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**SWP 1/97    TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONSHIP  
MARKETING: A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY , 2**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise of relationship marketing reshaping of organisations towards flatter, more responsive network forms are related, not as cause and effect, but as part of the same phenomena. They are symptomatic of a common cause in that both are responses to environmental turbulence and the pursuit of a common goal - the creation of competitive advantage in a changing world. As the central tenets of relationship marketing have become increasingly common currency among the academic and business communities, the need for new frameworks which conceptualise the scope, properties and remit of relationship marketing at the organisational level is becoming increasingly apparent. Some writers have endeavored to provide such frameworks, knitting together scraps of plausibly relevant theory borrowed from related fields, but to date these frameworks appear to be empirically untested.

The aim of this paper is to present a methodology for the development of a framework of relationship marketing at the organisational level which is both theoretically grounded and empirically robust.

## **INTRODUCTION - THE CHANGING MARKETPLACE**

“These are turbulent times in the world of organizations”, observed Miles and Snow [1986] more than a decade ago, and there is every indication that the bumpy ride will continue beyond the turn of the century and into the new millennium [Doyle 1995]. Behind the turbulence lie a series of frequently cited environmental factors: technological advances and the deregulation of markets, creating intensified global competition [Miles and Snow 1984; Webster 1988; Piercy and Cravens 1994]. These forces have changed and continue to change the dynamics of the marketplace, raising the profile of time-based competition and causing shifts in channel power. The world is becoming a buyers’ market, where increasingly discerning customers are freer than ever to select from the global marketplace - something that many corporations in the Western world were woefully slow to grasp.

Competitive pressures have, however, encouraged organisations to reexamine their supply chains, reducing costs and improving quality at every stage. The search for competitive advantage through improved efficiency has led them to reconfigure their operations and consequently their organisations. Classical corporate structures are therefore giving way to new forms of organisation as businesses reconfigure around core processes, outsourcing those activities which do not directly add value. Some organisations have gone further still, turning to partnerships and strategic alliances with customers, suppliers and competitors as ways of further enhancing their capabilities. In doing so these organisations are moving along an evolutionary continuum towards the type of network structures thought, by a growing band of authoritative writers, to be the most appropriate way to balance the rival competitive demands of greater organisational specialisation and flexibility [Miles and Snow 1986; Johnson and Lawrence 1988; Achrol 1991; Webster 1992].

As the effects of deregulation and technological change have rippled through international trade, classical models of marketing built around the teacher-friendly Four Ps framework [McCarthy 1960; Borden 1964], and based on the microeconomic market model, have been found to be wanting. They reflect the realities of another era. These models were developed from US studies of the indigenous market for consumer goods during the post-war boom of the 1950s and 60s, an environment where brief single transactions were the norm. Critics argued that the model was inappropriate for industrial and services contexts where relationships with customers were often on-going and of critical importance. They were also felt to be inadequate when applied to marketing in the international arena [Jackson 1985; de Ferrer 1986; Gronroos 1990a]. Marketing management, as it was widely taught, represented neither the aspirations or the reality of these branches of marketing. With the arrival of the recessionary 90s it became widely recognised that even in the consumer markets, this classical marketing paradigm had lost its potency [Brady and Davis 1993, The Economist 1994].

### **The Rise of Relationship Marketing**

From the early 1980s an alternative approach to marketing theory and practice - relationship marketing - was in the ascendancy. The term itself can be traced back to the services marketing literature [Berry 1983], though its origins can arguably be said to have originated in industrial marketing [e.g. Håkansson 1982]. In its earliest guises, relationship marketing focused simply on the development and cultivation of longer-term profitable and mutually beneficial relationships between a supplier and a target customer group.

The concept quickly broadened to encompass internal marketing, in acknowledgment that the successful management of external relationships was largely dependent on the alignment of supporting internal relationships [Flipo 1986; Gummesson 1987]. The proposition by Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne [1991] that relationship marketing represents the convergence of marketing, customer service, and the total quality movement underscores the notion of internal alignment, and stresses the cross-functional or process-based demands of relationship marketing. Explicit in this proposition is the recognition that customer satisfaction and loyalty are built through the creation of superior value for the customer, and that value is created throughout the organisation.

Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne [1991] went on to concur with Gummesson's view of marketing [1987], which factors relationships with a range of other parties (including distributors, suppliers and public institutions) into the relationship marketing equation. They identified a total of six role related domains or 'markets' - labeled internal, customer, referral, supplier, employee/recruitment and influencer - each representing dimensions of relationship marketing and involving relationships with a number of parties (organisations or individuals) who can potentially contribute, directly or indirectly, to an organisation's marketing effectiveness.

In a similar vein, Kotler [1992] presented "Total Marketing", suggesting that there are at least ten critical parties or 'players' in a company's marketing environment. He identifies suppliers, distributors, end users, and employees within the immediate environment of the firm. A further six 'players' - financial firms, governments, media, allies, competitors, and the general public - he places within the wider macroenvironment.

There is evidence to suggest that a broadened view of relationship marketing is gradually gaining wider acceptance among marketing scholars [Hunt and Morgan 1994; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doyle 1995; Gummesson 1996]. Each of these writers offer a view that marketing, and more specifically relationship marketing, involves interactive relationships with many 'market parties'. Though there is no overriding consensus regarding the identity or roles of these parties, these writers all extend the scope of relationship marketing far beyond the dyadic relationships between the firm and its customers.

### **Marketing's New Remit**

Whether organisational changes are overtly marketing driven or not, marketing's role and remit within these new functionally disaggregated organisations is being transformed.

Marketing's new remit will revolve around maximising customer value through the boundary spanning roles of customer advocate, internal integrator, strategic director and, within network organisations, partnership broker [Webster 1992, Leemon 1995; Doyle 1995]. The long-term survival of the functionally defined marketing department remains a moot point [Gronroos 1990b; The Economist 1994], but a survey by the London branch of Coopers & Lybrand [The Economist 1994] concluded that "marketing as a discipline is more vital than ever". Against this backdrop there are calls for effective new frameworks which conceptualise the scope, properties and remit of relationship marketing [Webster 1992; Brady and Davis 1993 - and latterly, Berry 1995; Gummesson 1996]. Gummesson in particular, urges that these frameworks should be both theoretically and empirically grounded. In reviewing the development of the field to date, he makes the following observation:

*“Developments in marketing management during the past twenty years point to the significance of relationships, networks and interaction. These are converging into the concept of relationship marketing, which is getting international acceptance during the 1990’s. The term relationship marketing offers a fragmented smorgasbord of definitions, statements, examples, checklists and conceptual models. The absence of context and theory is striking” [p.5].*

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Relationship marketing has been and continues to be studied at several levels of analysis. This research project will address the phenomenon, not at the market or industry level - a favoured area for researchers associated with the Industrial Marketing & Purchasing (IMP) group, [see for example anthologies edited by Håkansson 1982; Ford 1990; and Axelson and Easton 1992]. Nor at the level of the generic properties of marketing relationships themselves, studies at this level have also blossomed in recent years [see Gummesson 1996 for examples]. Instead, this research studies the phenomenon at the company or organisational level. It is acknowledged that this can itself be potentially problematic, as the boundaries between companies are becoming blurred. Nevertheless, it is believed that, for the purpose of this study, it is still possible to adequately delineate between a core company and its wider business environment. The aim of this research is therefore to develop an empirically robust and theoretically grounded framework of relationship marketing, at the organisational level.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Given the absence of an overall consensus on the scope, properties, and remit of relationship marketing, the questions to be addressed in this research are:

What initiatives or activities are the companies undertaking involving market parties, within the organisation or beyond, to improve their marketplace effectiveness?

- a) Who are the market parties involved?
- b) Why are these parties involved?
- c) What are the natures of these relationship?
- d) How are relationship with these parties being managed?

## **THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL ENQUIRY**

At the heart of scientific philosophy are the intertwined concepts of ontology and epistemology. These are usefully described by Blaikie [1993] in the following way: Ontology, in this context, refers to “the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social enquiry makes about the nature of social reality”, while epistemology is described as being concerned with “the claims or assumptions made about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of this reality, whatever it is understood to be; claims about how what exists may be known”[pp.6-7].

When studying the literature on social science research methodologies, it quickly becomes apparent that there are two underlying ontological approaches, realist and constructivist. The former takes the position that reality is ordered and exists independently of its being perceived.



The latter, takes an opposing view, believing that social reality is constructed and reproduced by social actors. These competing views of social reality each have their advocates.

Positivism, with its close affinity to the natural science model of research adheres to the realist view, embracing the underlying assumptions of order in nature, and a belief in 'laws', uniformity and the generalisability of knowledge. Whereas the constructivist's view of socially reality - as "a preinterpreted, intersubjective world of cultural objects, meanings and social institutions" [Blaikie 1993, p.203] - is the ontological foundation for several major schools of scientific philosophy allied to Interpretism. Given the differences of opinion over the nature of social reality, it is no surprise that there are equally conflicting opinions about how knowledge of reality can be obtained. In this respect we again begin by considering the positivist stance, as this is the one to which Interpretivism and all subsequent philosophical stances towards social enquiry are a reaction.

Positivism, in its many guises, asserts that direct experience is the only reliable basis for scientific knowledge, accepting as evidence only that which can be perceived directly through the observer's own senses. Furthermore, these direct observations must be received objectively by the researcher, who must at all times remain a detached and unprejudiced observer of the phenomenon under study.

In contrast, Interpretivists believe that the subject matter of the social sciences is fundamentally different from the natural sciences, so should be approached in a way that is appropriate to the phenomenon in hand. Given that the Interpretivist stance towards social reality is deeply subjective (being derived from meanings and concepts constructed by the social actors themselves), Interpretivism contents that the researcher may only understand the

meanings of a social phenomenon if he or she views it from the perspective of those involved. So, far from seeking the external detachment of the Positivist, Interpretivism demands that the researcher should endeavor to discover 'knowledge from within'.

The Positivist approach to scientific enquiry continues to be the dominant research paradigm in both the natural and social sciences, though after more than a century of relentless criticism its supremacy in the social sciences is slowly diminishing. Alternative schools of philosophical thought, spawned as reactions to the Positivist tradition continue to evolve and fragment. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore all of these alternative approaches. It must suffice to say that from the bewildering array of refinements and hybrid positions derived from these two ontological and epistemological extremes, this research adopts an essentially Realist stance.

#### **PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE - REALISM**

Realism shares the same underlying realist ontology as Positivism in that it accepts the notion that reality exists independently of the observer, but contends that there are in fact three overlapping domains of reality: the 'empirical', the 'actual', and the 'real'. The empirical domain consists of the observable, i.e. those that can be directly witnessed or experienced by the researcher. The second, the actual, consists of real events, accepting the possibility of their existence even though they may not be directly observed. The third, the domain of the real consists of the underlying structures and mechanisms that produce the events [Bhaskar 1975, p.56].

The aim of Realist science is to explain observable phenomena with reference to underlying structures and mechanisms [Blaikie p.98]. The emphasis on 'observable phenomena', is

recognition that like Positivism, Realism demands a rational and empirical basis for research, but this is tempered with the belief that all observation is 'theory laden', i.e. that these observations are described and interpreted using existing language, constructs and theories. In doing so it accepts the Interpretivist tenet that social reality is preinterpreted, constructed and reproduced by the social actors.

Realism adheres to the Interpretivist view that natural and social phenomena are fundamentally different, and that the study of social sciences requires research methods which are appropriate for social settings. Specifically, "Realist epistemology is based on the building of models of such mechanisms that, if they were to exist and act in the postulated way, they would account for the phenomenon being examined" [Blaikie p.98]. These mechanisms according to Bhaskar [1978], are "nothing other than the ways of acting of things". Sayer [1984] articulates the concept in the following way "objects - whether natural or social - necessarily have particular causal powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities". Easton [1995] in his discussion of Realism stresses that, in this instance, the concept of causality should not be taken to mean causality as correlation or sequence as in the Positivist meaning of the word, but as "a realist causality inherent in the nature of things, or objects"[p.374]. He elaborates the point in the following way:

*"Gravity makes apples fall from trees. People build houses. Firms downsize. Individuals create personal networks...It should however be noted that in none of the cases above is the causal power of the initial object sufficient of itself to cause the event to occur though it may be necessary".*

This is because the structures that the objects are involved in may have causal powers above and beyond those that can be attributed to the aggregated objects.

The Realist paradigm with its emphasis on empirical research, and the identification of underlying structures and mechanisms, through the development of frameworks and models is thought to be entirely compatible with the goal of the research. This is further supported by Zinkhan and Hirschheim [1992], who argue that Realism “provides an approach to causation that is very effective in describing [marketing] phenomena that act as enabling or inhibiting agents, rather than primary causes”.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The research will therefore follow the iterative, ‘retroductive’ approach of Realist science [Blaikie p.170], starting with a descriptive exploratory stage, using empirical data and followed by an ‘explanatory’ theoretical stage to produce a rational explanation of the (non-random) patterns found in the empirical study. This second stage usually involves the construction of hypothetical models of the structure and/or mechanisms which are assumed to produce the observed phenomenon. Further research will follow “to check critically what is thought to be known”. [Blaikie p.60].

This ‘Retroductive’ strategy was felt to be the most appropriate approach given the objectives and goal of the research, which is to develop an empirically robust and theoretically grounded framework of relationship marketing. The term ‘theoretical’ is used in the sense adopted by Willer [1967] when distinguishing between ‘general models’ and ‘theoretical models’ in the social sciences. He defines a ‘theoretical model’ as “a conceptualisation of a group of

phenomena, constructed by means of a rationale, where the ultimate purpose is to furnish the terms and relations, the proposition, of a formal system which, if validated, becomes a theory”[p.15].

Blaikie highlights a central question that haunts the Realist approach. It relates to the issue of where do the hypothetical structures used by the realist come from, and how can the plausibility of the hypothesised structures and mechanisms be established. This matter has been raised and discussed in the marketing literature within the wider debate surrounding the nature of truth in marketing science [Peter 1992; Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992; Hunt 1992]. Zinkhan and Hirschheim cite Bhaskar [1975] when they explain that:

*“The models represent only what we know of the world and such knowledge is inherently flawed: but as we build successive models, we may improve our representation. By making use of cognitive materials and operating under the control of something like a logic of analogy or metaphor, we can postulate a model”.*

Zinkhan and Hirschheim acknowledge that the models do not exactly duplicate the world, being composed of abstractions and oversimplifications. In short, these models are only as good as the theory behind them, so competing models are compared according to their ability to explain the phenomenon.

Relationship marketing in its broader sense, is an emerging and recognised, but little ‘known’ phenomenon. Conceptual models or frameworks for the phenomenon, to date, appear to have been ‘paramorphic’ i.e. they are existentially plausible, but the subject of the models -

relationship marketing - is not their source. These models are plausible, in that they are derived from fragmented theory from related fields, and intuitively appealing in that they are supported by (equally fragmented) anecdotal evidence. See for example Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne [pp.21-31] and more recently, Doyle [p.34]. The aim of this research is to develop a theoretically grounded framework of relationship marketing, which is 'homeomorphic', i.e. one that represents the characteristics of a known phenomenon, and is modeled using reasoned theory and derived from empirical research into the subject itself [Blaikie, p.171].

Such an approach to marketing science was, according to Zinkhan and Hirschheim, popular during the 1960s, but fell from favour "largely because it is difficult to operationalise and test such comprehensive models in marketing" [p.87]. They observe the current vogue for examining one-to-one relationships in partially closed settings, but urge marketers to return to the task of comprehensive model building:

*"Too often in marketing we undertake research projects to investigate the relationship between isolated variables and we do not make an attempt to integrate our findings into an overall framework"* [Zinkhan and Hirschheim, p.87].

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The long standing dominance of the positivist approach to social sciences research has resulted in an overall bias in favour of quantitative research methods. This historical bias towards quantitative research is as evident in marketing as it is in other branches of the social sciences. Deshpande [1983] noted that although there had been considerable interest in qualitative

marketing research during the 1950s and early 1960s, work on qualitative research methods in marketing was noticeably absent from the academic journals for the next two decades.

Deshpande went on to express his concern that adherence to the positivist paradigm had impeded the development of metatheory in marketing by creating an overemphasis on quantitative research methods.

While the bias in favour of quantitative research methods remains, those working in the relationship marketing field (most noticeably the members of the IMP group of academic researchers) have made efforts to promote descriptive, qualitative research methods for the study of industrial networks and relationship marketing. This research will follow their lead with the use of qualitative research methods, thus maintaining a logical consistency with the epistemological stance and the purpose of the research, while paying due regard to the maturity of the field.

Yin [1989, p. 16], cites three criteria for choosing a research method:

- The type of research question posed.
- The extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioural events.
- The degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events.

Using Yin's criteria, the principle techniques available for collecting and analysing empirical evidence in the social sciences - namely: experiment, quasi-experiment, action research, surveys, archival analysis, history, and case study [Yin 1989, Gill and Johnson 1991], - were assessed for the purposed study.

Experiments were immediately dismissed as being unsuitable for this study, being incompatible with the choice of qualitative method and underlying philosophical stance adopted for the research. Furthermore, experiments require a closed system, free from the contextual factors which are of central importance to the proposed research.

Quasi-experiment has some appeal because it enables research to take place in a natural, rather than laboratory setting, resulting in minimal disruption to the host organisation or situation under examination. Quasi-experiments are often conducted using an interrupted time series design, i.e. by reviewing the situation before an event or intervention took place, then comparing it with the analysis of the situation post intervention [Gill and Johnson 1991]. For the proposed study the method was not judged to be appropriate because of its focus on an intervention, and because it is incompatible with the proposed unit of analysis (the organisation as a whole, within its the business environment). Had the proposed study been on the effectiveness of a specific marketing programme or initiative (with the programme as the unit of analysis) then quasi-experiment would possibly have been a suitable method.

Action research - like an experiment - involves direct intervention, often in a form similar to that of a consultancy project [Gill and Johnson 1991]. Yin [1989] states that the study is likely to be dual-purpose and problem centred, in that it attempts to gain an understanding of a situation or problem and , as a result of the research project, propose possible solutions or courses of action to alleviate the problem. Secondly, attempts may be made to draw generalisations from the study which may be of relevance in other similar situations, or in a wider context (usually to fulfill the criteria for a higher degree). Action research has been



rejected for this study because direct intervention is not intended, and the purpose of the study is not to solve a predetermined problem.

Histories can effectively be ruled out at this point because they deal specifically with 'dead' material; as such they are examinations of closed incidents often viewed in isolation from their wider contexts [Yin 1989]. The proposed study intends to examine a current situation within a wider context.

Surveys, and archival analysis, though useful in some circumstances (for studying the outcome of events at a given point in time), were considered to be too limited in depth and scope to be the principle method of research. Nevertheless, extensive archives analysis will be incorporated into the study.

Finally case study methods were explored. They are suitable for examining on-going contemporary events, and for use when specific behaviours cannot be manipulated. The nature of the research questions - an exploratory 'What' question, combined with explanatory 'Why' and 'How' questions - also suggest that a case study approach would be appropriate for the proposed research [Yin, pp. 16-17].

## **THE CASE STUDY METHOD**

Going beyond Yin's initial criteria, the case study method was deemed to be particularly appropriate for the following reasons:

- The difficulty in distinguishing between a phenomena and its context.
- The immaturity of the field.

Furthermore, it is:

- Consistent with the objectives of the research.
- Consistent with the Realist paradigm and the retroductive research strategy.
- Compatible with the skills, preferences and experience of the researcher.

Yin defines a case study as “an empirical enquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” [p.23].

According to Yin's definition, the very essence of the case method provides the logic behind its adoption for this research. The issue of multiple sources of evidence will be addressed in some depth later in this paper.

The case method is commensurate with stage of development of the field of relationship marketing, which Berry [1995] describes as “far from being mature” [p.243]. Bonoma [1985] specifically called for greater use of the case study method in emerging fields of marketing

research, so as to establish a theoretical basis for further study before more quantitative methods could be applied. Bonoma appears to have assumed that all case studies are constructed from qualitative data, but this is not necessarily so [Yin, p.25]. Qualitative data collection techniques are, however, well suited to the study of complex, rich, contemporary phenomena. It is these qualities which have led many of the researchers wishing to study the development of industrial networks to adopt the case study method and prompted its use in the development of other multiple stakeholder models of management [e.g. Freeman and Reed 1983]. It is also these qualities which make the case study method so appropriate for this study.

Furthermore, the case method is entirely compatible with the philosophical stance of the research and the proposed retroductive research strategy. Moreover, Easton [1995] argues that “only Realism has properties which ensure a match with the particular characteristics of case research and thus provide a justification for case based knowledge claims”[p.369].

Last, but not least, the use of qualitative case studies is believed to be a viable choice, given the preferences, skills and experience of the researcher.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

While the logic for applying the case study method to this research is compelling, the method is not without its critics. Yin cautions the would-be case researcher that, contrary to popular belief, case studies are particularly difficult to execute effectively, and frequently fail because the design is not considered to be rigorous enough to be methodologically sound. Careful consideration has therefore been given to matters of design and methodological rigour.

A single case design was considered but rejected, because the host organisation is unlikely to meet any of the criteria described by Yin as justifying the use of a single case study. i.e. The research does not plan to investigate a situation which is *unique, extreme or revelatory*, thereby offering an opportunity to investigate a situation or organisation of a kind which has hitherto been inaccessible to management researchers. Nor does it represent a *critical case* - an opportunity to test a well honed theory in optimum circumstances. The theoretical basis of the study is not felt to be sufficiently well developed, or defined, to allow a single case to be used to determine whether the theoretical propositions are correct or otherwise, making it incompatible with Realist approach and the proposed retroductive research strategy.

*“Case research which would wish to lay claim to a Realist epistemology must ... be inquisitive, to look for the roots of things, to disentangle complexities and to conceptualise and reconceptualise, test and retest, to be both rigorous and creative and above all to seek for the underlying reality through the thick veil which hides it”*[Easton 1995, pp.379-80].

A multiple case study design was therefore devised, consisting of three embedded cases.

In each case, the company or organisation is taken as the primary unit of analysis, with subunits in the form of initiatives and relationships between market parties as anchorage points within each case. These embedded units are designed to guard against the insidious shifts in focus to which case research is apparently prone [Yin, p.50].

The advantage of using a multiple case study design is that such designs tend to be seen as more robust than single case studies. A disadvantage is that multiple case studies are particularly prone to loss of focus. A case study protocol is therefore being used to lend focus during data collection and analysis. Yin also urges the researcher to consider the amount of time and resources required to conduct multiple case studies, he cautions that the resource requirements may be beyond the means of a single investigator.

In selecting the cases Yin states that they should be chosen with the expectation of them yielding similar results (a literal replication), or that they might produce contrary results for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication). Whichever form of replication is envisaged for the study, Yin stresses that the replication process cannot proceed without the development of a rich theoretical framework, which becomes the vehicle for generalising or transferring to new cases.

### **THE INITIAL FRAMEWORK - THE SIX MARKETS MODEL**

The issue of how the Realist researcher might develop an initial hypothetical framework has already been discussed in this paper. In this instance it is proposed that a tentative framework based on Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne's 'Six Markets' should be used as a non-too rigid guide for data collection.

Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 'Six Markets Model' is shown below (see Figure1). The authors cite anecdotal evidence to support the inclusion of each of the 'markets' or domains, although little attempt is made to present a theoretical underpinning for the constructs.

Nevertheless, the literature does exist which provides a theoretical and empirical basis for their

The risk of reducing the richness of the data and distorting the final results is accepted.

However, Easton and his co-authors, acknowledge that the desire to let the categories emerge from random data collection, must be balanced against the practicality of doing the research.

It is impractical and perhaps even impossible to collect every piece of potential data offered by even a small number of sites. Compromises have to be made, if only to demonstrate a broad research focus so as not to be seen to be wasting the time of key informants. The Six Markets framework is therefore selected as the point of embarkation for this research, but it was decided that in order to retain the maximum degree of flexibility, no attempt should be made to structure or organise the constructs further at this stage.

## **SELECTION OF CASES**

A pilot or 'initial' case study is being undertaken, as much to test the approach as the tentative hypothetical framework, to be followed by two more case studies to test and refine the framework further. The researcher's decision to undertake only three case studies was determined by resource limitations and the time frame for the study. The small number of cases precludes the possibility of producing a theoretical replication, Yin suggests that a minimum of six case studies would be required for such a goal [p.53]. However, he indicates that two or three selected cases should be enough to produce a literal replication.

Three companies have been selected for the detailed case study analysis, they are Laura Ashley Plc, The Rover Group, and Guinness Brewing G.B. The choice of initial case study was purely opportunistic and followed on from an earlier research project. The selection of the

other cases - The Rover Group and Guinness Brewing GB, reflected two concerns: theoretical sampling and access.

Theoretical sampling means cases are chosen for theoretical and not statistical reasons, with a view to replicating or extending the emergent theory [Glaser and Strauss 1967, Eisenhardt 1989]. Guinness and Rover were selected because they are both well-known companies that were trying to boost their fortunes through well-publicised relationship marketing initiatives. These initiatives involved cooperative agreements with other external parties, with the publicly espoused intention of improving customer satisfaction and retention. Given that only a small number of cases could be undertaken, it made sense to select ones where the phenomenon of interest was “transparently observable” [Pettigrew 1988].

Each of the three organisations represents a different industry sector, but with some similarities. All for example, manufacture products in the UK, which are marketed here and around the globe. Although they are all manufacturing companies, there are clearly vital service issues involved in marketing their products. It is hoped that the cross-industry perspectives, together with the manufacturing and service elements present in each case will lend a breadth of vision to the research.

Access was an absolutely critical factor in the selection of the case studies. To conduct in-depth case studies of an organisation as a whole requires sustainable access and a high level of cooperation from the parties involved. Only those organisations where high-level access could be secured (with the help of Cranfield contacts) were considered for this study.

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

In planning the data collection phases of this research, the principle of 'triangulation' has been observed, to improve the richness of the data and the credibility and dependability of the research. The issue of triangulation will be discussed in greater depth at a later stage in this paper, however, at this point it should be noted that the proposed research will collect data from multiple sources and employ the following data collection methods:

- Interviews with key informants - members of middle and senior management from the core firm, service delivery staff and, where possible, representatives of other parties with whom the focal firm is cooperating.
- Direct and participant observation - informal visits and 'mystery shopping' trips to appropriate retail sites to witness or experience an end customer relationship with the focal firm.
- Archival analysis - the examination of the organisations' own archival material, in-house documentation, videos etc., together with press reports and other relevant material from the public domain.

Data generated during the interviews and participant observation is to be captured by either tape recording (where appropriate) and/or in the form of extensive field notes. The former will then be transcribed for analysis. All data, documentation, artifacts and notes are to be retained in case data bases so as to preserve the 'trails of evidence'.



## **STRATEGY FOR WITHIN-CASE ANALYSIS**

At the individual case level, the within-case analysis for this research will follow a strategy outlined by Miles and Huberman [1994], where qualitative analysis is viewed as following a four stage process, beginning during data collection and continuing through three concurrent streams of activity - data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (see Figure 2). A brief explanation of each stream of analytic activity follows.

### **Data Reduction**

Data reduction refers to the process of bounding data collection and condensing the data collected. It often begins in the earliest stages of the research, while the researcher is deciding on elements of the research design and strategy. It also takes place during the process of selecting, focusing, transforming and abstracting the data which appear in the written up field notes. In later stages of the project, data reduction occurs while the researcher is writing summaries, coding, teasing out themes and making any of the many analytic choices which must be made so that final conclusions can be drawn and verified.

### **Data Display**

Extended texts are the most frequently used form of data display in the analysis of qualitative data. However, Miles and Huberman are advocates of the use of other forms of data display - such as matrices, charts and network diagrams - as means of

assembling and organising data to clarify the process of analysis, and to facilitate the third stream of analysis, the drawing and verification of substantiated conclusions.

### Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model

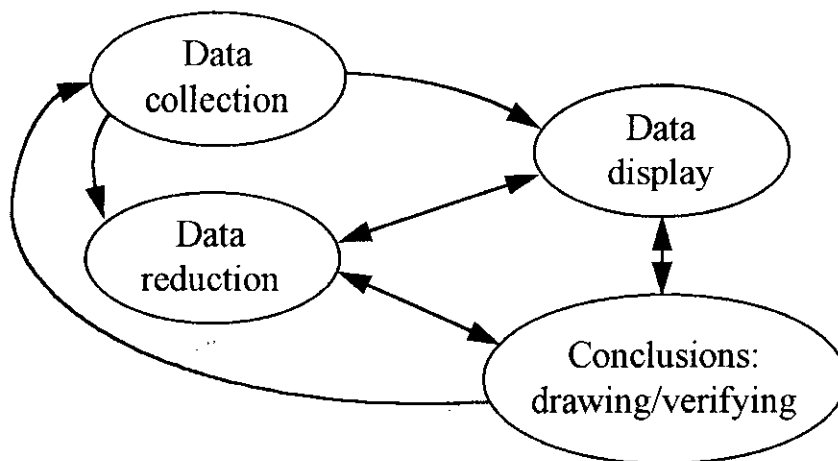


Figure 2

Source : Miles & Huberman 1994

#### Conclusion Drawing and Verification

It is human nature to draw conclusions as data collection proceeds, however, Miles and Huberman advise researchers to “hold these conclusions lightly” until they can be seen to be fully ‘grounded’ in the data. The conclusions may not emerge until after data collection is complete, those which emerge earlier must be verified as analysis proceeds. It is suggested that this ‘verification’ can take several forms.

*“Verification may be as brief as a fleeting second thought crossing the analyst’s mind during writing, with a short excursion back to the field notes, or it may be thorough and elaborate, with lengthy argumentation and review*

*among colleagues to develop 'intersubjective consensus' or with extensive efforts to replicate the finding in another data set" [p11].*

## **METHODS OF VERIFYING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Yin's warning about the difficulties in producing case research that is deemed to be methodologically sound has been considered at length, not least his concern over the issue of researcher bias. Case investigators are alleged to be particularly prone to researcher bias "because they must understand the issues and exercise discretion" [Yin p.65]. To minimise the risk of bias and other potential threats to the trustworthiness of the research, Lincoln and Guba [1985] suggest four questions that a researcher must address:

- How do we know whether to have confidence in the findings?
- How do we know the degree to which the findings apply in other contexts?
- How do we know the degree to which the findings emerge from the context and the respondents and not solely from the researcher?
- How do we know the degree to which the findings would be repeated if the study could be replicated in essentially the same way?

Yin puts forward four tests which deal with these issues in case study research, these are:

1. Construct validity - establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied.
2. External validity - establishing the domain to which a study's findings can be generalised.
3. Internal validity - establishing a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are shown to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships (for explanatory or causal studies only, not for descriptive or exploratory studies).
4. Reliability - demonstrating that the operations of a study (such as the data collection procedures) can be repeated, with the same results.

However, according to Lincoln and Guba [1985], at least three of these criteria - external validity, internal validity and reliability - display positivist leanings, making them inappropriate for research such as this which takes a post-positivist philosophical stance. Therefore the researcher has followed Lincoln and Guba's suggestion to employ four substitute criteria - credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, plus a fifth - integrity - as suggested by Wallendorf and Belk [1989], which fit the epistemological and ontological approach of this research.

1. Credibility - adequate and believable representations of the constructions of reality studied.

2. **Transferability** - the extent to which working hypotheses can also be employed in other contexts, based on an assessment of similarity between the two contexts.
3. **Dependability** - the extent to which interpretation was constructed in a way which avoids instability, other than the inherent instability of a social phenomenon.
4. **Confirmability** - the ability to trace a researcher's construction of an interpretation by following the data and other records kept.
5. **Integrity** - the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation, or misrepresentations by informants.

In their comprehensive paper "*Assessing Trustworthiness in Naturalistic Consumer Research*" Wallendorf and Belk [1989] offer specific techniques which allow an assessment of the research against each of these criteria, several of which are to be employed during the course of this research.

### **Credibility**

The credibility of the research rests to a great extent on the procedures employed during the data collection and early interpretation phases of the research.

Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation across sources and methods are all suggested as techniques which will enhance the credibility of data

collection. While triangulation across researchers, debriefings by peers, member checks, and negative case analysis are all recommended to improve the credibility of the interpretation of the data.

### ***Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation***

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are recommended, so that sufficient observations can be made to assess distortions which may exist in the data and acquire sufficient understanding to be able to assess the quality of the data. How long that engagement should be is determined by the purpose of the research, the prior experience of the researcher and the information obtained, but a consideration should be the length of the cycle over which the phenomenon of interest manifests itself. Wallendorf and Belk specifically advocate that persistent observation should be conducted in an overt manner, allowing the researcher to probe issues in a way which would otherwise seem inappropriate. Undertaking the research over a prolonged period of time increases the likelihood that informants will abandon any attempts at impression management.

In all instances, the amount of time spent at the site, the number of researchers and their roles should be specified to establish the trustworthiness of the presentation of the interpretation.

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation of sources requires the researcher to develop evidence for an interpretation from several sources, these may include literature or other media, as

well as interaction with several informants, particularly several different types of informants. Importantly, Miles and Huberman also add time as a dimension for consideration when triangulating by data source. It is noted that triangulation of sources requires that (for primary sources) all contacts are fully recorded in field notes to provide as much detail as possible, so that confirmatory or conflicting data can be identified quickly and easily at a later date.

Triangulation of methods demands that the researcher tests an interpretation in data gathered using several different methods [Wallendorf and Belk]. These methods should, if possible, include multiple types of primary as well as secondary data. Audio recordings, video recordings of events and still photographs are all recommended methods of primary data capture [Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988].

Triangulation of researcher or observer is also deemed to be highly beneficial in establishing the credibility of the research, by bringing multiple perspectives to bear on an interpretation. While a Realist ontology would suggest that these perspectives would inevitably differ to a greater or lesser degree, what is important is that the interpretations developed by the team should appear to each member of the team to be plausible and firmly grounded. In short they should not contradict each other.

Denzin [1978] advocated triangulation of method, investigator, theory and data as an ideal “to provide the soundest strategy for theory construction”. He does however acknowledge that restrictions of time and money may preclude the use of multiple observers, and accepts that “this lack is significantly mitigated when multiples of the

other triangulated elements are employed - nor would a lack of theoretical perspectives seem to be a problem”.

### *Negative Case Analysis*

There is a natural tendency for researchers to find evidence which supports their hypothesis and consciously ignore that that might contradict it. To overcome these tendencies the researcher should firstly attempt to uncover negative instances during the fieldwork, by actively seeking data which would be likely to disconfirm the findings which the researcher believed to be true. Secondly, the researcher should seek to enlist the help of a ‘friendly skeptic’ to examine carefully the conclusions in question, avoiding the researcher’s own data displays, and see if they can disconfirm the conclusion [Miles and Huberman 1994].

Lincoln and Guba [1985] described negative case analysis (perhaps a little too ambitiously) as continuously refining a hypothesis until it accounts for all known cases without exception. They later concede that, in practice, to achieve such absolute support for any hypothesis would be unlikely.

### *Debriefings by Peers*

Lincoln and Guba [1985] recommend using peer reviewers as a further technique for enhancing the credibility of an interpretation. This entails regular debriefings by peers who are not directly involved in the research project, who will critique emerging interpretations. Wallendorf and Belk found this technique to be enjoyable, but often less productive than some of the other techniques already described in this paper.



### *Member Checks*

Lastly, Wallendorf and Belk advocate the use of feedback from informants or ‘member checks’ as a method for establishing the credibility of an interpretation. These may occur informally throughout data collection, as the researcher seeks to clarify or confirm verbally his or her interpretation of a point. Formally, member checks are conducted where an interpretation and report, (or a portion of it, perhaps rewritten for the lay reader) is given to informants for their comment. Their comments serve as a check on the viability of the interpretation. The informants may not always agree with the interpretation itself, but the researcher should not necessarily amend the interpretation because of such disagreements. The significance of these agreements depends on whether they centre around descriptive or interpretive material. However, these disagreements should be noted, and if possible explained in the final report. Wallendorf and Belk note that the more abstract the interpretation, the less likely informants are to disagree with the researcher’s interpretation of the whole corpus of data. The usefulness and appropriateness of member checks therefore decreases as the level of interpretive abstraction increases. However, in such circumstances, if an informant does disagree then this should be considered as grounds for rejecting the interpretation.

On a more practical level, other problems with member checks include the difficulty of getting informants to wade through lengthy academic reports. Some writers warn also of a potential bias resulting from checks usually being limited to the more articulate and naturally insightful informants [Werner and Schoepfle 1987]. However,

Wallendorf and Belk dismiss this concern, believing that the overall benefits of member checks outweigh the potential problems, particularly when there are questions surrounding the adequacy of the researcher's understanding based on limited time and exposure to a site [Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988]. They therefore support the use of member checks to counterbalance to concerns about whether the engagement of the researcher was sufficiently prolonged.

Miles and Huberman support the use of member checks or 'informant feedback' from data collection right through to before and after 'final' analysis. During data collection and early analysis they suggest that the researcher check back early finding with new as well as existing informants. It is likely that the latter will already be involved in the verification process. After the final analysis the use of member checks is seen as useful because: "For one thing, you know more. You also know better what you know - are less tentative, have more supporting evidence, can illustrate it. In addition, you can get feedback at a higher level of inference: on main factors, on causal relationships, on interpretive conclusions" [p.275-276].

In summary, formal and informal member checks conducted throughout the course of the research, "serve to enhance the credibility of the constructed interpretation" [Wallendorf and Belk, p75].

### **Transferability**

There is a school of post-positivist thought which deals with the issues of whether findings from one enquiry can be applied to other settings and contexts. These

researchers suggest that the question should be answered by (usually the person who wishes to know) simply trying the same methods out in another setting and comparing the results [Schmitt 1974: Lincoln and Guba 1985]. Wallendorf and Belk concede that this might well suffice “when the study is an in-depth ethnography of a single site, organisation, or group”, but not for other “broader or more explanatory research”(p.76). In such instances they recommend that the researcher seeks “limiting exceptions” by progressively expanding the types of sites and contexts in which the phenomena of interest can be studied. This process will (eventually) define the limits of transferability, and in identifying the limits provides an opportunity to discover why the theory does not work in these instances. These insights should then be tested by further research at other purposefully sampled sites, leading gradually to a broadening and refinement of the theory. However, the more robust the theory, the more difficult it will become to identify boundaries and exceptions.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is similar to the notion of ‘reliability’ in positivist research, i.e. that if the same case study was repeated in an identical way, would the same findings emerge? However, given that social and organisational settings change, it is unlikely that the same research could be repeated in exactly the same way. Situations and people change over time, indeed the original research is likely to have had some impact, however small, on the setting and informants. The concern of dependability is therefore to establish the extent to which a finding is enduring, or whether it rests on an interpretation which is derived from peculiar and possibly fleeting circumstances. Wallendorf and Belk therefore recommend observation over time as a way of

establishing the dependability of interpretations and findings. More specifically they recommend that the researcher should return to the informants or sites months and possibly even years after the original contacts were made, when circumstances should have changed. By learning what has changed and whether and how these changes have affected the phenomenon previously detected, the researcher can see whether the theory still appears to be robust. If not it must be revised to accommodate the changes or discarded. This approach to assessing dependability does not preclude the writing up of findings from a single wave of data collection, but it does help to ameliorate the cross sectional bias which is inherent in social science research.

### **Confirmability**

In assessing the confirmability of a piece of research, the important issue is whether the research findings can be shown to have been determined by the subjects (or respondents) rather than the biases, motivations, interests and perspectives of the researcher [Lincoln and Guba 1985]. Since the post-positivist researcher recognises that no absolute objectivity exists, demonstrated neutrality becomes an appropriate goal.

One favoured method for neutralising researcher bias is through triangulation of researchers. Deploying a team of researchers to study a particular phenomenon is the ideal, with two or more researchers present at each interview. Though it is important that field notes are written up individually before the notes are compared, to avoid the danger of 'groupthink'. This performs a useful form of internal audit during data

collection and interpretation which, according to Wallendorf and Belk, is more useful in some ways than forms of external audit.

A team of researchers is, however, a luxury that cannot always be afforded. This is where the method favoured by Lincoln and Guba - the external confirmability audit - comes into play.

A 'confirmability audit' involves supplying an independent auditor (not a member of the research team), with all raw data and the interpretations derived from them - not simply asking a colleague to comment on them. Wallendorf and Belk stress that an external auditor should be asked to comment, not so much on the "truth" and inferences drawn from the data, but "on the plausibility of their interpretations and the adequacy of the data"[p.79]. i.e. have the researchers deluded themselves by making inferences which cannot be supported or grounded in the data.

To facilitate an external audit the data must be collected, preserved and displayed in a way that a qualitative research auditor should be able to follow a trail of evidence from primary data, through analysis and into the final report. However, the practicalities of making an auditor wade through possibly thousands of pieces of evidence, interpretations, and then a weighty final report, means that a true external audit is rarely a feasible proposition. Therefore, the researcher must attempt to provide a sufficiently detailed account of the methods and procedures used, with conclusions linked explicitly to exhibits of condensed and displayed data, so that confirmability can be gauged without resorting to a full audit.

## **Integrity**

There are several reasons why informants may not be entirely truthful when dealing with the researcher. Data can be affected by informants fear or dislike of the researcher, or perhaps a wish to impress the researcher by presenting themselves in a more attractive light than otherwise might be usual. All of these factors may affect the quality of the data [Nachman 1984]. Beyond a general strategy of skepticism, Wallendorf and Belk suggest other techniques for improving the integrity of the research. These include: prolonged engagement, triangulation of source, method and researcher, care with interviewing technique and the safeguarding of informant identity.

Prolonged engagement allows the researcher to learn more about a situation, including the internal politics of an organisation and possible motivations for informant deception. Equally important is that it encourages informants to 'open up' as they become more comfortable and confident about the motivation, competency, and integrity of the researcher.

Triangulation of source and method allows data to be cross checked for authenticity, while triangulation of researcher helps to neutralise the interpretive distortions which can arise when a researcher acts alone. Triangulation of method, meanwhile enables the researcher to cross check interview data giving *perspectives on actions* (i.e. what the informant says is happening) with *perspectives in action* (i.e. what the researcher

observes to be happening). The latter may refer to data gathered during participant or direct observation [Snow and Anderson 1987].

In relation to issues of integrity, the triangulation of researchers helps to assess and improve data integrity, by taking advantage of differences in, among other things, the ages and genders of the researchers. For example, Wallendorf and Belk have found that members of a research team have different access to various types of informants, and that informants will impart different types of information to different researchers. In other words the relations between an informant and the researcher - and the data which emerges from an interview - will depend at least partially on the gender combination of the researcher and informant. The writers stress that to get the maximum cooperation from informants, the researcher may have to promise not to reveal the identity of the informant. It is essential in such instances that their anonymity is protected.

Finally, Wallendorf and Belk remind the reader that “the best interview is one which is supplemented by and embedded in observations of behaviour in a naturalistic setting” [p81]. They go on to caution that “over-reliance on interview material without supplementary contextualizing observations and participation in the culture of the informant opens the door to the impatient researcher being duped”.

## **STRATEGY FOR CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS**

The research will adopt the overall analytical strategy of ‘explanation-building’, following the series of steps prescribed by Yin. [pp.114-115]:

- Making an initial theoretical statement or proposition, or in this instance taking a descriptive framework.
- Comparing the findings of an initial case against the framework.
- Revising the framework.
- Comparing other details of the case against the revision.
- Again revising the framework.
- Comparing the revision to the facts of a second, third or more cases.

The iterative process of explanation-building gradually modifies and refines the ideas behind the framework, by comparing it with case study data and importantly, by comparing the data with other plausible or rival explanations.

Yin adds that the entire process should be repeated as many times as is needed, but for the reasons already stated, this study does not intend to pursue refinement of the framework beyond a third case study.

## **SUMMARY AND REVIEW**

This paper has attempted to determine and present a suitable methodology for the development of a theoretically based and empirically grounded framework of relationship marketing at the organisational level. The result is a qualitative methodology, to be undertaken in the Realist tradition, using a case study method. A number of factors, namely; the objectives and context of the research; the 'world view', values and preferences of the



researcher; and a consideration for the practical constraints within which the research was undertaken, all had a part in determining the methodology proposed.

At the heart of the methodology is the research question, drafted to explore the scope, properties and remit of relationship marketing. The proposed methodology must of course be judged by its relevance to this research question and the overall objectives of the research. To this end a retroductive research strategy was felt to be most appropriate given the 'theoretical' objectives and goal of the research and the underlying epistemological stance of the researcher. With the retroductive strategy comes the contentious issue of the use of paramorphic frameworks as a starting point for the development of empirically grounded homeomorphic frameworks. This research acknowledges the argument that paramorphic frameworks are 'inherently flawed', but strives to move forward from an initial framework - in this instance the Six Markets Model - towards an empirically grounded framework which provides a better representation of relationship marketing.

The decision to apply qualitative methods using a multiple embedded case study design maintains a logical consistency with the factors above and reflects a concern for the immaturity of the field, the purpose, scope and context of the research. While the logic behind the adoption of the case study method and its appropriateness for the research in hand is well supported in the literature, case study research has in the past been widely criticized for its alleged lack of rigour. Consequently, this paper explores and discusses in some depth the proposed strategies for within-case and cross case analysis, concluding with a range of methods for improving the quality and rigour of qualitative research, many of which will be employed during the course of this research.

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