

# Associations between Relationship Marketing of Architecture Office and Customer Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Communication Skills

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Considering the importance of communication marketing in the market industry, this research was designed to investigate the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of architecture offices. Meanwhile, communication skills were considered as a mediating variable.

**Methods:** The current study utilized a descriptive-correlation approach, employing structural equation modeling. It involved 391 customers (128 women) of architecture firms in Tehran, aged between 32 and 61 years (with an average age of  $46.94 \pm 5.47$  years), who voluntarily took part. The research took place in Tehran, Iran, in 2023. Participants were chosen using a convenience sampling technique. Standard questionnaires were used for data collection. Pearson correlation test and the structural equation modeling were used for data analysis.

**Results:** Results revealed that relationship marketing significantly affected customer loyalty ( $T=6.584$ ). Moreover, relationship marketing significantly affected communication skills ( $T=8.429$ ). Furthermore, communication skills affected customer loyalty ( $T=7.014$ ). Finally, communication skills have significantly mediated the relationship between relationship marketing and customer satisfaction ( $P<0.001$ ). Results of model fit indicated that the research model has good fit.

**Conclusion:** According to the results of this study, it is advisable for marketers to prioritize the promotion and enhancement of the factors and elements that support relationship marketing. Furthermore, there should be a stronger focus on customer loyalty.

**Keywords:** Relationship marketing, architecture, customer loyalty, communication, mediation

## Introduction

Marketing science revolves around catering to the needs of consumers. Nowadays, numerous companies and organizations have embraced innovative marketing strategies and are adapting accordingly (Bandura, 1997; Baniasadi, et al. 2018; Chaharbaghi, et al. 2022; Chris, et al. 2010; Conner & Davidson, 2003; Zaborova et al. 2023). They have come to understand that focusing on customer needs entails ensuring product quality and delivering exceptional customer service. Traditional marketing approaches are no longer as effective or lucrative in today's competitive landscape, where markets are saturated and demand exceeds supply (Afsanepurak et al. 2012; Sadeghipor & Aghdam, 2021a, 2021b; Taso et al. 2014). Acquiring new customers is challenging, prompting companies to prioritize retaining existing ones. Businesses are constantly seeking ways to nurture

relationships with loyal customers, as they are the primary source of profitability (American Psychological Association, 2014; Sadeghipor et al. 2021; Vasconcelos et al. 2013). "Relationship marketing" is one such method that aims to minimize dissatisfied customers and cultivate loyalty among them. Relational marketing is viewed as the process of identifying, establishing, maintaining, growing, and, when necessary, terminating relationships with customers and stakeholders in a profitable manner, ensuring that all parties involved achieve their objectives. This situation is clearly based on fulfilling promises (Abdoshahi & Ghorbani 2022; Ohler et al. 2010; Ramachandra et al. 2013; Taghva et al. 2020). Given the significance of customer satisfaction, adopting a customer-centric approach and achieving customer contentment in the global economic arena is considered a fundamental business principle (Hosseini, et al. 2022; Khosravi, et al. 2023; Shafaei et al. 2024). Neglecting these principles may result in the risk of being phased out of the market, as meeting customer expectations with goods and services leads to satisfaction, repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth referrals, ultimately contributing to the organization's longevity and success. It appears that relational marketing is an effective strategy for satisfying and retaining sports customers (Hazrati et al. 2022; Herrick & Ainsworth, 2003; Seyyedrezaei et al. 2021). Relationship marketing emphasizes customer loyalty and long-term engagement over short-term goals like customer acquisition and individual sales. The aim is to establish strong emotional connections between customers and brands, leading to organic word-of-mouth promotion and increased lead generation. This strategic marketing approach prioritizes building and sustaining long-term relationships with customers, in contrast to transactional marketing which centers on one-time transactions. The focus is on delivering value to customers, fostering trust, and cultivating loyalty (Dana et al. 2021, 2023).

Based on the article mentioned, in today's competitive environment, it is highlighted that the cost of acquiring new customers is significantly higher than the cost of retaining existing customers. Researchers emphasize that adhering to relational marketing principles can play a crucial role in retaining current customers, thereby enhancing the company's profitability and gaining a competitive edge (Ghorbani et al. 2020a, 2020b). Recent studies reveal that companies are increasingly adopting strategies to retain their current customer base by leveraging technology to gather timely customer information, fostering stable relationships, and aiming for long-term customer satisfaction and loyalty (Letvak et al. 2012; Masten, 2001; Shafaei et al. 2024). Relational marketing and customer relationship management are key strategies employed by successful companies today to achieve these objectives, ultimately providing a competitive advantage in the business landscape (Davidson, 2003; Ellis et al. 2013; Faircloth, 2017; Seyedi Asl et al. 2016, 2021). Many companies have implemented loyalty programs, such as affiliate marketing initiatives, to promote customer loyalty towards their products and services. Considering the importance of communication marketing in the market industry, this research was designed to investigate the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of architecture offices. Meanwhile, communication skills were considered as a mediating variable.

## Methods

The current study utilized a descriptive-correlation approach, employing structural equation modeling. It involved 391 customers (128 women) of architecture firms in Tehran, aged between 32 and 61 years (with an average age of  $46.94 \pm 5.47$  years), who voluntarily took part. The research took place in Tehran, Iran, in 2023. Participants were chosen using a convenience sampling technique.

The Relationship Marketing Questionnaire (RMQ) developed by Akbari et al. (2003) consists of 21 questions, covering service quality, price perception, brand mentality, and suggested value (Seyedi Asl et al. 2016, 2021). The Likert scale is used for scoring the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha, and the coefficient was found to be 0.87.

The customer loyalty survey developed by (Davidson, 2003) comprises 26 items divided into 5 subscales: attitudinal loyalty (6 questions), complaint behavior (7 questions), willingness to be loyal (4 questions), resistance to competitive offers (6 questions), and situational loyalty (3 questions). These subscales are utilized for assessing customer loyalty. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha, and the coefficient was found to be 0.90.

Revised Questionnaires of Communication Skills (CST-R) (2001) consist of 60 questions and 5 message understanding subscales (Herrick & Ainsworth, 2003). The questionnaire measures setting excitement, listening, insights, and self-expression. The scoring is based on a spectrum of 5 entries, with questions 2, 0, and 3 scored

in reverse. The range of marks for each person will be between 60 and 011. A score between 31 and 012 indicates average communication skills, and a score above 012 indicates good communication skills. The reliability and validity of the communication skills questionnaire have been confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported as 0.93.

We utilized SPSS-26 and Lisrel software to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were employed to characterize the variables. Pearson correlation test was conducted to assess the relationships between the variables. The structural equation method was applied to investigate the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of architecture offices, while also examining the mediating role communication skills. The significance level was set at  $P < 0.05$ .

### Results

Descriptive data are presented in Table 1. Descriptive results show that in general the level of relationship marketing, customer loyalty and communication skills are higher than the average. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests revealed that all variables were normally distributed (all  $P > 0.05$ ). Results of Independent t tests showed that there were no significant differences between men and women in all variables of the study.

**Table 1.** Descriptive data

	relationship marketing	customer loyalty	communication skills
Mean	33.69	41.57	14.08
SD	3.48	5.67	2.19

Bivariate relationships between relationship marketing, customer loyalty and communication skills are demonstrated in Table 2. Results revealed significant direct relationship between relationship marketing and customer loyalty ( $P < 0.001$ ). Moreover, relationship marketing was directly and significantly associated with communication skills ( $P < 0.001$ ). Finally, communication skills were directly and significantly associated with customer loyalty ( $P < 0.001$ ).

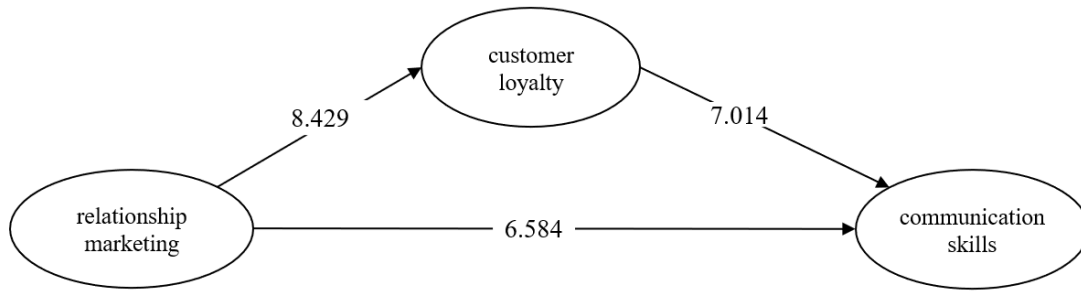
**Table 2.** Results of bivariate relationships between variables

	1	2	3
1. relationship marketing	-		
2. customer loyalty	r=0.669 P<0.001	-	
3. communication skills	r=0.857 P<0.001	r=0.705 P<0.001	-

Table 3 and Figure 1 show the results of structural equation modelling. Results revealed that relationship marketing significantly affected customer loyalty ( $T=6.584$ ). Moreover, relationship marketing significantly affected communication skills ( $T=8.429$ ). Furthermore, communication skills affected customer loyalty ( $T=7.014$ ). Finally, communication skills have significantly mediated the relationship between relationship marketing and customer satisfaction ( $P < 0.001$ ). Results of model fit are presented in Table 4 and indicated that the research model has good fit.

**Table 3.** Results of structural equation modelling

Path	$\beta$	T-value
1 relationship marketing => customer loyalty	0.628	6.584
2 relationship marketing => communication skills	0.840	8.429
3 communication skills => customers loyalty	0.694	7.014
	Z	P-value
4 relationship marketing => communication skills => customer loyalty	6.364	P<0.001



**Figure 1.** Structural equation modelling in the form of T-values

**Table 4.** Results of model fit

Index	Optimal Range	Obtained Value	Conclusion
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.07	Good fit
X <sup>2</sup> / df	< 3	2.98	Good fit
RMR	Closer to 0	0.01	Good fit
NFI	> 0.9	0.98	Good fit
CFI	> 0.9	0.98	Good fit

### Discussion

Considering the importance of communication marketing in the market industry, this research was designed to investigate the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of architecture offices. Meanwhile, communication skills were considered as a mediating variable. Results revealed that relationship marketing significantly affected customer loyalty. Moreover, relationship marketing significantly affected communication skills. Furthermore, communication skills affected customer loyalty. Finally, communication skills have significantly mediated the relationship between relationship marketing and customer satisfaction. In today's intricate business landscape, companies must stay competitive and adapt to the ever-changing market conditions in order to survive. One of the key objectives for all companies has always been to continuously enhance their performance (Davidson, 2003; Ellis et al. 2013; Faircloth, 2017; Seyedi Asl et al. 2016, 2021). To achieve this, it is crucial to improve the organization's efficiency and effectiveness, ensure optimal delivery of goods and services to customers, and strive for customer satisfaction. Establishing strong customer relationships, implementing effective marketing strategies, and leveraging marketing capabilities are essential tasks for managers. Neglecting the fundamental principles of customer relationship management and the importance of marketing capabilities can lead to unsatisfactory customer experiences, ultimately causing them to seek better services from other companies in the competitive market.

Various tools are utilized by organizations to acquire customer knowledge, a crucial asset. Nevertheless, the conversion of customer data into valuable information and knowledge poses challenges for organizations (Hazrati et al. 2022; Herrick & Ainsworth, 2003; Seyyedrezaei et al. 2021). Despite the conceptual grasp of customer relationship management, many organizations struggle to analyze their customer data effectively. Empirical research on the relationship between customer relationship management and performance has yielded inconclusive results, despite the significant financial benefits observed. Recent studies indicate that only 30% of organizations have adopted customer relationship management technology, resulting in improved organizational performance (Ohler et al. 2010; Ramachandra et al. 2013; Taghva et al. 2020). To enhance customer perception of quality and loyalty towards the organization, relational marketing activities can be employed in the service sector to boost customer engagement. Iranian organizations should recognize the importance of focusing on customers, meeting their needs, and fostering customer loyalty over time (Afsanepurak et al. 2012; Sadeghipor & Aghdam, 2021a, 2021b; Taso et al. 2014).

Private banks emerging alongside state banks have intensified competition, making relational marketing a key strategy for addressing this issue. By fostering long-term relationships with customers, organizations can identify, enhance, and prioritize activities valued by customers, ultimately attracting and retaining more loyal

customers. Through leveraging customer loyalty, organizations can enhance their competitive position in the market. Iranian banks have consistently endeavored to develop solutions and initiatives aimed at cultivating enduring customer relationships and loyalty. Effective planning in this realm necessitates a thorough understanding of the bank's strengths and weaknesses in customer relationship management, as well as an evaluation of the perceived importance of customer-centric initiatives (Sadeghipor et al. 2021; Vasconcelos et al. 2013).

The role of communication skills audit on customer satisfaction can be explained by defining communication as the exchange of information between individuals. There are two main areas of communication: emotional and non-verbal. Emotional communication involves verbal behavior, and we tend to rely on verbal communication when there is ambiguity. In both areas, we assess the quality and strength of connections. Communication ranges from clarity to ambiguity, and one important skill, especially in marketing, is listening. When a business listens to its customers and meets their needs, customer satisfaction increases. Therefore, communication skills can play a significant role in auditing customer satisfaction (Baniasadi, et al. 2018; Chaharbaghi, et al. 2022; Chris, et al. 2010).

### Conclusion

In summary, it can be asserted that relationship marketing plays a vital role in improving customer loyalty. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty is strengthened by effective communication skills. According to the results of this study, it is advisable for marketers to prioritize the promotion and enhancement of the factors and elements that support relationship marketing. Furthermore, there should be a stronger focus on customer loyalty.

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