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Trust or satisfaction in a relational approach. The case of financial institutions and high-tech firms

Abstract

Recent research has highlighted the importance of trust in building and maintaining business relationships. This research addresses these findings and utilizes Macneil's norm theory to develop a model illustrating the mediating role of trust in buyer-seller relationships and compare it to the role of satisfaction. The study focuses on the commercial banking sector, where a climate of trust is essential for developing and maintaining business relationships. Data were collected in a dyadic mode from bank account managers and their clients in high-tech firms. The findings suggest that while both satisfaction and trust have a role to play in the financial institution's strategy, managers underestimate the importance of trust and often have incorrect perceptions of how they are rated by clients. Managerial implications of the findings are considered along with the study's limitations.

Keywords: Macneil's norms, trust, satisfaction, financial services, relationship marketing.

Introduction

In industrialized nations, the importance of the financial services sector is widely acknowledged and reflected in the significant contribution it makes to the nations' GDP. Yet sustaining growth and competitive advantages in a dynamic, complex and global marketplace is growing ever more challenging. As a result, issues surrounding the management and development of customer relationships have become increasingly important (Skarmeas et al., 2008; Gronroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1996). Numerous studies, both conceptual (Gundlach and Murphy, 1993; Nooteboom et al., 1998) and empirical (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Tax et al., 1998; Ratnasingam and Phan, 2003) have found trust to be at the heart of the relational approach and consider it key to the development of commitment in buyer-seller relationships. Trust is seen as the cornerstone of strategic partnerships, and it appears to be a mediating or intermediary element in buyer-seller relationships (Nevins and Money, 2008; Vaquez et al., Dwyer et al., 1987; Spekman, 1988).

A number of studies have emphasized an understanding of the antecedents of trust in business relationships (Geyskens et al., 1998; Seppanen et al., 2007). However, in developing this understanding few studies have incorporated all the relational contract norms as defined by Macneil (1980). Norms are patterns of accepted and expected behavior shared by members of an exchange system. As such, Macneil's work provides an interesting means of analyzing and understanding business exchange, since norms determine the behavior that occurs in relationships (Macneil, 1980). Those authors who have adopted Macneil's (1980) norms in a marketing context have done so one by one or only used a subset of them (Durif, Paulin, Bergeron, 2008). In contrast, this study incorporates all of Macneil's (1981; 1983) relational norms that have been operationalized in marketing, including contractual solidarity, mutuality, flexibility (or harmonization of relational conflicts), communication (or information exchange, a norm that has been added in many studies but not cited explicitly by Macneil) and role integrity.

This study focuses on the commercial banking sector, where an environment of trust is crucial in managing customer relationships (Yosafzai et al., 2007). The aim of this study is to investigate the antecedents and mediating role of trust in the buyer-seller relationship and to compare that role to the role of customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is an essential component of a successful business relationship (Jap and Ganesan, 2000) and is unlikely to develop in the absence of trust (Geyskens et al., 1998). More specifically, the objective of the research is to develop, in a dyadic mode, a model based on Macneil's norms that illustrates the mediating role of trust.

This article begins with a review of the literature on trust and relational norms, which was used to develop the conceptual model and research hypotheses. The research methodology adopted for the study is then explained. Next, the study's findings are outlined and the conclusions and implications for managers are described. Finally, the limitations of the study are provided together with opportunities for future research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Trust and satisfaction. Trust is an important area of enquiry in a number of disciplines, which has led to difficulties in defining and conceptualising the construct (Colquitt et al., 2007). However, in the field of marketing, in spite of the divergence of opinions and difficulties in measuring trust, a consensus has emerged in the literature defining trust as 'an expectation on the part of individuals that the written or verbal words, promises, or statements of another individual are reliable' (Chow and Holden, 1997). Or, to put it more simply, it is the customer's expectation that their service provider will keep their promises (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Trust is often viewed as a multidimensional construct (Vaquez et al., 2007), and a large number of articles mention two main dimensions of trust, specifically credibility and benevolence. In this study, we define 'credibility' as the degree to which the partner's word is believed and can be relied upon and 'benevolence' as the extent to which the partner is genuinely interested in the other party's welfare (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Thus, benevolence is seen as a core factor in the evaluation and development of trust in the exchange partner (Singh et al., 2005).

A number of antecedents of trust have been mentioned in marketing research (Geyskens et al., 1998) and vary according to whether interorganizational, intraorganizational, interpersonal or institutional trust (Doney and Cannon, 1997) is considered. In addition, within organizations, employees' behavior reflects the values and attitudes of the organization providing the service (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Zaheer et al., 1998). Accordingly, when buyers have little experience with a company, they base their trust in the company on how they feel about its contact personnel. In the banking sector, it was found that relationships are developed mainly between the clients and account managers, not the institutions in general. Accordingly, account managers are a driving force in the development of relationships because they are the link between the funding party and the borrowing company (Perrien et al., 2002). Apart from their contact personnel, banks have few ways to distinguish themselves as an entity. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, analyzing interpersonal trust is important while analyzing institutional trust is less so.

Trust is one of the most widely studied and recognized constructs in the field of relationship marketing (Geyskens et al., 1998) and is a well-known mechanism for governing exchange relationships (Jap and Anderson, 2003). The advantage of developing high-quality relationships has been highlighted by Skarmeas et al. (2008). These include greater customer retention and the ability to produce new ideas and customer contacts. Trust is viewed as a key element in establishing lasting relationships with customers and maintaining a company's market share (Urban et al., 2000; Graf, Durif and Belzile, 2008).

Trust, commitment and satisfaction are central factors in determining relationship quality (Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Crosby et al., 1990). In the absence of trust, partners are unlikely to commit the time, energy and resources needed to develop a relationship. Kiessling and Harvey (2004) have highlighted how a lack of trust can engender dissatisfaction and lead to the breakdown of relationships. In contrast, satisfaction occurs when the service exceeds or meets the expectations of the partners in the relationship (Anderson and Narus, 1984). It has been suggested (Singh et al., 2005; Geyskens et al., 1998; Dwyer, 1984) that satisfaction is related to both the social and economic aspects of the exchange between partners and should be measured on that basis. According to Fondas et al. (2009), the two most common approaches to conceptualizing satisfaction are to focus either on a specific transaction or on cumulative or overall satisfaction. The latter reflects the customer's overall impression of the performance of a firm's services over a period of time. Likewise, trust can be built over time after repeated, satisfactory interactions (Nevin, 1995; Leonidou et al., 2007).

1.2. Relational norms and exchange relationships. For the purpose of this study, we have adopted the definition of 'norms' used by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978): 'norms are widely shared sets of behavioral expectations' which govern what conduct ought to be in certain situations. Norms are central to the exchange process between buyer and seller and are important social and organizational means of controlling the process (Gundlach and Achrol, 1993). In their efforts to explain and develop models of relational exchange, a number of authors (Ivens and Blois, 2004; Gundlach, 1993) have utilized Macneil's exchange or contract theory (1980; 1983), but there is ongoing debate concerning the operationalization of Macneil's norms (Blois and Ivens, 2005; Durif, 2008). However, of importance to this study is the role of norms in exchange relationships.

Ten common contractual norms were established by Macneil (1981; 1983). These norms must be respected by the parties if they wish to engage in exchanges that are beneficial to both parties. However, since a transactional approach was not always best-suited, the relational approach was emphasized and the importance of the 10 norms was found to vary depending on the context in which they were applied. This led to the selection of five relational norms that had an impact on trust between the parties: the role of integrity, contractual solidarity, harmonization of relational conflicts, harmonization with the social matrix, and supra-contractual norms (Macneil, 1983). However, relatively few relational contract norms are used in any given empirical study (Durif et al., 2008). Initially, Macneil's norms were adapted and used in supply chain literature related to business-to-business product exchanges

(Heide and John, 1992). More recently, their use has been extended to research on the services sector (Ferguson et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2000).

2. Conceptual model and hypothesis development

Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework, based on theoretical contributions from the marketing literature and Macneil's relational exchange or contract theory outlined above. As the antecedents of satisfaction are well documented (Szmanski and Henard, 2001), we focused on the antecedents of trust, which were linked to the relationship with the account manager, the characteristics of the account manager, the characteristics of the financial institution, and the characteristics of the high-tech company. Although our focus is on the impact of the account manager's characteristics on interpersonal trust, the characteristics of the financial institution have an impact on interpersonal trust through a transfer process (based on institutional trust).

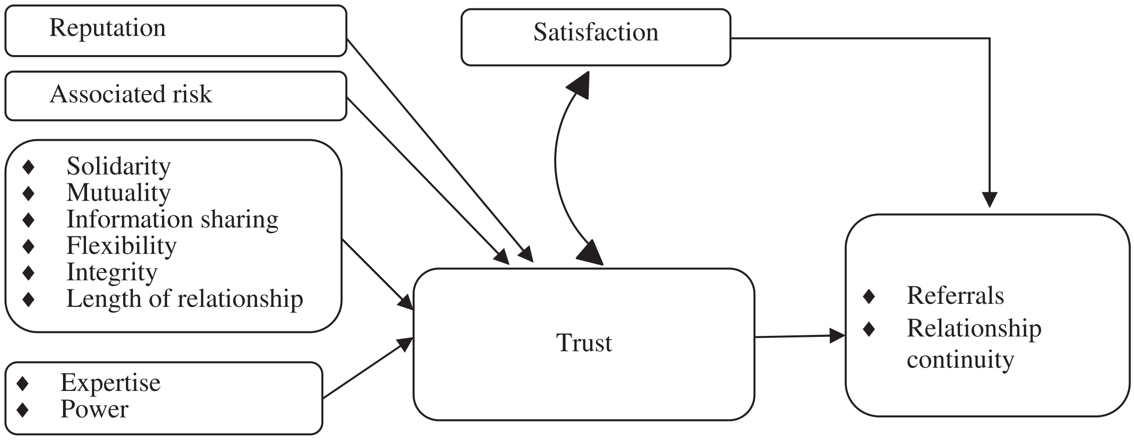

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

2.1. Antecedents of trust. The starting point of the model and antecedents of trust is the firm's reputation. 'Reputation' is defined as the extent to which businesses and individuals feel a supplier is honest and has its customers' interests at heart. A favorable reputation is transferable between companies and enhances the vendor's credibility (Ganesan, 1994). The importance of the service provider's reputation and the expertise and power of the personnel in contact with customers was highlighted earlier by Crosby et al. (1990). Customers infer what degree of trust to accord a supplier from their experience and interactions with that supplier, as well as from the words and actions of other persons and organizations (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Based on the foregoing discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The financial institution's reputation has a positive impact on interpersonal trust.

Risk-taking is considered by Colquitt et al. (2007) to be the most proximal behavioral outcome or expression of trust. The characteristics of the client firm affect attitudes to risk and interorganizational trust. We were interested in learning whether this would affect interpersonal trust. In addition, the state of the client firm's market can generate a certain amount of environmental uncertainty and associated risk, which has a negative impact on trust (Kumar et al., 1995). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Associated risk has a negative impact on the degree of interpersonal trust in the relationship with the account manager.

In Figure 1, the next group of antecedents of trust consists of solidarity, mutuality, information-sharing, flexibility, role integrity, and length of the relationship. In a meta-analysis conducted by Durif, Paulin and Bergeron (2008), it was found that contractual solidarity, flexibility and role integrity are the three most frequently employed relational norms in the literature. This supports the earlier work and meta-analysis of Guay, Perrien and Graf (2006). Contractual solidarity, which encompasses relationship maintenance, has been used in various studies as a trust antecedent (Simpson and Mayo, 1997; Aulakh et al., 1996). It was distinguished from mutuality, which is a distinct concept in the literature and implies that both parties find benefits to the relationship (Paulin et al., 1997). As contractual solidarity is the most frequently used norm, it is important that its operationalization process be fine-tuned. Based on the preceding discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Solidarity has a positive impact on the interpersonal trust.

H4: Mutuality has a positive impact on the interpersonal trust.

Sharing of information (or communication), even though not explicitly cited by Macneil (1983), is often used in the marketing literature. It helps to enhance both parties' performance and serves to build an enduring working relationship between the parties. Where there is openness and a shared style of communication, there is a greater opportunity to achieve a shared understanding. Research by Morgan and Hunt (1994), Aulakh et al. (1996), Anderson and Narus (1990), Doney and Cannon (1997) and Anderson et al. (1989) has found that information-sharing is considered vital to interpersonal trust. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H5: The frequent sharing of information between the account manager and his or her client has a positive impact on interpersonal trust.

The role of flexibility in trust has been analyzed in various contexts by Simpson and Mayo (1997), Doney and Cannon (1997), and more recently by Durif, Paulin and Bergeron (2008). It was found that the norm of flexibility is positively related to trust as it generates a stock of goodwill (Aulakh et al., 1996).

This leads to the following hypothesis:

H6: The account manager's flexibility has a positive impact on interpersonal trust.

In various articles (Simpson and Mayo, 1997; Mayer et al., 1997), the notion of role integrity has been found to play a part in the development of trust between business partners. The perceived integrity of a business partner contributes to the development of a positive working environment and relationship. This is a relationship characterized by honesty, where partners are trusted to fulfil their promises. In this study we define role integrity as the unwillingness of the account manager to sacrifice ethical standards to achieve organizational goals:

H7: The account manager's integrity has a positive impact on interpersonal trust.

Business relationships often involve significant sums of money and tend to be long-lasting in nature, hence the importance of trust. Once trust is established, business partners will be willing to commit more time and resources to develope the relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In this study, we have assumed that as the relationship develops over time, it helps to create a climate of trust between the parties. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H8: The length of the relationship has a positive impact on the interpersonal trust.

The next part of the model examines the impact of the account manager's characteristics on interpersonal trust. Expertise plays an important role in creating trust in contact personnel (Lindskold, 1978; Doney and Cannon, 1997) by reassuring the buyer that the vendor has the know-how and can keep his or her promises. This is based on the perception that contact personnel possess some special knowledge or expertise that will strengthen the relationship. This fundamental aspect was studied by Moorman et al. (1993), who identified expertise as a trust antecedent, and by Crosby et al. (1990), who showed that a salesperson's perceived expertise is a good predictor of the trust he or she will garner. Therefore, we can hyposize that:

H9: The account manager's expertise has a positive impact on interpersonal trust in the relationship.

Power, defined as the belief that the vendor can deliver the expected result, is also essential (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Moorman et al., 1993). Purchasers may doubt a vendor's word if the vendor does not appear to have control over the organization or its resources. The use of non-coercive power can help increase financial rewards and social benefits (Leonidou et al., 2008). Based on this, we can hypothesize that:

H10: The account manager's power has a positive impact on the interpersonal trust.

2.2. Mediating variables. The marketing literature provides some information about the correlation between trust and satisfaction in the service sector (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Simpson and Mayo, 1997), and more specifically in the banking context (Graf and Perrien, 2005; Graf, Durif and Belzile, 2008). As stated in the literature review, trust and satisfaction are prerequisites for developing long-term quality relationships and collectively are considered by many authors as mediating variables (Graf and Perrien, 2005). In a study by Bergeron et al. (2003), trust, along with satisfaction, has a significant impact on loyalty in the banking sector. Our task was to verify this information in our specific context.

H11: Trust and satisfaction correlate positively in the relationship.

2.3. Performance measurements hypotheses. In a business context, there needs to be a 'tie' between the customer and the firm (Graf et al., 2008) for a relationship to exist. If either party is unable to keep its promises, the relationship ties will inevitably be broken. Thus, trust is considered to be a key construct of relationship marketing and is found to have an impact on loyalty in the banking sector (Graf 2004; Graf and Perrien, 2005; Ndubisi, 2007). For the relationship to lead to customer loyalty, which is the crux of the relationship marketing concept, there must be a climate of trust (Benamour, 2000; Meyer-

Waarden, 2004; Graf et al., 2008), and a positive link has been found between trust and loyalty (Deutsch, 1962; Moorman et al., 1992; Auh, 2005).

In financial services, Liang and Wang (2004) found that satisfaction and trust affect behavioral loyalty, and, therefore, client retention, in a marketing system. In the banking sector, Marple and Zimmerman (1999) and Fisher (2001) have demonstrated the importance of client retention. According to Cohen et al. (2007), there are a number of compelling arguments for bank managers to carefully consider the factors that might increase their customer retention rate. The antecedents of client retention noted in the literature are numerous, the most important being trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Doney and Cannon, 1997) and satisfaction (Graf, Perrien, 2006). Finally, the relationship between trust and the propensity to change suppliers was described by Bluedorn (1982) and discussed again by Morgan and Hunt (1994). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H12: Trust has a positive impact on the relationship continuity.

In order to verify the impact of trust on referrals in high-tech firm/bank relationships, we propose the following hypothesis:

H13: Trust has a positive impact on the referrals.

Several studies have found support for the positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Sandvik and Duhan, 1996; Samuelsen et al., 1997; Methlie and Nysveen, 1999). In the banking sector, customer satisfaction is seen as an important indicator of customer loyalty (Olsen, 2007). Also in the banking sector, customers who are satisfied with their service provider develop a positive attitude toward the bank, and their retention rate is likely to be higher (Methlie and Nysveen, 1999; Graf et al., 2008). This is supported by Ennew and Binks (1999), who found that satisfaction had a major impact on customer retention within the services sector. In addition, Ennew et al. (2000) state that within the banking sector, positive comments from customers can lead to increased purchases by the customer and others, thereby influencing referrals. Two empirical studies conducted in both business-to-business and business-to-consumer contexts by Wangenheim and Bayon (2007) found that customer satisfaction affects word-of-mouth referral-making, which in turn affects new customer acquisition. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H14: Satisfaction has a positive impact on the relationship continuity.

H15: Satisfaction has a positive impact on the referrals.

3. Research methodology

Two major North American banks and their client partners in the high-technology sector participated in the study. The client partners were all well-established firms. A questionnaire was developed using constructs drawn from the marketing literature and rated from 1 to 7 using Likert scales. We conducted a pretest with ten high-tech firms to check our measurement techniques, on the basis of which the questionnaire was modified. This final version consisted of: (1) detailed information on the banks and other financial institutions with which the client firms do business; (2) the type of banking relationship and the high-tech firms' needs, including an evaluation of the relationship characteristics and its outcomes, the account managers' characteristics, and the assessment of external performance measures; (3) the high-tech firms' characteristics (size, market and competition); and (4) client demographics.

To minimize possible bias in responses to the questionnaire, we inversed some statements and some scales throughout the various sections of the questionnaire and mixed the points randomly to ensure that all those concerning a single construct wouldn't be grouped together, as recommended by Malhotra (2007) and Leonidou et al. (2008). The first questionnaire was sent to the client companies. After contacting 135 client companies, 79 agreed to participate in our study (for a response rate of 58.5%). Most of the respondents (88%) were CEOs of the high-tech firms or accountants responsible for banking transactions and in charge of relationships with the account managers. A total of 88.2% of them had a university diploma, and they had been working in the high-tech branch for an average of 10 years. The second set of questionnaires was sent to the companies' account managers at their banks during weekly department meetings. We received 63 completed questionnaires for a 79.7% response rate, thus providing 63 dyads to analyze.

Measurement quality was first checked for accuracy using Cronbach alpha coefficients (the minimum accepted norm was 0.7). We also analyzed the validity of our constructs using confirmatory factorial analyses. Given the nature of our model, we conducted our analyses by section (bank, client, relationship, mediating variables and external performance). This approach is recognized in the marketing literature (Doney and Cannon, 1987; Atuahene-Gima and Li, 2002).

Following the purification of measures, each of the items strongly loaded its assumed factor (minimum loading = 0.64).

All constructs exhibited a high composite reliability (ρ > 0.78). The convergent and discriminant validities of the constructs were verified using the method proposed by Fornell and Larker (1981). In general, the psychometric qualities of the measures used proved to be satisfactory. These initial results enabled us to empirically test the integral conceptual framework.

In the first phase, the hypotheses were tested using a structural equation model developed through partial least squares (PLS) estimation. This method is preferred to a classical analysis of covariance structures, which requires multinormal data and sufficient sample sizes. Some of the variables showed a non-multinormal distribution. Moreover, the samples formed were too small for a LISREL-type model to be applied without biasing the estimation of parameters. Several authors have shown that the PLS method correctly manages constraints, including high multicollinearity between the independent variables (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982; Falk and Miller, 1992). In the second phase, we turned our attention to the main variable averages in order to estimate relationship assessment differences between what clients reported and how account managers perceived what their clients would report. The SPSS 13 statistical package was used for all analysis.

4. Findings

In the following section we present the results for the client and account manager dyads.

4.1. Impact of antecedents. For the clients, we observed that solidarity, flexibility and account manager expertise had a significant impact on trust accorded by the client in the relationship (see Table 1), thus confirming H3, H6 and H9. Their impact is quite similar to the respective beta coefficients of 0.32, 0.37 and 0.30. The overall R^2 = 0.63. The account manager's ability to adapt and personalize service is, therefore, crucial to creating trust in relationships. We found that the impact of the other antecedents was not significant, and thus H1, H2, H4, H5, H7, H9 and H10 could not be confirmed.

For account managers, our model looked at the solidarity variable as it is the sole significant antecedent, with a beta of 0.64, thus confirming H3. The impact of the independent variable on the variance of the dependent variable was high, with R^2 at 0.58 (see Table 1). Significantly, none of the other hypotheses could be confirmed for the account managers, revealing a large discrepancy between the two sides of the dyad.

Table 1. Clients and AM: impact of antecedents on the trust

	Clients				AM			
	Coefficients		Beta/SE(beta)	Sig.	Coefficients		Beta/SE(beta)	Sig.
	Beta	SE			Beta	SE		
Flexibility	0.3750	0.0865	4.3356	Yes	0.1930	0.1297	1.4884	No
Expertise	0.3040	0.0896	3.3913	Yes	-0.0300	0.0881	-0.3405	No
Solidarity	0.3270	0.1092	2.9951	Yes	0.6420	0.1679	3.8229	Yes
	R^2 = 0.63				R^2 = 0.58			

4.2. The role of trust in relationships. We first analyzed the correlation coefficients between trust and satisfaction. Then, we investigated the mediating nature of trust. On a theoretical level, this mediating nature can be established if the following three conditions are met (Baron and Kenny, 1986): (1) solidarity, flexibility and expertise significantly affect trust; (2) all these antecedents of trust exert significant direct influence on the referrals and relationship continuity; (3) when the relationships between trust and each of the relationships variables are controlled, the intensity of the paths in the first condition declines. The explanatory capacity of the indirect model obtained is significantly greater than that of the direct relation model. Each condition was examined and subjected to a PLS model. A bootstrap replication procedure was applied using PLS-Graph software (version 2.91.03.04), which allowed us to check the significance of the relationships (Chin, 1998; 1999).

For the clients, we observed that trust and satisfaction were both significantly correlated (corr. = 0.69; p = 0.000), thus confirming H11.

The first mediating condition has already been verified as we established solidarity, flexibility and expertise to be antecedents of trust.

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the results for mediating conditions 2 and 3. All conditions were met. When trust is included in the models, the direct effect of its antecedents on referrals and relationship continuity declines. Simultaneously, the predictive capacity of the model obtained significantly increases according to the results of an increment test using the procedure described by Jaccard, Turrisi and Wan (1990). Thus, trust acts as a mediator in the relationships as far as the clients are concerned.

These results show that both satisfaction and trust have a role to play in the financial institution's strategy (see Table 2). The impact of satisfaction on referrals is higher than that of trust. Altogether, our variables explain 74% of the variance in our model. Also for relationship continuity, satisfaction is the most important variable, and our model explains 62% of the variance. Thus, hypotheses H12, H13, H14 and H15 are confirmed.

Table 2. Clients: impact of trust and satisfaction on the referrals and on relationship continuity

	Referrals				Relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Beta/SE(b)	Sig.	Coefficients		Beta/SE(b)	Sig.
	Beta	SE			Beta	SE		
Trust	0.3600	0.0869	4.1414	Yes	0.2760	0.1149	2.4021	Yes
Satisfaction	0.5430	0.0766	7.0881	Yes	0.5500	0.1226	4.4872	Yes
	R^2 = 0.74				R^2 = 0.62			

Table 3. AM: impact of trust and satisfaction on the referrals and on the relationship continuity

	Referrals				Relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Beta/SE(b)	Sig.	Coefficients		Beta/SE(b)	Sig.
	Beta	SE			Beta	SE		
Trust	0.1250	0.0955	1.3094	No	0.1430	0.1267	1.1285	No
Satisfaction	0.7610	0.0968	7.8633	Yes	0.6800	0.1235	5.5043	Yes
	R^2 = 0.68				R^2 = 0.57			

Table 4. Clients: direct effects on the referrals and on the relationship continuity

	Dependent variable: referrals				Dependent variable: relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2
	Beta	T-test			Beta	T-test		
Flexibility	0.781		Yes	0.609	0.734		Yes	0.539
Expertise	0.543		Yes	0.295	0.509		Yes	0.259
Solidarity	0.799		Yes	0.638	0.730		Yes	0.533

Table 5. Clients: indirect effects via trust on the referrals and on the relationship continuity

	Dependent variable: referrals				Dependent variable: relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2
	Beta	T-test			Beta	T-test		
Flexibility	0.400		Yes		0.433		Yes	
Trust	0.475		Yes	0.687	0.375		Yes	0.587
Expertise	0.024		No		0.045		No	
Trust	0.776		Yes	0.627	0.692		Yes	0.521
Solidarity	0.453		Yes		0.426		Yes	
Trust	0.439		Yes	0.711	0.387		Yes	0.591

For the account managers, Tables 6 and 7 show that trust has no indirect influence on referrals and relationship continuity.

Table 6. Clients: direct effects on the referrals and on the relationship continuity

	Dependent variable: referrals				Dependent variable: relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2
	Beta	T-test			Beta	T-test		
Solidarity	0.696		Yes	0.485	0.655		Yes	0.429

Table 7. Clients: indirect effects via trust on referrals and on relationship continuity

	Dependent variable: referrals				Dependent variable: relationship continuity			
	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2	Coefficients		Sig.	R^2
	Beta	T-test			Beta	T-test		
Solidarity	0.640		Yes		0.705		Yes	
Trust	0.038		No	0.45	-0.064		No	0.43

Only the satisfaction variable had an impact on referrals and relationship continuity. Moreover, the adjusted R^2 levels are high (see Table 3), presenting H14 and H15. H12 and H13 could not be confirmed for account managers. These results show that managers are unaware of the importance of trust in their relationships with clients and that they need to become more aware of its importance if they wish their portfolios to grow.

4.3. Differences in the evaluation of the relationship between clients and account managers. We were also interested in assessing differences in the evaluation of the relationship between the two parties in the dyad. Accordingly, we looked to see if the difference between μ_1 and μ_2 averages of our two populations (clients and account managers) was significantly different from zero. In analyzing the averages for the different variables in our model and performing t-tests, we note that account managers systematically overestimate how clients have rated their relationship.

Table 8. Standard averages per variable, by respondent

Variable	Respondent	Average	T-test	Sig.
Reputation	AM	2.153	-1.308	0.193
	CL	2.447		
Risk	AM	4.046	0.978	0.330
	CL	3.901		
Solidarity*	AM	5.356	2.090	0.039
	CL	4.930		
Flexibility*	AM	5.538	2.504	0.014
	CL	5.026		
Integrity	AM	5.307	0.278	0.782
	CL	5.253		
Length	AM	22.193	1.527	0.129
	CL	18.704		
Expertise*	AM	5.715	4.030	0.000
	CL	5.000		
Power	AM	4.292	0.850	0.397
	CL	4.041		
Satisfaction*	AM	4.935	2.279	0.024
	CL	4.528		
Credibility*	AM	6.669	16.923	0.000
	CL	4.995		
Benevolence*	AM	5.750	7.401	0.000
	CL	4.320		
Trust*	AM	6.210	12.640	0.000
	CL	4.660		
Referrals	AM	5.223	0.004	0.997
	CL	5.222		
Continuity	AM	5.415	-0.343	0.732
	CL	5.481		

Note: * Significant difference ($\alpha = 5\%$).

We observe significant differences for the following variables: solidarity, flexibility, expertise, satisfaction and trust. However, the perception gap varies, with expertise and trust showing the biggest differences (0.71 and 1.55 respectively, on a Likert scale of 1 to 7). The importance of these variables was ascertained in our previous analyses. However, assessment of external performance measurements was not affected by the nature of respondents.

4.4. Dyadic analysis by portfolio. In support of our analysis by group (clients and account managers) and to illustrate the dyadic character of our research, we analyzed responses by portfolio.

The deltas were calculated as follows:

$$Delta = AVAM - AVCL, \tag{1}$$

where $AVAM$ is the assessment of variable by account manager, $AVCL$ is the assessment of variable by client.

No systematic bias was evident for any single account manager. All account managers tended to overestimate variables for most of their clients, but no account managers overestimated (or underestimated) the variables to such an extent that it affected the overall results for the group. There were also a few cases of underestimation by account managers, showing that response bias had been minimized.

In analyzing variables whose average differences were significant, we note the following:

- Eight account managers out of 11 overestimated the solidarity variable. Of these, four were greater than 0.5.
- For flexibility, there were 10 positive deltas, including six above 0.5.
- Ten account managers overestimated their expertise as perceived by clients, and eight deviations were above 0.5.

- Client satisfaction was overestimated by 10 account managers, but only four overestimated it by more than 0.5.
- All account managers overestimated the trust variable, with all deltas exceeding 0.5. When we refer to the client model and note that this variable has an impact on the external efficiency of the relationship, we see how important it is for account managers to rectify this misconception.

Reputation is a variable whose average difference was insignificant. We found seven underestimations and four overestimations, but there were seven major deviations (greater than 0.5). This shows the difficulty of assessing such a variable, or a possible response bias for the field of study.

For the other variables, we noted no major deviations. For the risk, integrity and power contingency factors, we noted respectively two, three and three deviations greater than 0.5.

Discussion and conclusions

A major contribution of this study is the use of Macneil's norms in the examination of the manager-client dyad and the understanding of trust in the relationship. We demonstrated that for clients, the account manager's expertise and degree of flexibility have an impact on the degree of trust granted, as does perceived solidarity.

Second, we analyzed the normative power of trust by comparing it to satisfaction, a variable commonly used in relational marketing studies. We demonstrated that trust has a significant impact on relationships and nurturing it is consequently vital in developing and maintaining relationships. This fact must be taken into consideration if a bank's strategy is to expand its portfolio. We found that a high level of satisfaction is associated with a high level of client retention.

Significantly, we found that account managers at financial institutions often have incorrect perceptions of how they are rated by clients. In their view, only contractual solidarity and flexibility have an impact on trust. They also believe that trust has no impact on the company's external performance as measured by referrals and relationship continuity. It is interesting to note that assessment of relational norms and performance variables (trust and satisfaction) varies from one party to the other within the dyads, with account managers systematically overestimating their performance.

Implications for managers

The results have a number of implications for organizations that wish to improve and strengthen their buyer-seller relationships, such as the one that exists between the account manager and client. This is particularly important in today's complex selling situations, where the nature of selling and the role of the account manager have often evolved to that of partnering. The focus here is on developing long-term outcomes for the partnership and relationship continuity. This in turn requires trust and commitment in order to facilitate communication and the free exchange of ideas and information. It is essential, therefore, for organizations to recognize the critical role played by the account manager in developing and maintaining the buyer-seller relationship. This has implications for the selection and professional development of account managers and for establishing their credibility, both internally and externally.

Our results suggest that it is important for firms to establish the credibility of the account manager externally with the client, as credibility is regarded as the essence of trust. The account manager's credibility can be affected by the customers' assessment of their expertise, dependability and benevolence. The account managers' values, words and actions must be aligned if trust is to be developed. In addition, it appears to be important for account managers to possess broader business skills than those of the traditional salesperson since they need to be able to demonstrate their expertise and knowledge of both their firm's products and services and those of their customers. Seeking out synergistic opportunities for sales growth for both parties in the relationship is an indicator of their ability to demonstrate high levels of managerial know-how and expertise. Account managers need to be able to demonstrate technical competence to their clients and exemplify a service orientation.

The findings also have implications for the selection, training and evaluation of account managers. Collaborative relationship building, a long-term vision and the ability to focus on benefits in support of the dyad are all essential skills for the account manager. Emphasis needs to be placed on the development of the 'soft' skills needed for managing relationships as well as the 'hard' analytical skills traditionally required of the bank manager. The findings also show the necessity of demonstrating the account manager's flexibility and solidarity. This could involve tailoring their service offering to the needs and schedules of the client rather than to those of the firm. Showing a willingness to adapt and make changes to plans and service offerings as circumstances dictate is one example.

Our results also suggest that managers have to be educated about the importance of trust and made aware of the entire range of factors which can affect trust levels. Seeing the relationship through the client's eyes and identifying the factors that may affect trust in the relationship is one possible solution. This may be achieved through the clients' systematic assessment and monitoring of the account manager's performance.

In addition to trust, stressing the role of satisfaction in the relationship is also crucial for improving and maintaining the relationship. The importance of relationship continuity and customer retention is widely documented, and our findings emphasize the role that satisfaction can play in retaining customers. It is therefore important to determine clear organizational goals and relationship marketing practices that highlight the importance of trust and satisfaction and motivate managers towards achieving said goals.

Finally, it is fitting to point out the positivistic, cross-sectional nature of this work, which exerted an influence on the results and may be complemented by further work using a different research methodology. Moreover, it should be noted that the relational norms (Macneil, 1983) are the result of legal research and were only very recently operationalized in the field of marketing (Paulin et al., 1997). As such, there are opportunities for further research in the area of service marketing.

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