

Relationship Marketing and its Role in Achieving Customer Retention: A Study in Iraqi Telecommunications Companies

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Abstract: The present study addresses relationship marketing and its role in achieving customer retention. Relationship marketing is considered a contemporary topic, as organizations cannot achieve the success they aspire to without harmonious and effective relationships with customers during the marketing process. Its dimensions include service quality, strengthening customer relationships, and complaint management. It is evident that the success of relationship marketing depends on the extent to which organizations can retain customers, making it a highly positive tool if effectively adopted. Its related dimensions encompass guidance, organizational structure, selection, information systems, and the workforce.

To achieve the objective of this study, a questionnaire was the primary tool for data collection. In general, most related studies have employed descriptive and analytical approaches. In this study, information was collected based on the descriptive method, which is appropriate when previous studies and research on the phenomenon or problem under investigation exist.

The findings of the current study revealed that relationship marketing plays a positive role in achieving customer retention in Iraqi telecommunications companies. Its dimensions significantly influence customer retention, with a statistically significant positive effect of relationship marketing on achieving customer retention. Moreover, a positive relationship was found between relationship marketing and customer retention. Based on these conclusions, several recommendations were proposed, the most important of which is adopting a strategic orientation by shifting toward relationship marketing instead of traditional marketing, while focusing on customers' needs and desires, understanding them, and implementing procedures that encourage leveraging them in the best possible way to ensure sustainability.

Key words: Relationship Marketing, Customer Retention, Telecommunications Companies.



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Introduction

Relationship marketing is considered one of the modern marketing concepts that emerged alongside the transformations in the business environment, which have compelled organizations to seek sources of competitive advantage within an increasingly competitive context. The philosophy of this approach is based on targeting, attracting, and retaining profitable customers in order to build lasting relationships with them, thereby ensuring their loyalty throughout their engagement with the organization and securing a stable base of long-term profits (Mawahib, 2020, p. 59).

The customer is regarded as the lifeblood of the organization. Since organizations operate in highly competitive markets within a rapidly changing marketing environment, they are compelled to adopt approaches that allow them to attract new customers, retain existing ones, and establish long-term relationships with them. The most effective method to achieve this is relationship marketing, which enables organizations to strengthen customer ties and manage them appropriately, while also motivating them to exert greater efforts to provide high-quality services. This, in turn, guarantees customer satisfaction, which leads to happiness and long-term loyalty to the organization. Consequently, this strengthens the organization's competitive position in the market and ensures its sustainability over the long term (Hassan & Abdulrahman, 2020).

The concept of relationship marketing begins with the organization's understanding and adoption of practices aimed at strengthening relationships with customers, improving product quality, pursuing continuous improvement, studying customer feedback, and managing customer relationships. Many studies and research have highlighted relationship marketing as a contemporary concept in recent years, given its comprehensive approach to the marketing process. Organizations are thus required to implement its key dimensions—service quality, strengthening customer relationships, and complaint management—in order to achieve integration within the marketing chain. This integration is considered the backbone of the organization, ensuring its success and sustainability, with positive effects on employee performance and satisfaction, customer satisfaction, commitment, and stability in dealing with the organization.

Based on the above, the current study aims to clarify the nature of relationship marketing and its role in achieving customer retention. In light of changing environmental conditions and accelerating challenges that organizations must confront, recent research considers customers as valuable assets of organizations. This recognition necessitates greater attention to customers, as they are regarded as a key source of competitive advantage, survival, and continuity, and as a tool of distinction in both the present and the future.

Research Problem

The research problem is the starting point of any scientific study, as it highlights the gap the researcher seeks to address. In this context, the main problem lies in the fact that many telecommunications companies in Kirkuk suffer from weaknesses in customer retention among their employees. This weakness may be linked to the absence of effective relationship marketing strategies or to their improper and ineffective implementation. Relationship marketing assists leaders in understanding the organizational environment, analyzing trends and future challenges, thereby enabling them to make informed decisions and guide the organization toward success. It also helps them think strategically and develop innovative solutions to potential challenges.

Furthermore, leaders must be attentive to the conditions and needs of employees within the organization and utilize their effectiveness in ways that align with these circumstances. Positive interaction and continuous support from leaders contribute to motivating employees, increasing their productivity and job satisfaction, which in turn significantly enhances customer retention in Iraqi telecommunications companies.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following research question:

What is the role of relationship marketing in customer retention within the investigated Iraqi telecommunications companies?

****Significance of the Study****

The significance of this study arises from the following points:

1. Enriching managerial thought and scientific knowledge by addressing modern topics such as relationship marketing and its role in achieving customer retention.
2. Providing a theoretical framework for previous studies related to the variables of the current study and strengthening their contribution to shaping future directions.
3. Contributing to the development of conceptual frameworks for the research variables, thereby assisting future researchers who wish to benefit from them.

****Objectives of the Study****

The study aims to achieve the following:

1. Addressing a contemporary topic that reflects modern trends in marketing variables.
2. Clarifying the nature of relationship marketing and its role in achieving customer retention.
3. Highlighting the researcher's personal interest in the topic and presenting suggestions and recommendations regarding future studies on these variables, as this study represents a modern trend in the field of marketing.

****Research Hypotheses****

The research is based on the following main hypothesis:

- * There is a statistically significant effect at the (0.05) level of relationship marketing on customer retention in the sampled telecommunications companies.

From this main hypothesis, the following sub-hypotheses are derived:

1. There is a statistically significant effect at the (0.05) level of service quality on customer retention in the sampled telecommunications companies.
2. There is a statistically significant effect at the (0.05) level of strengthening customer relationships on customer retention in the sampled telecommunications companies.
3. There is a statistically significant effect at the (0.05) level of complaint management on customer retention in the sampled telecommunications companies.

****Research Model****

1. ****Independent Variable:**** Relationship Marketing and its dimensions (Service Quality, Strengthening Customer Relationships, Complaint Management).
2. ****Dependent Variable:**** Customer Retention.

****Research Boundaries****

- * ****Spatial Boundaries:**** The study is limited to telecommunications companies operating in Kirkuk Governorate, which constitute the scope of the current research.

- * ****Human Boundaries:**** The human boundaries consist of customers from the targeted companies included in the study, selected based on specific criteria, with a total of (150) individuals within the administrative limits of Kirkuk.

* **Temporal Boundaries:** The temporal scope of the current study extends from (01/01/2025) to (01/07/2025).

****Data Collection Methods****

This study relies on the descriptive-analytical method, which is based on collecting information about facts, examining and verifying their accuracy, followed by analysis and interpretation to organize and extract results related to the research topic. To fulfill the requirements of the study, the theoretical framework was built using available scientific sources, including books, journals, theses, dissertations, and studies, in addition to relevant materials obtained from online sources related to the study variables.

****Research Sample****

The research population consists of employees working in private telecommunications companies (Asiacell, Korek, Zain) in Kirkuk Governorate, including administrators and academics directly involved in relationship marketing and customer retention. A purposive sample of (150) individuals was selected, which represents a sufficient proportion to achieve the research objectives.

Section Two: Theoretical Framework

First: The Concept, Importance, and Dimensions of Relationship Marketing

Concept:

The emergence and spread of the concept of relationship marketing was neither a coincidence nor a sudden event; rather, it was the result of a series of developments in the field of marketing. The adoption and discussion of this new concept began with researchers in the field of services, with Berry being the first to introduce the idea of relationship marketing. Several factors contributed to shaping this approach, including: the changing structure of resources and the emergence of knowledge as a fundamental resource and product of organizational activities; the evolution of the philosophy of relationships and the growing importance of customer relations; and the shift toward market orientation with a strong focus on the customer as the foundation of success (Mizyan, 2018, p. 20).

Marketing activities are characterized by continuous change and innovation, moving away from traditional methods toward modern marketing approaches, whether in the marketing of tangible goods or intangible services, including tourism services, which are aligned with new developments in marketing practices.

Customer service is a set of practices aimed at enhancing customer satisfaction—that is, ensuring that the service or product meets customer expectations. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) can be defined as an approach to managing a company's interactions with current and potential customers. It is a method that analyzes customer history data within the company to improve business relationships, with a particular focus on customer retention (Hazmia, 2021, p. 248).

It can also be defined as *“understanding the customer's unrecognized needs and developing them through building a database of past customer needs, and enhancing the ability to anticipate future ones.”*

The Importance of Relationship Marketing

In this section, emphasis is placed on the importance of relationship marketing for both the organization and the customer (Mawahib, 2020, p. 69):

1. Importance of Relationship Marketing for Organizations:

- ✓ Helps organizations achieve what is known as “lifetime customer value.”
 - ✓ Increases the volume of purchases and spending by customers on the organization’s products.
 - ✓ Establishes a position in the customer’s mind, positioning the organization as an expert in its field.
 - ✓ Reduces marketing costs, particularly in the area of promotion.
 - ✓ Assists in targeting the right and profitable customer at the right time through profitable offers.
 - ✓ Builds trust, commitment, and information sharing between the organization and its customers.
2. **Importance of Relationship Marketing for Customers:**
- ✓ Maximizes the value gained by the customer.
 - ✓ Improves customer service in terms of quality and speed of delivery.
 - ✓ Enables customer participation in certain marketing decisions.
 - ✓ Reduces the search and comparison costs that customers might otherwise bear during the purchasing process.
 - ✓ Provides customers with benefits and rewards that may be offered by the organization.

Dimensions of Relationship Marketing

According to Mawahib (2020, p. 84), relationship marketing comprises three main dimensions:

1. **Service Quality:** Refers to the extent to which the provided service meets customer expectations. It is a measure of the organization’s ability to understand and fulfill customer needs. Service quality is assessed through various aspects such as reliability, responsiveness, and trustworthiness, with the ultimate aim of enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty.
2. **Strengthening Customer Relationships:** Involves practices that successfully establish trust between the customer and the organization, alongside consistent commitment and effective communication. This includes investing in continuous and transparent communication, listening to customer feedback, providing excellent customer service, and offering value-added services. Leveraging technologies such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems allows for better understanding of customers and personalization of their experience. It also entails acknowledging mistakes and working to improve them, developing products to meet customer needs, and offering after-sales support.
3. **Complaint Management:** Refers to the organization’s ability to handle negative situations through a set of procedures and processes aimed at recovering dissatisfied customers. It is a systematic process within organizations to resolve customer problems and address complaints, with the objective of improving service quality, enhancing customer loyalty, and fostering trust. This process includes receiving complaints, investigating them, providing appropriate solutions, and taking corrective actions to prevent recurrence. It can be carried out through digital channels such as online platforms and mobile applications, or via dedicated phone lines.

Second: The Concept of Customer Retention

Concept:

Customer retention has become an important concept for many companies today, given its significant impact on profitability. It is now considered a global principle for organizational

success and longevity. Customer supremacy is fundamental, and recognizing that customer loyalty is essential to a company's success and sustainability makes retention a vital factor for realizing the aspirations of every marketing-oriented company.

All operating organizations rely on their good reputation in delivering products to achieve customer satisfaction, which is considered the most important source of true profit and a guarantee for the continuity of operations (Al-Dulaimi, 2017, p. 252). Customer retention can be defined as the process of customers' continued commitment to purchasing from and engaging with the same organization, which yields numerous benefits such as larger market share, higher production efficiency, lower costs, reduced price sensitivity, and improved service quality.

Customer retention is also defined as a behavior-based approach that represents the core activity adopted by customer relationship management (CRM) philosophy in organizations, relying on database marketing and direct marketing (Hussein & Kamel, 2019, p. 372).

Importance of Customer Retention:

The literature reveals that up to 25% of a company's profits can be achieved through only a slight increase in customer retention. Retaining customers brings goodwill, positive reputation, and long-term relationships for companies. Customer retention is considered sacred, and failure to achieve it is akin to operating with a leaking bucket. Therefore, companies should focus on retention as a core principle rather than overemphasizing customer acquisition (Victor et al., 2021, p. 5).

Third: The Relationship Between Relationship Marketing and Customer Retention

The relationship between the research variables is central to this study, which aimed to clarify the role of marketing in delivering the values desired by customers—values that typically satisfy their needs and wants. Modern marketing approaches, known as *relationship marketing*, emphasize that organizations must provide more than the customer's expectations and perceptions in terms of value and benefits, while continuously improving products or services. This approach ultimately leads to customer retention.

This study holds significant importance because, at present, customers are considered strategic assets for organizations (Farquhar, 2003, p. 89). The study also focused on several objectives, including highlighting the importance of customer retention as a central aspect in the operations of banks. To investigate and measure this, a questionnaire was distributed to a group of authorized personnel—50 employees representing 5 banks selected from a total of 33 banks in the research population.

Finally, the study reached a set of conclusions and recommendations. The findings confirmed the acceptance of the hypotheses outlined in the methodology, leading to conclusions that emphasize the importance of giving customers appropriate attention through strong relationships and successful banking services. This includes providing competent personnel to serve clients and understanding customer needs through various methods and approaches (Al-Hadrawi & Al-Shammari, 2017, p. 266).

Practical Aspect of the Research

Research Method:

The study relied on the descriptive-analytical method, as it is the most appropriate for research of this type, which aims to describe, analyze, and interpret the studied phenomenon. The focus was on examining the reality of relationship marketing in telecommunications companies operating in Kirkuk Governorate and analyzing its impact on achieving customer retention.

Research Instrument:

The questionnaire was adopted as the primary tool for collecting data from the study sample. It was prepared based on the literature and previous relevant studies, comprising **16 items** distributed across the research variables as follows:

- **12 items** to measure the dimensions of relationship marketing (Service Quality, Strengthening Customer Relationships, Complaint Management).
- **4 items** to measure customer retention.

A five-point Likert scale was used to determine the respondents' degree of agreement, ranging from **1 = Strongly Disagree** to **5 = Strongly Agree**.

Validity of the Instrument:

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by a group of experts and specialists in marketing and business administration. Some items were modified to ensure clarity and accuracy. Construct validity was also verified through factor analysis to ensure that the items measured the theoretical dimensions of the study variables.

Reliability of the Instrument:

The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results showed that all values were greater than **0.70**, which is statistically acceptable and indicates a high level of reliability. The following table presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each dimension:

Table (1): Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients for the Questionnaire Dimensions

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Relationship Marketing	12	0.916
Service Quality	4	0.821
Strengthening Customer Relationships	4	0.850
Complaint Management	4	0.823
Customer Retention	4	0.830
Entire Questionnaire	16	0.935

Statistical Methods

To analyze the study data, a set of statistical methods was employed using the **SPSS** software, including:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Means, standard deviations, and percentages were used to describe and analyze the responses of the sample individuals.
2. **Validity and Reliability Tests:** Exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha coefficient were used to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument.
3. **Hypothesis Testing:** Simple linear regression analysis was applied to measure the effect of the dimensions of relationship marketing on customer retention.
4. **Significance Testing:** The level of statistical significance was verified (**Sig ≤ 0.05**).

Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Data

Gender			Age		
	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
Male	102	68	Less	19	12.7

Female	48	32	than 30 years		
Total	150	100	From 30 to 40 years	21	14
Educational Qualification			From 41 to 50 years	48	32
	Frequency	Percentage	Over 50 years	62	41.3
Bachelor's or below	46	30.7	Total	150	100
Above Bachelor's	104	69.3			
Total	150	100			

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on outputs from **SPSS V.27**.

Gender:

The results show that the majority of the sample are males (68%) compared to females (32%). This reflects the nature of work in telecommunications companies in Kirkuk Governorate, where direct interaction with customers and the management of marketing relationships is predominantly male-dominated.

Age:

It is observed that the age group over 50 years represents the highest proportion at 41.3%, followed by the 41–50 years group at 32%. The younger groups (30–40 years and under 30 years) together constitute 26.7%. This indicates that most respondents have long experience and a higher level of maturity, reflecting greater awareness of the importance of relationship marketing and its impact on enhancing customer retention.

Educational Qualification:

The results indicate that 69.3% of the sample hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30.7% with a bachelor's degree or below. This demonstrates the high educational level of the study sample, which enhances the credibility of their responses and their ability to understand the questionnaire items related to the concepts of relationship marketing and customer retention.

Descriptive Analysis of the Study Variables

Variable	Item and Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level	Rank
Relationship Marketing	v1	4.17	0.670	Good	1
	v2	3.95	0.858	Good	2
	v3	3.90	0.784	Good	3
	v4	3.89	0.820	Good	4
	Service Quality	3.98	0.78	Good	Second
	v5	3.74	1.019	Good	2
	v6	3.71	0.885	Good	3
	v7	3.86	0.890	Good	1
	v8	3.70	0.981	Good	4
	Strengthening Customer	3.75	0.94	Good	Third

	Relationships				
	v9	4.04	0.858	Good	2
	v10	3.95	0.862	Good	4
	v11	3.99	0.897	Good	3
	v12	4.05	0.789	Good	1
	Complaint Management	4.01	0.85	Good	First
Customer Retention	v13	4.03	0.772	Good	1
	v14	3.96	0.850	Good	4
	v15	3.99	0.807	Good	2
	v16	3.99	0.871	Good	3
		4.00	0.83	Good	

The results indicate that the overall evaluation of the level of relationship marketing was “**Good**” with a mean of **3.98** and a standard deviation of **0.78**. The **Complaint Management** dimension ranked first with a mean of **4.01**, reflecting the telecommunications companies’ commitment to addressing customer complaints and providing appropriate solutions, which contributes to enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. The **Service Quality** dimension followed with a mean of **3.98**, indicating the companies’ attention to the quality of the services they provide, though it still requires further development to keep pace with increasing competition. The **Strengthening Customer Relationships** dimension ranked last with a mean of **3.75**, suggesting a relative shortfall in building long-term relationships with customers through effective communication and continuous interaction.

Regarding the **Customer Retention** variable, it was also rated as “**Good**” with a mean of **4.00** and a standard deviation of **0.83**. Item **v13**, related to customer retention, achieved the highest mean (**4.03**), reflecting the success of companies in satisfying and retaining some customers. Conversely, item **v14** had the lowest mean (**3.96**), indicating areas for improvement to enhance companies’ ability to foster stronger customer loyalty.

Overall, the results suggest that Iraqi telecommunications companies in Kirkuk make acceptable efforts in relationship marketing; however, there is an urgent need to focus more on building strong and sustainable customer relationships to increase long-term retention.

Third: Testing the Research Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis:

There is a statistically significant effect at the **0.05 level** of relationship marketing on customer retention in the sampled telecommunications companies.

Table (2): Analysis of the Effect of Relationship Marketing Dimensions on Customer Retention

Dimensions of the Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	Correlation Coefficient (R)	Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	Calculated F-Value	Calculated t-Value	Sig	Significance
Service Quality	Customer Retention	0.634	0.598	0.358	82.427	9.079	0.001	Significant
Strengthening Customer Relationships		0.619	0.723	0.523	162.365	12.742	0.001	Significant
Complaint Management		0.739	0.757	0.573	198.973	14.106	0.001	Significant
Relationship Marketing		0.849	0.786	0.618	239.829	15.486	0.001	Significant

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on outputs from **SPSS V.27**.

The results indicate that **relationship marketing** has a significant effect on **customer retention**, with a beta coefficient of $\beta = 0.849$ and a coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.618$, meaning that 61.8% of the variance in customer retention can be explained by relationship marketing. The significance value (**Sig = 0.001**) is less than 0.05, indicating that the model is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis, confirming a significant effect of relationship marketing on customer retention, is accepted.

Service Quality:

The results show a statistically significant effect of service quality on customer retention, with $\beta = 0.634$ and $R^2 = 0.358$, indicating that 35.8% of the variance in customer retention is explained by service quality. The significance value (**Sig = 0.001**) is less than 0.05, confirming the model's strength. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Strengthening Customer Relationships:

The findings reveal a significant effect of strengthening customer relationships on customer retention, with $\beta = 0.619$ and $R^2 = 0.523$, explaining 52.3% of the variance in customer retention. The significance value (**Sig = 0.001**) is below 0.05, confirming statistical significance. The null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Complaint Management:

The results indicate that complaint management has a strong and significant effect on customer retention, with $\beta = 0.739$ and $R^2 = 0.573$, explaining 57.3% of the variance. The significance value (**Sig = 0.001**) is below 0.05, demonstrating the model's strength and statistical significance. Accordingly, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis confirming the significant effect of complaint management on customer retention is accepted.

Future Recommendations:

Future researchers can develop studies by incorporating different topics, such as:

1. The role of **creative marketing** in customer retention.
2. **Relationship marketing** based on **cyber marketing** to strengthen customer relationships.
3. **Aggressive marketing strategies** relying on relationship marketing.

Although the study variables have been applied across various sectors, most applications have focused on service sectors. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies focus on **production sectors** due to their importance in increasing individual and community income levels and supporting economic growth. Additionally, the researcher recommends using a **developed and organization-approved database**, as accumulated information can help organizations identify needs that customers themselves may not be fully aware of.

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