A MARKETING OPTIMISATION MODEL
FOR CRM ACTIVITIES

– The Value of Communication for CRM –

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Abstract

Purpose. Evaluate the importance of CRM for the hotel business and show the influence of an ongoing guest communication on the buying behavior (booking activities).

Design/methodology/approach. Descriptive analysis of the marketing campaign data of four 4-star hotels in Germany over a period of 4.5 years.

Research Limitations. I had no influence on the communication strategy respectively on other factors which influence loyalty like pricing, product or services.

Findings &Practical Implications. The analysis proves the assumption that communication plays a significant role within CRM to keep customers loyal. Further on the quality of the media channels e-mail and post mail could be proven. The result is that the replacement of post mailings through e-mail communication is at least questionable.

Originality/Value. The study is most likely the first analysis for the hotel business which shows the effect of guest marketing in a CRM context. The reason is that hotel companies so far had not the necessary campaign data available or the data was not linked to a central guest profile. This circumstance made it impossible to analyze the effect of communication on customer relationships.

Paper type: Research Paper.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate for the first time the long term effect of communication on Customer Relationship Management in the hotel business. The paper also describes the qualitative differences between e-mail and post mail. For the analytical part a quantitative analysis of the direct marketing actions of four hotels and the booking behavior of 5.222 consumers were tracked over a period of 4.5 years.

The management of Customer Relationships is part of almost each marketing department since information technology has revealed that a handful of "heavy users" accounts for a disproportionate share of most businesses' sales. [1]

The goal of CRM is to develop, keep and retain profitable customers and to increase finally the profitability of the organization. Many studies describe the effects: Reichheld and Sasser calculated with a profit boost by up to 100% by retaining just 5% more customers; [2] loyal customers intend to be less price-sensitive and would accept a 5% price increase in order not to endanger a relationship [3]; the retention of loyal customer's costs only 15 to 20% compared to the acquisition of new customers. [4] Summarized loyalty provides companies more security, more growth and a better profitability. [5] On top marketers have focused on building loyalty because the proliferation of alternative media outlets in print, radio, television, and the internet has fractured the media market and made mass market penetration strategies costly and difficult to execute. [6]

For the hotel business especially the soaring distribution costs forces a professional CRM strategy. Online Travel Agents like Expedia charges between 10 and 30% commission. [7] Since loyal customers intend to book directly an active CRM strategy is required for a booking channel and profitability optimization in the hotel business.

On top the relative low marketing budgets of hotel companies prevent expensive advertisement campaigns in prime mass media channels, which mean a certain hotel name even from multi-national brands do most likely not appear in the daily routine of the consumer. To see a certain hotel brand a consumer has to pass by which is obviously a main differentiator compared to other industries like for instance the automotive industry. Prestigious cars like Porsche, BMW or Mercedes are getting seen many times when walking through the streets in Western Europe. Just through the presence demand is generated and the brand is getting part of the awareness set of the consumer through an ongoing conscious and unconscious perception. This is obviously not the fact for the hotel business.

There is no doubt Customer Relationships are one of the most important success factors for the hospitality industry [8] and communication is an integral part of it. Compared to other industries hotels have one important advantage, they know who their customers are. Through the booking process hotels have access to the contact information of their clients; name, address and email are commonly stored in the hotel data bases. The usage of this data for direct marketing and CRM is a key asset [9] and almost each hotel is actively using this potential.

But how important is communication within CRM exactly especially for an emotional product like a hotel, characterized by a low buying frequency? Which marketing channel is how effective and where is the contact corridor, respectively what is the best frequency to generate measurable results? Summarized what is right marketing mix for a successful CRM strategy for hotels?

The Value CRM model which is proposed in this paper tries to more specify the role of communication and should provide a fundamental help for marketers in order to implement an efficient customer relationship management.

2. CRM

The question of Marketing is always, what is the best way to drive revenue? In general marketers can increase sales of their products in two ways. A) The company focuses on non-users in order to generate new revenue. This strategy is known as a penetration strategy, or B) a company induce existing customers to buy and use the own products and services more often

(called a frequency strategy). [10] Companies focusing on the frequency strategy are clearly engaged in Customer Relationship Management.
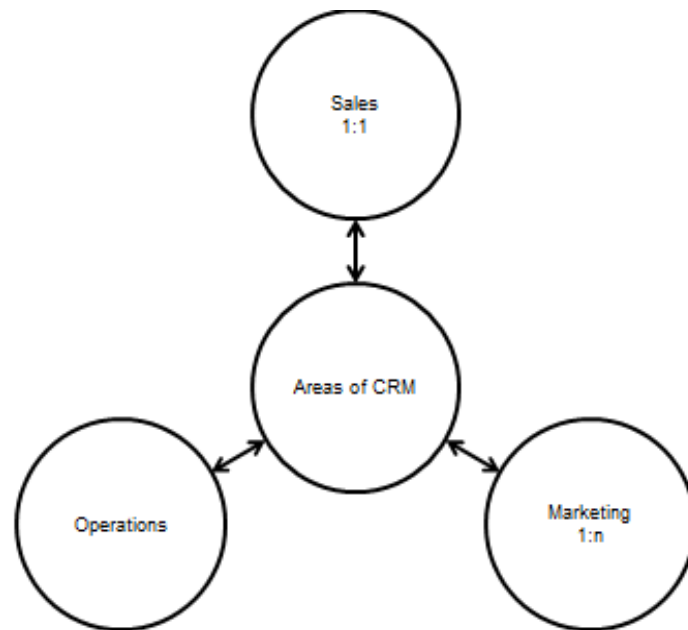

Figure 1. Areas of CRM (own image)

As seen in Figure 1 CRM can be divided into three areas from the organizational but also from the technological stand point. Sales departments and the used software solutions are mainly contact management systems for the 1:1 communication over email or phone. In Operations service employees need quick access to the most relevant guest data to process requests respectively to provide a better service at the point of sale. The third area is marketing, the quality of marketing relies on the knowledge stored of each individual customer from the different touch-points and its usage for an individualized communication. In marketing thousands or more recipients get contacted at the same time, mass communication as individualized as possible is the goal of a modern marketing. The buzzword in this context is behavioral marketing.

2.1. Ways to Generate Loyal Customers

Companies have four ways to retain customers: through the product, followed by the price, the promotion and the distribution channels. [11] Theses classic instruments, also called the 4 P's are enhanced by additional 3 P's for the service industry such as the hotel business. The P's are people, the physical evidence, for instance the hotel design and processes. [12]

Lynn stated 2008 that successful marketing comes not from loyalty programs, it comes from creating value in the form of a superior product and service offering, communicating that value to all users of the product category, and capturing that value through pricing. [13]

Many definitions for CRM exists; Grönroosfor instance define Relationship Marketing as it is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance and when necessary also to terminate

relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties are met, and that this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises. [14]

Summarized Customer Relationship Management (CRM) implies all efforts of a company to positively influence the relationship between a company and its customers in order to stabilize respectively enhance the relationship. [15] The focus of CRM activities should be keeping profitable customers and attracting those with a high calculated potential. This implicit that CRM is not for every customer; CRM is focused on valuable customers.

Harker (1999) who analyzed 26 different definitions of CRM comes finally to the result that an organization which is engaged in proactively creating, developing and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with selected customers or partners overtime is engaged in relationship marketing. [16]

For the purpose of this paper I define CRM as the maintenance respectively the creation of relationships with hotel guests with the goal to increase customer revenues and buying frequencies (increase the share of wallet) in order to enhance the lifetime value. CRM is therefore not a single project it is more a management strategy centered around the customer with the clear focus on company profitability.

2.2. Loyalty Models

Several models describe loyalty mainly based on satisfaction; the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), the European Customer Satisfaction Index (ECSI), the Swedish Customer Satisfaction Barometer (SCSB) or the Norwegian Customer Satisfaction Barometer (NCSB). [17] Several endogenous and exogenous variables are included in the different systems such as performance, expectations, satisfaction or complaints. The measured outcome for all systems is loyalty but differently defined. For the SCSB loyalty is defined as repurchase behavior; within the ACSI model it is repurchase behavior plus price tolerance; in NCSB model repurchase behavior plus intention to recommend and in the ECSI model repurchase behavior plus intention to recommend plus intention to buy addition. [18]
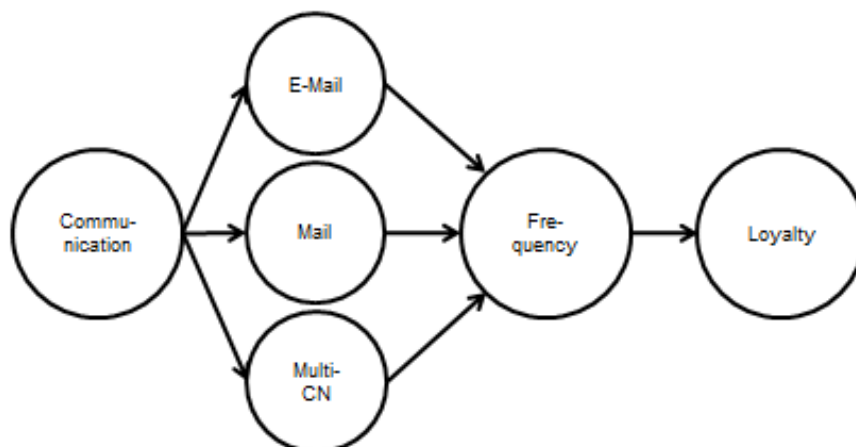

Figure 2. Value CRM Model by Toedt

Ball, Coelho and Machás (2004) enhanced the ECSI model by the variables communication and trust. They identified satisfaction as the most important variable to the explanation of loyalty, but the second highest effect on customer loyalty has the variable communication. They argue that in a regulated market with little differentiation in basic services, such as many hotels, communication may be an important strategic tool to differentiate a company. They state that helpful, clear and personalized information not only enhance satisfaction and trust but also loyalty to a significant extend. Customer expectations, perceived value, complaints and trust present lower but significant effects on loyalty as well. [19] None of the systems so far are applied to the hotel business.

The approach of the author to loyalty research is to add the sub-variables channel and frequency to the factor communication to answer the most important question in marketing: "What channel should be used and what is the right frequency?" Figure 2 describes the different variables and the model which is named by the author as the "Value CRM Model". Within "Value CRM" loyalty is measured by the repurchase behavior, which means hotel bookings made after the receipt of a communication.

2.3. Effects of CRM

The effects of customer loyalty are described in many articles. Hellstrand states for instance that the long-term success of a company is based on guest loyalty and retention which consequentially results in future revenue [20]. Gruner describes the effect of CRM in the way that loyalty gives a company more security, a better growth rate and a better profitability [21]. Beside such global statements the effects of CRM can be divided into cost savings and revenue effects. The retention costs for instance are 15 to 20% lower than the expenses needed to acquire new customers. [22] Loyal customers are on top less price-sensitive [23] and the increase of the retention rate of 1% raise the company value of 3 to 5%. [24]

Bruhn adds a third effect, the effect of mouth-to-mouth communication and the value of recommendations. [25]

3. Communication Channel Value

The efficiency of advertisement is decreasing. Thousands of competitive marketing messages almost "bombard" the consumer in the industrialized world. [26] Therefore it is an ever harder task that a transmitted marketing message is getting perceived by the consumer. That is one reason why direct communication is more and more in the focus within the marketing departments.

In 2010 95% of the German companies were involved in direct communication respectively dialog marketing. From the 76.2 billion spent for advertising almost two-third went into dialog marketing. [27]

It is clear that the communication between a hotel and its guests is an important area of CRM and in order to generate the intended outcome the right communication channels have to be used. [28]But although marketing efficiency is an important topic for years one question is not answered yet, what are the right channels, what is the most efficient marketing mix for a successful CRM strategy for hotels?

In general the value of communication can be seen from two perspectives: from the receiver and from the transmitter. A receiver of a marketing message evaluates the value of a communication based on his individual needs, goals, interests, situation etc. High content relevance and the media acceptance add value, whereas low content relevance or media acceptance decreases value. [29] It can be stated that different media channels have individual characteristics and limitations. [30]

The value of a communication from the transmitter, in our case a marketer, can finally only be economically. Even if for instance brand building is the predefined goal of a communication the ultimate result is generating revenue. Therefore I follow Harvey, Mogg and Eniswho evaluated the value of communication respectively its effectiveness in terms of conversion of consumer attention to purchase action. [31]

It can be summarized that the communication of a product or service can either add value, decrease value or it does not influence value. The key issue for marketers is finally the reaction to the communication.

3.1. E-Mail

The media channels which are of interest for this paper are direct mail and e-mail. These are the two dominating media types in direct marketing today, especially in the hotel business. About 60% of the companies in Europe are engaged in e-mail marketing. It is the most common online-marketing channel at the moment. [32] A survey in 2010 revealed that the 30 biggest hotels (revenue wise) in Germany use e-mail as part of their customer relationship management strategy. E-mail was the most used channel of the hotels. [33] The reasons for the triumphal procession of e-mail marketing are the low costs and the easiness of the channel to stay in touch with the own customers. [34] Another plus factor is the easy possibility to answer. E-mail newsletter generates often response rates of 10% and more. [35]

Beside the technological aspects the acceptance of e-mail within the population has been increased over the last years. In 2010 65% of the European population used the internet to send and receive e-mails. In 2002 the share was about 35% (see Eurostat 2010).

3.2. Post Mail

Nevertheless direct mail is still the number one of the direct marketing channels. But through an increasing cost pressure in 2010 the expenditures dropped by 8% to about 9.4 billion Euros in Germany. [36] This trend can also be seen in the hotel business. Especially the US-Hotel companies avoid almost completely post mail. As part of a replacement strategy more and more organizations use solely electronic channels. It is at least questionable if the replacement strategy of offline mailings is correct based on the assumed differences in quality of both media types.

4. Analyzed Data

4.1. Data Collection

The data was collected through the CRM system dailypoint™. The software is developed and distributed by TS&C, a Munich based company (*www.TS-and-C.com*). TS&C is one of the

leading providers of analytical and communicational CRM software within the hospitality industry and provides with dailypoint™ a software family for marketing experts. Clients are individual hotels as well as hotel groups like Maritim Hotels, InterContinental and Hyatt.

4.2. Description of the Research Data

The goal of the research was to measure the influence of relationship marketing on the booking behavior of existing customers.
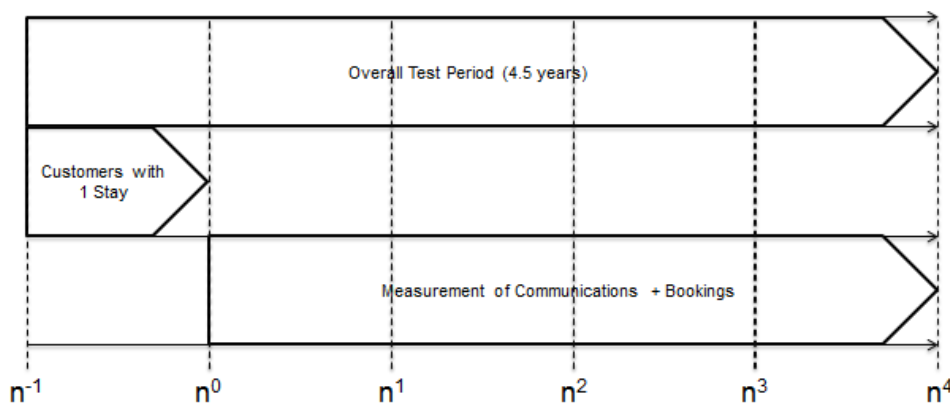

Figure 3. Description of Test Group

The data was collected from four 4star Hotels in Germany, three business hotels and one resort, all member of the same brand. The test group (see Figure 3: Description of Test Group) consisted of customers who had their first stay within n^{-1} and n^0 (2nd half-year 2007). Through this restriction only the customer group of first-timers was included in the research in order to evaluate the influence of the communication actions on the repeat purchase behavior. Existing best customers or other marketing segments which already showed some kind of behavioral loyalty through the booking of several stays could be excluded through this selection filter.

From n^0 to n^4 all direct marketing actions where tracked as well as all bookings made by the test group. The reviewed period consisted of four years from 2008 to 2011. Within this period all completed bookings of the preselected customers were measured. This means the departure date of the last stay must be before n^4. The period of four years was taken because of the low buying frequency of a hotel compared to other products and services.

The limitation of first timers was necessary from a communication perspective since the participating hotels all run marketing campaigns based on the RFM++ segmentation developed by TS&C. Using this method hotels normally intend to use expansive marketing channels like post mail only for valuable guest segments, on the other side online marketing actions like email newsletter are normally dispatched to all available guests since the associated costs are extremely low.

The sent communications were either relationship or transaction oriented. Marketing actions linked to a stay like pre- and post-stay communications were excluded since otherwise the communication frequencies were be influenced negatively.

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4.3. Analysis

The analysis was done with the software SPSS statistics Version 20 during fall 2011. In the first step the correlation between the variables were analyzed. With the pearson correlation systematic it was tested how strong the correlation between the variables number of bookings and the different communication channel was.

Correlations

		Tot#_Email	Tot#_Mail	Total_Comm#	TotalBookings_Inkl2007HJ2
Tot#_Email	Pearson Correlation	1	0.337*	0.619*	0.237*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	5222	5222	5222	5222
Tot#_Mail	Pearson Correlation	0.337*	1	0.948*	0.302*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	5222	5222	5222	5222
Total_Comm#	Pearson Correlation	0.619*	0.948*	1	0.332*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	5222	5222	5222	5222
TotalBookings_Inkl2007HJ2	Pearson Correlation	0.237*	0.302*	0.332*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	5222	5222	5222	5222

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Figure 4. Correlation Analysis

As seen in Figure 4 the correlation for e-mail on the number of bookings was 0.237 for post mail 0.302 and in the case that a recipient received communications through both channels the correlation value was 0.332. Mail and multi-channel communication were above 0.3 and therefore significant. For the channel e-mail a correlation could be identified though not significant.

Dependent Variable: TotalBookings_Inkl2007HJ2

Equation	Model Summary					Parameter Estimates			
	R Square	F	df1	df2	Sig.	Constant	b1	b2	b3
Linear	0.111	648.480	1	5220	0.000	2.207	0.480		
Logarithmic[a]	.	.	.	.	.	.	.		
Inverse[b]	.	.	.	.	.	.	.		
Quadratic	0.114	335.578	2	5219	0.000	2.031	0.652	-0.006	
Cubic	0.123	243.390	3	5218	0.000	1.782	1.092	-0.036	0.000
Compound	0.339	2672.383	1	5220	0.000	1.382	1.079		
Power[a]	.	.	.	.	.	.	.		
S[b]	.	.	.	.	.	.	.		
Growth	0.339	2672.383	1	5220	0.000	0.324	0.076		
Exponential	0.339	2672.383	1	5220	0.000	1.382	0.076		
Logistic	0.339	2672.383	1	5220	0.000	0.723	0.927		

The independent variable is Total_Comm#.

a. The independent variable (Total_Comm#) contains non-positive values. The minimum value is 0.00. The Logarithmic and Power models cannot be calculated.

b. The independent variable (Total_Comm#) contains values of zero. The Inverse and S models cannot be calculated.

Figure 5. Model Summary

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The next step was a regression analysis. With the help of the curve-fit methodology (see Figure 5) the best fitting equation was defined (see next Figure). The mathematical equations which were applicable are growth, compound, exponential and logistic.

For this paper the exponential equation was selected. The formula shows the influence of the communication frequency on the number of bookings of hotel guests. To reduce the volume of the analysis only the effects of a multi-channel communication was analyzed. The equation of course can also be applied for the other media types.

$Y = a * x^b$

a = initial amount (bookings); x = frequency; b = exponential growth

$Y = 1.383 * x^{0.076}$

The graphic below (Figure 6) shows on the x-axis the number of communications and on the y-axis the calculated number of bookings. The result is a digressive increasing function for the communication effects within CRM.
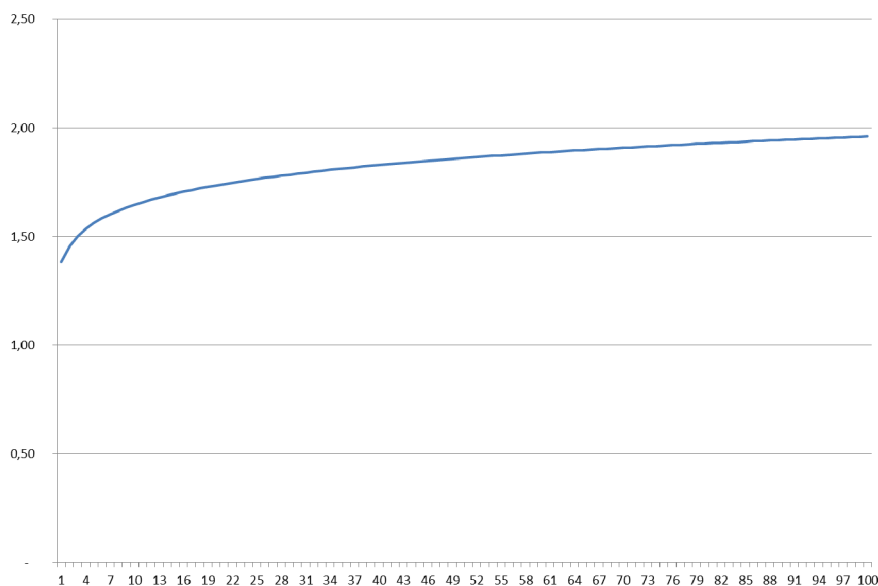

Figure 6. Response Function

An s-shaped graph was denied.

5. Findings& Managerial Implications

Ceteris paribus S-shaped response functions as described in the literature can be denied for hotel CRM activities. The graph shows that learning effects are not necessary for communications with existing guests to initiate hotel bookings; the booking decision seems to be more emotionally driven than cognitive based.

The digressive increasing graph of the exponential equation reveals a strong effect on the booking behavior for up to 27 marketing messages. This means the communication corridor respectively the best contact frequency to create remembering effects and booking impulses is 6 weeks. The denying of an s-shaped graph implicit also that a minimum frequency is not needed for known products.

Another finding is that the correlation between bookings and communication frequency increases over the years. [37] This underlines the necessity of CRM activities for hotels and shows the importance of an ongoing communication.

The analysis proves finally the assumption that the channel e-mail has not the same value and quality as post mail. The replacement strategy which is in place in many companies, which means e-mail communication replaces almost completely post mail, is at least questionable.

6. Research Limitations

The result of relationship marketing actions is correlated to many factors like the product and service quality, the satisfaction level or the pricing strategy of a company. In the service industry 7 P's describes the areas of a company which influences finally the business success: Products, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Processes, Physical Evidence. All these factors were completely under the control of the participating hotels.

Within the marketing action itself I had no influence on the provided content, the frequency, the layout, the target group or anything else associated with the communication strategy, the setup or the distribution of the marketing actions.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of this research the importance of communication over time to keep customers loyal can be regarded as verified. Therefore companies should try to continuously stay in touch with its customers to generate remembering effects and bookings. Both post mail and e-mail plays a significant role within the construct of loyalty. To keep both the communication frequency high and the associated costs acceptable hotels have to use the channel e-mail. Therefore it is recommendable to install a data quality management to review the data collection and the data quality at the different touch points.

It can be assumed that the results of the research are applicable to other industries if they are characterized by a low buying frequency, a location based product and a low usage of mass media channels.

For future research the author suggests to include the variables content and timing to the CRM model. Also the integration of further channels like Facebook is recommended.

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