared that their company communicates mainly through social networks, both to create brand awareness and to communicate with the customers.
When asking the different interviewees what was at the core of the relationships established between the company and the customers, two of them answered that confidence, satisfaction and loyalty were at the core of the relationship. Two others answered that confidence, satisfaction, loyalty and experience lived were the basis of the relationship. Finally, the CEO of the French brand of t-shirt told that he had a different kind of relationship with its customers. These results can be explained in the following way.

The founder of the jewellery brand, who answered confidence, satisfaction and loyalty, explained that her main preoccupation in order to create customer confidence and satisfaction is quality, especially for a brand claiming to be made in France. The company has to be attentive to the trends and anticipate them in order to allow the customers to remain at the forefront of the latest trends. The brand also aims to launch innovative and various products to respond to the tastes of as much customers as possible, and to renew its collections on a regular basis in order to create desire for customers. As we saw in various theories on customer satisfaction and loyalty, this professional told that all these factors determine the customers’ degree of loyalty towards the brand. Then, it is important for this company to create good relationships with the customers in order to increase this loyalty. According to this professional, as online companies are increasing, competition is increasing too. Thus in order to stand out from the competition, they have to act on customer relationships to attract most of them. She added that since customers have no opportunity to touch or see the products for real but only through the Internet, having the best relationships with the customers creates confidence and allows them to differentiate from the other companies.

The other participant who talked about confidence, satisfaction and loyalty as a connection between the brand and the customer is the head of the relation and influence department of a global media group. In this case, it is question of a cooking magazine that is sold online either individually or by subscription. Then there is a need for renewal and innovation so the customers don’t get weary. Besides, providing quality information let the customers satisfied and implies a higher chance for loyalty. The relationship manager of this company, which aims to retail monthly magazines, highlighted a strong need for loyalty and told that providing quality products and maintaining healthy relationships with the customers were strong tools to implement this repurchase behaviour.
When we interrogated the marketing & communication manager of the company retailing “boxes”, she answered that confidence, satisfaction, loyalty and experience lived were at the core of the firm’s customer relationship. The purpose of the company is to propose a subscription that allows to the customers to receive, each month, a box containing a set of cosmetics and beauty products. The company, in order to create customer confidence and satisfaction, also has to provide quality and diversified products. However, the professional explained that experience is also at the basis of the relationship they maintain with their customers. Indeed, if confidence and satisfaction influence the degree of loyalty of the customers, experience is the factor that has the most positive impact on customers repurchase. Then, this professional explained that one of the company’s main goals is to provide surprising and innovative products, in an attractive packaging. Indeed, when thinking about the brand, customers think about the originality and surprise of the concept. The manager explained that in order to provide products in line with customer needs and expectations, they have to create good relationships with them.

The head of marketing department of one of the clothes brand also told that confidence, satisfaction, loyalty and experience were connexion points between the brand and the customers. Indeed, they aim to satisfy their customers through a good customer service in order to retain most of them. Their relationship particularly relies on the experience lived by the customers, point which will be further explored below. The professional explained that as a ready-made clothes brand, the best way to increase turnover is to create loyalty through long-term relationships with the customers.

From a completely different point of view, the owner of the French brand of t-shirt answered that only the originality of its concept is at the basis of the relationship it has with the customers. Indeed, the brand offers t-shirt representing football players: the customer just has to choose his favourite football player, and a t-shirt with a drawing of the player’s face is sent to him. The CEO explained that even if the brand has been very successful in the lasts years, customers buy in average only one product to the company. Indeed, the originality of the concept makes customers need only one t-shirt. The founder explained that there is a need for implementing good customer relationships at it implies a positive word of mouth, which is in this case the main communication tool to create brand awareness. However, as customers are more likely to buy only one product, there is no significant need for long-term relationships in this company.
On the whole, there is a need for this study sample to create positive relations with the customers, even if all of them do not necessarily need to engage in long-term relationships. Collecting customers’ personal insights provide feedback to the companies, and therefore allow them to adapt and improve the products to the needs and expectations of the customers. Additionally, we figured out that despite their continuous growth, these online companies suffer from a yield problem since customer acquisition costs are high. By improving relationships, customer engagement and loyalty increase, which allow precisely decreasing customer acquisition costs and therefore improving companies’ profitability.

**Hypothesis 2:** I hypothesize that experiential marketing permits to improve the customer relationship of an online company.

We figured out previously the importance for online retailers to create strong customers relationships. We could also realize that since they have no direct contact with customers, these companies face difficulties which have to be offset through the implementation of alternative means of communication. The purpose of this hypothesis is then to figure out if experiential marketing can lead to a better customer relationship for online companies. Indeed, we could see the need for them to maintain long-term relationships. We can therefore ask if this type of companies are willing to provide experience to their customers and if it as a positive impact on their relation. To answer this issue, I retake the sample of professionals previously interviewed and I tried to inquire if they provided experience to their clients, what it could bring to their company and how it could affect their relationship. Then the results obtained were gathered and analysed in order to draw clear and coherent conclusions.

After comparison of the results, we found out that four professionals out of five answered that they usually provide experience to their customers. In this case and as we saw according to various theories, customer experience is characterized by both emotions and feelings felt by the customer before, during and after the purchase. It corresponds to the set of interactions that are created between the customer and the company or brand. Customer experience is the result of all the interactions encountered during the purchasing process.
I therefore gathered together information collected through the different interviews, and obtained the following results.

Customer experience plays a significant role in customer satisfaction and loyalty, as it is a source of influence. In order to improve customer experience, it is necessary to create a smooth experience, which exceeds customer expectations while creating an emotional link. It is this link that makes customers want to engage in the company or brand and to be a source of recommendation. These recommendations, when they are inspired by the client’s experience, have much more impact to the public. “A customer who is satisfied will share his experience to more than then others around him”.

As an example, the head of relation and influence department of the media group detailed that they recently develop a mobile application. As they realised that most of the buyers were smartphone users, they implemented this new tool to provide more experience to the customer. Thus, when ordering their cooking magazine, customers can now decide to get a digital magazine instead of the paper version and to upload it directly on their smartphone. The application also offers other features like the ability to create an avatar, or leave comments below the description of recipes. According to the professional it was a “low-cost” operation, which led to an impressive return on investment.

All the professionals that previously admitted to provide customer experience also discussed personalization. They told that personalization is a mean allowing to adapt the products according to the customer behaviour. It consists in identifying customer’s needs and then provides them an offer that is in line with these needs during the purchase process. Personalization allows increasing customer satisfaction, as he feels privileged. It is also essential in the process of creating a relationship. For the interviewees, personalization is not an option anymore. As explained during the interviews, the customer is at the core of the sale process since he is the one to generate turnover. Then, personalisation is a necessary strategy to be implemented, which allows the company to adapt to customer needs and expectations. It transforms the customer experience by bringing back the customer at the centre of the strategy. As collected from the interviews, it is important to know the customers deeply and individually to provide a quality experience. It is that knowledge of the customer experience, which improves the company’s customer loyalty. Customers become more confident as the relationship becomes more privileged over the interactions, and it reinforce brand
image. As a consequence, personalisation has real influence on customer behaviour as it increases sales.

Among the different companies interviewed, one that has particularly developed customer personalisation in its communication strategy is the French brand of clothes. Indeed, the brand positioning strategy of the company led to a unique and personalized experience for customers. For instance, when ordering a product, customers can track their package in real time during the delivering process. As well, packaging is very well thought-out, goodies are offered when it is a large order and during Christmas period, personalized acknowledgment card are sent along with the order. Delivery and return policy is at the customer advantage including no fees whatever the amount of the order is. New collections are unveiled first to the most loyal customers and a selection of products is suggested according to the previous order of the client.

As well, the manager of the beauty box company told us the way customers are offered experience with this product. Each month, the company makes their customers discover five products by sending them a box containing cosmetic samples. When visiting the website, customers choose their subscription period from one month to one year. After their subscription, customers can customize their box by indicating their preferences, skin colour and other features so the box is optimized to correspond the best to each customer and ensure that they receive items that matched these preferences. Besides, the company provides experience through the packages, of which the look and design are highly attractive and can be reused by the customers for other purposes, like storing their own cosmetics. During their unboxing experience, customers can also discover new products before anyone else, or unknown cosmetic brands. After having tested the sample, customers are free to purchase either the sample or full product on the website. Finally, after having received their box, customers are asked to give their feedback on the products they received and to explain what items they liked or disliked, used or did not used. The manager of this company explained during the interview that their main interest is to collect as much information as possible on the customers so the company can provide them a fantastic experience. Then, the relationship with their customers is the key of the company’s success and rapid growth.

Concerning the French brand of t-shirts whose founder previously stated that he did not need long-term relationships, he declared that he provided customer experience through their ordering process. Indeed, as explained before, customers just enter their clothing
size and favourite football player and then receive a personalised t-shirt with the face of this player drawn on a t-shirt. In this case, experience is not employed in order to create loyalty, but to have positive impact on word of mouth. Indeed, experience can also make customers communicate about the brand and become potential brand ambassadors. By talking about their experience lived with the brand, they also become indirect vendors.

As collected during the interviews and concerning the companies studied, online customers are known for their lack of loyalty towards online retailers and are just looking for the best product at the best price. However, experience adds value to the online brand and encourages loyalty. Indeed, customer experience and personalisation involves customer satisfaction and engagement towards the brand.

**Hypothesis 3:** I hypothesize that event marketing allows an online company to create personal relationships with their customers.

As discussed above, online companies are likely to suffer from their lack of direct contact with their customers, especially during the earliest stages of implementation of the relationships. We also discussed the importance for these companies to create customer relationships and their will to strive to establish these relations. At the same time, we figured out how the methods used by the online companies studied to provide experience to their customers could influence and improve their relationships. The purpose of this hypothesis is to figure out if event marketing allows these companies, which basically don’t have direct contact with their customers, to create personal relationships with them. To address this issue, the interviews were composed of a third part dedicated to event marketing. We first try to inquire if these companies needed personal relationships with their customers and if they needed to meet them in person, and then we discussed event marketing and its contributions to an online company.

First, we tried to inquire to what extend it was necessary for these companies to create personal links with their customers. On the five people interviewed, all of them declared that having personal links with customers was an asset at it allows getting insights and feedbacks, leading to higher opportunities to adapt the products to customers’ expectations. As well, it allows to have a more accurate idea of who is exactly the customer.
Among the different professionals interrogated, all of them declared that their company already organized or planned to organize event as a tool of their communication strategy.

The head of relations and influence department of the media group explained that they often organized events in privatized kitchens, where they invite a famous chef and some of their most loyal customers. The purpose of the event is to make customers cook the recipes that are detailed in the magazine, and then share some dishes while discussing all together. In this case, event marketing allows meeting the customers in person and discussing with them in real, which allows to have better customers’ insight and feedback. But the main purpose of these events is to give a good brand image and provide experience to the participants in connection with the product. Indeed, everything is implemented so the customer can live an experience while using the recipes contained in the magazine. By cooking the recipes on their own, both customers and their feelings are engaged in interactions with the brand. This confirms the theory of Whelan & Wohlfeil (2006) that includes experience orientation, self-initiation, interactivity and dramaturgy. Indeed these events provide to the customers active participation in experiencing the product, it match their habits as it is addressed to people who used to cook, there is an interaction between the brand and the customers and finally, emotions and feelings are provided to the participants. Still according to this theory and the data collected, these events develop customers’ brand attachment and value, which leads to an increasing customer loyalty.

The CEO and founder of the French brand of t-shirts explained during the interview that since the creation of the brand, he is used to organize event communication strategies during the FIFA World Cup. These events mainly aim to create brand awareness and then get new customers. Indeed, if both the product and the event communication strategy please the customers, they will more willing to buy the products. However in this case, the purpose of the events has no link with the will to improve customer relationship.

Concerning the cosmetic boxes company, several events are organized each year, particularly before Christmas, Valentine’s Day or Mother’s Day. The purpose of the events is to organize receptions in different cities during which guests can customize their own box and buy the products that are presented. It is the opportunity for them to meet other buyers, to talk about the brand and interact with the products and the brand.
For the company, these events are a good mean to get additional feedback and figure out which products are more or less preferred by the customers. Then, they can adapt the boxes composition when selling to other buyers. Providing this kind of events creates emotions and feelings to the customers who develop attachment to the brand and feel more implicated.

The creator of the jewellery brand told that as the brand was quite recent, the company didn’t organized events yet. However, they plan to organize many events in the future. Indeed, the founder told that at the end of April, a pop-up store would be implemented during ten days in Bordeaux, the city in which the company is based. The aim is to announce the launch of a new collection for summer. Besides, it is an opportunity to create additional brand awareness, first through the communication and the event and then during the event. Indeed, the professional selected a strategic place as the pop-up store will be situated in the heart of downtown and then will benefit from high visibility. For the founder, it was important after less than one year on the market, to increase brand visibility and go meeting the customers. In this way, customers can interact directly with the products and brand representatives, which allows to implement confidence between the brand and the customers. Indeed, the online barrier is broken down and people can judge on themselves the quality of the products. As well, the professional stated that it is important to create this kind of link in her business as customers can live a real experience and then are more likely to remember the brand. As well, the company decided to select two public figures to be the brand ambassadors and launch an event campaign founded on them. As these figures are well known and liked by the public, the former identify more easily to the latter and then to the brand.

Finally, the French brand of clothes also declared to attach great importance to event marketing. Indeed, the company has already organized several dozen of events in the last years. Pop-up stores, receptions, contests to win items, everything is implemented to give out a positive image of the company. The final goal of this event strategy is first to increase positive word of mouth by organizing enjoyable events in beautiful places and in a good atmosphere. Indeed, in the case where customers have a good time during the event, or if they win a contest and earn the item of their choice, they will talk about their experience and speak positively about the brand around them and on social networks. As a consequence, spreading a positive message about the company will increase its number of customers. As mentioned by the interviewee, the aim of this
strategy is also, for this company, to put the human back at the heart of relations. Indeed, interactions between customers and online companies are 100% virtual as there is no direct interaction between humans. With the event strategy, the customer is replaced at the centre of the relations while keeping the online aspect.

On the whole, the examined online companies have a strong will to create personal relationships with their customer and to implement strategies to succeed. In their case, organizing events allows increasing customers’ confidence towards the products. It also allows to create a “real” contact between the brand and the customers, and convey a good brand image leading to positive word of mouth. Feeling and emotions will be created and customers will more easily remember the brand and the products, and therefore increase loyalty.
4. CONCLUSION

This thesis work began by highlighting the role of relationship marketing within an online framework. It identified the concepts of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, which are two fundamental notions in understanding the importance of customer relationship.

Due to the changes in customers’ behaviour, the number of online companies has significantly increased over the years. As more attention is paid on customer needs and expectations, the emphasis is put on customer relationship. In the online framework, various different communications channels can be employed by companies in order to establish a contact with the customers. However, the online business model makes the interactions less fluent as there are no direct interactions but only connected ones.

Otherwise, several experts attempted to discover how to create a link between the customers and the brand or products. They considered factors such as providing customer experience and creating emotions and feelings through the implementation of an experiential marketing strategy.

This thesis work addressed three hypotheses to understand the influence of experiential and event marketing on customer relationships. First, we hypothesised that online companies need to create strong relationships with their customers. We found out through the sample studied that they are willing to implement tools and method to implement these relationships as they enhance both social relational and performance and the companies. Second, we hypothesised that experiential marketing allows to improve customer relationships in such companies. Our research led us to discover that customer experience strengthens such relationships through the creation of feelings and emotions for customers. Third, we hypothesised that event marketing allows an online company to create personal relationships with their customers. The results obtained demonstrated that online companies can create personal links with their customers and break the online barrier through the organization of events.

The companies featured in this study were all online retailers, selling tangible products. To successfully answer the research questions, the paper analysed data collected during interviews of five different companies.

The individual interviews allowed to make some comparisons and to give out similarities and differences between the companies’ models.
To summarize, findings illustrated that most of the online retails aim to create strong links with their customers both for relational and performance concerns. Besides, even if there are many different communication channels to communicate with their customers, online retailers frequently use experiential marketing. With regards to the theories associated to the analyse, providing customer experience enhance the relationships. As an element of experiential, event organization has been frequently utilized in order to create direct interactions between the customers and the brand.

LIMITATIONS

This study has yielded interesting results, however several sources of possible error have to be taken into account concerning the analysis. First, we must consider that some limitation arises from the sample size. The research only focused on five companies, therefore we cannot generalize the results obtained to the whole online retail market. We must remain aware that the sample size of this study consists of only five companies, then the results may have been different if the analysis involved more companies.

To perform a deeper, more accurate analysis, more detailed research could be conducted. A customer survey could bring more information about customer views and insights about the issues raised, and doubtless yield more precise results.
5. REFERENCES


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6. APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What kind of exchanges do you have with your customers?

How can you describe, in your company, the nature of relationships with customers?
   ➔ What is it based upon?
   ➔ “Who” is the customer in the view of your firm?
   ➔ What is at the core of the relationship/What is the main element that connects your firm to its customers?

How important is it to maintain a relationship with your customers in your line of activity? Is it any different from other types of companies?

How difficult is it to create a customer relationship? Which difficulties are faced?

As an online-only company, do your feel it important to establish a personal relationship with your customers?
If yes:
   o Do you need customers’ personal insights? If yes, why?
   o Do you build a strong relationship with your customers? If yes, why? If no, why?

Do you provide user experience to your customers? What do you, in your company, understand by user experience?

As an online company, do you provide offline experience to your customers? If yes:
   o Why? What does user experience bring to your company?
   o Do you think user experience have an influence on your relation with your customers?
As an online-only company, do you feel it necessary to create personal links with your customers? If yes, why? If no, why? If yes:

- What do you do to create this kind of link? If you do, what?
- Have you already organized events for your customers? If yes, what kind of events did you organize? What do they bring to you? How do they influence the relationship you have with your customers?
  If no, what do you think about events? Do you think it can influence your customer relationship?