

Title:

Customer-oriented culture's effect on relational characteristics and performance in cross-border business relationships: The exporter's perspective

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Abstract: Researchers view customer-orientation as a key aspect of organizational culture. However, limited attention has been devoted to the role that a firm's customer-orientation plays in cross-border business relationships. This paper proposes and tests a model that explains the role of an export firm's customer-oriented culture in terms of maintaining high levels of behavioural commitment and information exchange as well as enhancing relationship performance for the exporter. The findings show that customer-oriented culture enhances relationship performance directly and indirectly via information exchange. The implications of the study are discussed, along with limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords: Cross-border business relationships, customer-oriented culture, behavioural commitment, information exchange, relationship performance

1. Introduction

Firms are faced with increasing commoditization of products (Gounaris, 2005; Ulaga, 2003). Price and product quality are exposed to imitation; and consequently, it becomes a matter of interest how to differentiate from competitors. Emphasizing relationship building is one approach to differentiating from competitors (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Humphreys & Williams, 1996; Zhang, Cavusgil, & Roath, 2003). This implies going beyond production efficiencies and price-based competition to achieve competitive advantage (Humphreys & Williams, 1996). Distributors tend to spend more time and resources on those suppliers with whom they have established a relationship (Bello, Chelariu, & Zhang, 2003; Nevin, 1995). In consequence, one could improve customer interactions and accommodate the customer's situation to ensure rewarding and long-term business relationships (Gounaris, 2005; Humphreys & Williams, 1996; Shankarmahesh, Ford, & LaTour, 2004; Ulaga, 2003). The aim of this paper is to contribute with new knowledge with regard to how exporters can differentiate from competitors by investigating the role of the export firm's customer-oriented culture to the maintaining of business relationships and to enhancing relationship performance for the exporter. No studies have so far investigated the relationship between a firm's customer-oriented culture and relationship characteristics, viewed in terms of commitment and information exchange, and relationship performance in export marketing channels.

Commitment and information exchange are two relational dimensions that have been subjected to investigation by a number of studies, and empirical evidence shows that they do play a role to sustaining rewarding and long-term business relationships in export marketing channels. Evidence shows that these two dimensions have a positive effect on performance in international distribution channels (Aulakh, Kotabe, & Sahay, 1996; LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Lohtia, Bello, & Yamada, 2005; Skarmas et al., 2002). A firm that emphasizes a customer-oriented culture encourages an external focus which implies that customer needs are given

high priority (Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1997; Kalé, 2003; Parasuraman, 1987). To show a sincere concern for the customer's needs is worth while: "Organisations succeed when they meet the needs of customers more effectively than competitors" (Rundh, 2007, p. 185).

Overall, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of which role a firm's customer-oriented culture plays in order to cultivate and enhance business relationship characteristics such as commitment and information exchange in international distribution channels, as well as relationship performance. This paper focuses on the behavioural aspect of commitment which reflects to what extent the exporter provides extra help to its customer (Kim & Frazier, 1997). From an exporter's perspective it is important to understand the way a customer-oriented culture affects relational characteristics and performance in export markets in terms that will provide managerial guidance to enhancing selling effectiveness. Findings show that managers in export firms should make sure that a customer-oriented culture is established because it provides guidance to what are the appropriate behaviours of a salesperson. This means that salespeople should have a good understanding of the customers' needs with regard to the quality of products and the customer service as well as taking steps when a customer has a request.

The next section gives a review of the term customer-oriented culture. A presentation of the conceptual framework and hypotheses is given in the following section. Section 4 which presents the method includes among other things a presentation of the sampling frame and measure development. Section 5 presents the findings, and section 6 presents discussions including managerial implications, limitations and proposes directions for future research.

2. Background and definition of customer-oriented culture

Researchers within marketing acknowledge the potential of organizational culture as a predictor of a number of marketing issues, among them buyer-seller relationships (Williams

& Attaway, 1996). A definition of organizational culture which has been frequently used is as follows: the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and provide guidance for behaviour (Deshpande & Webster, 1989; Wallach, 1983; Williams & Attaway, 1996). Organizational culture defines expected standards of behaviour, speech, and presentation of self (Wallach, 1983), and provides guidance to what are the appropriate behaviours of a salesperson (Parasuraman, 1987). Williams and Attaway (1996) make a distinction between two types of principal organizational cultures: bureaucratic culture and supportive culture. A supportive culture is viewed as analogous to a customer-oriented culture (Williams & Attaway, 1996). A bureaucratic culture is characterized as rule intensive, non-innovative, and slow to change (Wallach, 1983; Williams & Attaway, 1996). A customer-oriented culture contrasts a bureaucratic culture in the sense that it supports decentralized decision-making, innovation, cooperation, and adaptive behaviour.

Customer-orientation has been referred to as a critical aspect of organizational culture in marketing organizations (Deshpandé, et al., 1993; Parasuraman, 1987; Williams & Attaway, 1996). Researchers, whose interests have been marketing management issues (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989), innovation in market orientation research (Hurley & Hult, 1998), and relational aspects of buyer-seller business relationships (Williams & Attaway, 1996) view customer-orientation as a key aspect of an organizational culture. Deshpandé et al. (1997) and Parasuraman (1987) stress the importance of emphasizing external organizational activities. Kalé (2003) argues that a firm's customer-oriented culture, manifested in terms of external focused practices, is one of several aspects of organizational culture. Similarly, to be market focused, that is, to promote external focused behaviours, is by Hurley and Hult (1998) viewed as one of the cultural characteristics of an organization.

Customer-oriented culture refers to an organization that encourages the performance of customer-oriented actions (Deshpande & Webster, 1989; Hurley & Hult, 1998; Parasuraman, 1987). Behaviours can be viewed as manifestations of the cultural values of an organization (Slater & Narver, 1995). A customer-oriented culture emphasizes an external focus, that is, to be sensitive to the market and take the customer's need into account (Parasuraman, 1987). A customer-oriented culture is concerned with behaviours necessary for the creation of superior value for the buyer (Cadogan & Diamantopoulos, 1995; Deshpandé et al., 1993; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). An external focus implies that "...all decisions start with the customer and are guided by a deep and shared understanding of the customer's needs and behaviour..." (Day 1994, pp. 50, 45). Consequently, customer-oriented culture refers to what extent norms operating in a firm encourage an external focus, which implies that customer needs are given high priority (Deshpandé et al., 1997; Kalé, 2003; Parasuraman, 1987).

Williams and Attaway (1996) find that "...the maximum impact on buyer-seller relationships comes from the synergy of a seller's supportive culture working *through* customer oriented salespeople" (1996, p. 44). This shows that having a supportive and thus a customer-oriented culture is essential in order to succeed in the market (Williams & Attaway, 1996). The salesperson and the selling organization jointly influence a customer's perception and thus experience (LaBahn & Harich, 1997), and a customer-oriented culture constitutes an important part of the selling organization (e.g. Deshpandé et al., 1997; Parasuraman, 1987). Buyers are able to consider the selling firm's culture through contacts such as sales personnel and other customer contact personnel (Williams & Attaway, 1996). To conclude, those firms that will succeed in competitive markets are those with a really customer-oriented culture. Customers will notice the differences between firms with regard to their responding to

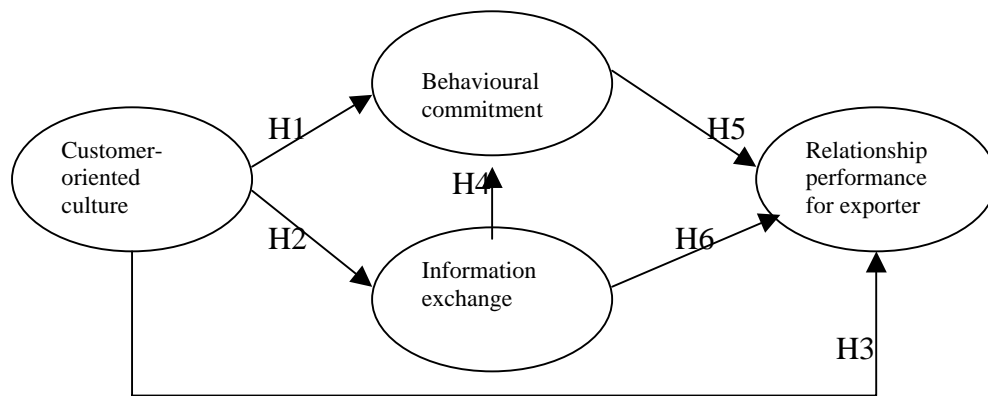
customer inquiries and their effectiveness of resolving customer complaints, among others (Parasuraman, 1987).

3. The conceptual framework and hypotheses

3.1. The conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows that an export firm's customer-oriented culture is viewed to be a driver of behavioural commitment and information exchange, and relationship performance for the exporter. A firm which emphasizes a customer-oriented culture, expressed in terms of external focused norms and behaviours, demonstrates to its customers that they are given high priority. Thus, external focused norms and behaviours are expected to culture the selling firm's behavioural commitment to the customer as well as facilitate exchange of information with this customer. Furthermore, the conceptual model proposes that behavioural commitment and information exchange mediate customer-oriented culture. It is predicted that behavioural commitment and information exchange have positive effects on relationship performance. The link between behavioural commitment and relationship performance, and the link between information exchange and relationship performance is based on previous findings (LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Skarmeas et al., 2002). Information exchange is proposed to affect relationship performance directly and indirectly via behavioural commitment. The model suggests that information exchange is an antecedent factor to behavioural commitment. This is a link based on previous research (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Besides having an indirect effect on relationship performance, via behavioural commitment and information exchange, customer-oriented culture is also expected to have a direct effect on relationship performance.

Figure 1. Customer-oriented culture and its role in cross-border business relationships



3.2. *Customer-oriented culture, commitment, information exchange and performance*

Commitment is defined as the extent to which a firm is dedicated to a close and lasting relationship with another firm. This means that the exporting firm believes that an ongoing business relationship with another firm “...is so important as to warrant maximum effort at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes that the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). This study focuses on the behavioural commitment which reflects the extent the exporter provides support to its buyer when it is required (Kim & Frazier, 1997; Skarmeas et al., 2002). Commitment is an important factor to the maintaining of a business relationship between business partners in distribution channels (Gounaris, 2005; Skarmeas et al., 2002). Commitment helps business partners to achieve stable business relationships (Kumar, Sheer, & Steenkamp, 1995). Morgan and Hunt (1994) find that commitment mediates rewarding relationship marketing in distribution channels. Evidence shows that cultivating partner relationship commitment is important in exporter-importer contexts (Skarmeas et al., 2002).

A firm characterized by a customer-oriented culture encourages salespeople to perform certain types of behaviour. Among them is information sharing and cooperation, which implies that buyers in different selling situations are served in the best possible way, and the needs of the buyer can be met (Williams & Attaway, 1996). In addition to

professional expertise, it is of major importance that contact personnel have the competence to interact successfully with customers, thus providing the basis from where commitment is cultivated (Gounaris, 2005). To adhere to some set of principles that the buyer finds acceptable, signals that the relationship is important (Lovett, Simmons, & Kali, 1999). Consequently, customer-oriented culture is one factor that is expected to promote behavioural commitment to the buyer. One may suggest that the customer-oriented culture of the exporting firm encourages its personnel to provide extra help to its buyer as required by various situations (Kim & Frazier, 1997).

Information exchange can be defined as the extent to which the partners of a business relationship openly share information, formal as well as informal (LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Information exchange is essential for ongoing business relationships (LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship performance for the exporter is defined as the extent to which the exporter's relationship with a specific buyer is perceived to be productive and rewarding (Bucklin & Sengupta, 1993; LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Skarmeas et al., 2002). Williams and Attaway (1996) found support for the view that a salesperson's customer-oriented behaviour has a positive effect on buyer-seller relationships. In this study, a number of elements expressing close ties, and thus relational characteristics, between business partners, are incorporated in the buyer-seller relationship measure, and include trust, satisfaction with the relationship, anticipation of future interaction and the desire to increase the relationship. A salesperson who is a member of an export firm, which norms encourage its personnel to be actively involved and seek contacts with its buyers (Humphreys & Williams, 1996), are likely to be more closely involved with business partners. Thus, information exchange is assumed to be one element of the close ties between the partners. An organization characterized by a high degree of customer-oriented norms encourages salespeople to respond to customer needs and inquiries.

Accordingly, personnel dealing with customers are encouraged to ensure that offerings match up with customer needs and expectations (Williams & Attaway, 1996). Similarly, one may argue that a customer-oriented culture promotes behavioural commitment which implies that salespeople provide special support to customers when they ask for it. That is, salespeople who are members of an organization characterized by a high level of a customer-oriented culture are likely to provide further assistance to customers who ask for it.

Saxe and Weitz (1982) found as follows: “The customer orientation of salespeople is related positively to the extent to which customers use the salespeople as an information source, cooperate with salespeople in identifying needs, and trust salespeople” (1982, p. 348). Salespeople who have a concern for their customers are likely to be members of an organization that advocates external focused behaviours (LaBahn & Harich, 1997). Subsequently, a salesperson who is a member of an export firm, which norms encourage personnel to be actively involved with customers and to meet their requirements (Humphreys & Williams, 1996), are expected to have close ties with business partners, which is composed by a number of relational characteristics including behavioural commitment and information exchange. On the basis of the discussions above one may argue that a salesperson who is a member of a firm practicing a customer-oriented culture is prepared to develop close ties with customers, including high levels of behavioural commitment and information exchange, and to enhance relationship performance. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H 1: Customer-oriented culture has a positive effect on behavioural commitment.

H 2: Customer-oriented culture has a positive effect on information exchange.

H 3: Customer-oriented culture has a positive effect on relationship performance.

3.3. *Commitment, information exchange and relationship performance*

The importance of commitment and information exchange for ongoing business relationships has found support in studies carried out in export marketing channels. Anderson and Weitz (1992) find that information exchange leads to closer relationships between the partners and enhances coordination. They also find that two-way communication enhances the commitment levels of both the supplier and the distributor (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Similarly, Bello et al. (2003) find that information exchange in export channels, together with two other relational norms defined as solidarity and flexibility, enhances the ties between firms. Time, effort and problems solved involve exchange of information, which serves to bring business partners closer to each other (Anderson & Weitz, 1992), and thus makes the partners committed to the business relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, the argument carried forward is that a salesperson's perception that past exchange of information with a specific foreign buyer has been of high quality will result in a high level of behavioural commitment.

Skarmeas et al. (2002) who tested the effect of commitment on relationship performance find that developing close business relationships in a cross-border context has a strong and positive effect on relationship performance. This shows that a firm's ability to develop a portfolio of stable and long-term business relationships in international distribution channels "...offer better prospects for sustained foreign market penetration, development, and success" (Skarmeas et al., 2002, p. 772). Similarly, Lohtia et al. (2005) find that commitment has a positive effect on seller's performance in cross-border contexts.

LaBahn and Harich (1997), who also focus on export marketing channels, present a model conceptualizing information exchange and conflict as central dimensions of inter-organizational relationships. They find that communication has a more important role than conflict. Findings also show that communication has a positive effect on relationship performance. Findings show that those who maintain a continuous flow of communication

with the market are also likely to succeed with their export ventures (Czinkota & Johnston, 1983). To conclude, commitment and information exchange are two relational dimensions that have been subjected to investigation, and empirical evidence shows that they do play a role to sustaining rewarding business relationships in export marketing channels. Evidence shows that these two dimensions have a positive effect on performance in export marketing channels. Based on the discussions above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H 4: Information exchange has a positive effect on behavioural commitment.

H 5: Behavioural commitment has a positive effect on relationship performance.

H 6: Information exchange has a positive effect on relationship performance.

4. Method

4.1. Questionnaire and the sampling frame

The unit of analysis is the export firm and one selected business relationship in an export market. The perspective of the selling side has been taken into account to report the selling firm's customer-oriented culture, the selling firm's behavioural commitment to a specific customer, and to assess information exchange and relationship performance. The Norwegian seafood export industry provides the empirical setting. The measurement scales have been derived from previous studies. The scales were accommodated to the context studied. Customer-oriented culture is a new scale. The items included in the questionnaire were translated into Norwegian and then back-translated into English. The questionnaire was pre-tested by 4 persons responsible for sales of seafood products in export markets to identify any problems (de Mortange & Vossen, 1998). Some changes were carried out as a result of feedbacks.

O'Grady and Lane (1996) argue that business relationships selected for a study investigating ongoing business relationships should preferably be running for a minimum of 2

years. Thus, in this study the respondent was asked to select a business relationship with duration of 2 years or more. It is of great importance to ensure some variation in the responses (Skarmeas et al., 2002). Therefore, the following instructions were given: If the respondent serves 3 or less customers in export markets with duration of 2 years or more, the respondent should select the customer who bought the largest volume seafood products the previous year. If the respondent serves 4 or 5 customers with duration of 2 years or more, the respondent should select the customer who bought the second largest volume the previous year. If the respondent serves more than 5 customers with duration of 2 years or more, the respondent should select that customer who bought the third largest volume the previous year.

The sampling frame was developed on the basis of a list held by the Norwegian Seafood Export Council. The effective sample consists of 271 exporting firms. Every firm was contacted by telephone, and 224 accepted to respond. It was clarified both by phone and by the instructions given in the questionnaire that the person responsible for a specific business relationship is the one who should report. A questionnaire, including a cover letter and a pre-paid envelope, was sent to each of them. An electronic version of the questionnaire was also given as an option. Participants in the survey were ensured anonymity. To motivate the respondent to respond, a report describing the main results of the study was offered in return. 78 responded after the first wave of questionnaires, 23 responded after the second, and 11 responded after the third wave. 1 questionnaire was excluded due to missing data on several key variables, and 3 questionnaires were excluded because the business relationship had been running for 1 year or less. 108 questionnaires were included in the analysis, which makes up a response rate of 39,9 percent. A test of non-response bias, a *t*-test of mean differences across the early and late response groups, shows that there are no significant differences for number of employees, turnover, export sales experience and key variables at the significance level 0.05 (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

4.2. *Measure development*

Behavioural commitment refers to the extent the exporter provides special support to its buyer when it is required (Kim & Frazier, 1997; Skarmeas et al., 2002). 1 study has been used as the source of 3 items: Skarmeas et al. (2002). *Information exchange* is defined as the extent to which the partners involved in the business relationship openly share information, formal as well as informal (Labahn & Harich, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). 2 studies have been used as the sources of 5 items: Heide and John (1992) and LaBahn and Harich (1997).

Customer-oriented culture refers to what extent norms operating in a firm encourage an external focus, which implies that customer needs are given high priority (Deshpandé et al., 1997; Kalé, 2003; Parasuraman, 1987). 2 studies have been used as the sources of 4 items: Parasuraman (1987) and Deshpandé et al. (1997). *Relationship performance for exporter* is defined as the extent to which the exporter's relationship with the buyer is productive and rewarding (Bucklin & Sengupta, 1993; Skarmeas et al., 2002). 1 study has been used as the source of 4 items: Skarmeas et al. (2002). All items were measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from "very poor description" to "very good description".

4.3. *Measurement validation*

Reliability tests extracted in SPSS show acceptable scores. All inter-item correlations are above 0.30, suggesting that the items relate well (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1996). Also, all item-to-total correlations are well above 0.30, providing evidence that the items correlate well with the total score (Field, 2005). Cronbach Alphas are above the cut-off level 0.70 for all constructs (Hair et al., 1996). Discriminant validity was tested by carrying out an orthogonal (varimax) rotated factor analysis including each item composing the summated scales (Buvik & John, 2000). The items load properly on the theoretically correct factor. All loadings are above 0.60. Correlations between each pair of constructs (including all constructs

in the conceptual model) are at acceptable levels, less than 0.60, providing evidence of discriminant validity. Common methods variance was tested by using the 1-factor test described by Podsakoff and Organ (1986). Each item of the summated scales was entered into a factor analysis, and the analysis produced 4 factors. The largest factor accounted for 35 % of the covariance. This result indicates that common methods variance is not a problem.

5. Findings

The method of least squares was used to test the hypotheses. The backward method, which is one of the stepwise methods, was used when model 3 was run. Although this research is theory driven, it also explores new relations with the objective to develop the conceptual model further to show how customer-oriented culture is linked with behavioural commitment, information exchange and relationship performance (Field, 2005). A regression analysis including customer-oriented culture and information exchange as the independent variables, and behavioural commitment as the dependent variable, was carried out (Model 1). The findings show that a customer-oriented culture ($p < 0.01$) and information exchange ($p < 0.01$) promote behavioural commitment. This means that $H 1$ and $H 4$ are supported. This finding shows that customer-oriented culture promotes a strong dedication to the firm's customer, which implies that the exporting firm goes to a great length to help the customer when problems occur. In the same way, information exchange between business partners strengthens the firm's dedication to the customer.

As a second step, the effect of customer-oriented culture was tested on information exchange (Model 2). The findings show that an export firm's customer-oriented culture ($p < 0.01$) influence information exchange between the business partners in a positive way. Thus, $H 2$ is supported. This shows that information exchange between business partners is promoted by the firm's customer-oriented culture which implies practices of external focused behaviours towards its customers. A customer-oriented culture ensures a connection with the

customer which involves information exchange. Model 3 was run including customer-oriented culture, behavioural commitment, and information exchange as the independent variables and relationship performance as the dependent variable. The backward method was used. The behavioural commitment was excluded from the model. The findings show that behavioural commitment does not have a direct effect on relationship performance, and *H 5* is not supported. In contrast to expectations the exporting firm's behavioural commitment to the buyer does not necessarily lead to productive and rewarding results. The findings also show that customer-oriented culture ($p < 0.01$) and information exchange ($p < 0.001$) have a positive effect on relationship performance. This means that *H 3* and *H 6* are supported. To conclude, customer-oriented culture has a role to play in seller-buyer business relationships in cross-border contexts: it influences relationship performance directly and indirectly via information exchange. The regressions results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Regression results

Models/ Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Customer-oriented culture	0.263**	0.322**	0.295**
Information exchange	0.276**		0.339***
Behavioural commitment			-
Adjusted R ²	0.177	0.095	0.252
<i>F</i>	12.525***	12.232**	19.039***

^a Standardized coefficients, and 2-tailed tests are reported.

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

6. Discussions

How to maintain business relationships in international distribution channels has received attention by a number of researchers (e.g. Bello et al., 2003; de Mortanges & Vossen, 1999; Harich & LaBahn, 1998; LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Skarmetas et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2003). Maintaining business relationships is a challenging and complex task, especially if it is done in an international environment (Rundh, 2007). This paper provides findings that make a key contribution to the understanding of how to sustain business relationships in this kind of

context. This is done by investigating the role of a customer-orientated culture in the exporting firm with regard to maintaining business relationships as well as enhancing relationship performance. Findings show that cultivating a customer-oriented culture is a way to go to maintaining business relationships. Those firms that have established procedures with regard to how to resolve customers' inquiries in an effective way are better prepared to sustaining business relationships. Thus, cultivating customer-orientation is a way to go to differentiate from competitors. Customer-oriented culture promotes a high level of information exchange between business partners and enhances the firm's behavioural commitment to the foreign customer. The results also show that a customer-oriented culture influences relationship performance in a positive way both directly and indirectly via information exchange.

In contrast to expectations a customer-oriented culture influences relationship performance only through information exchange, and not through behavioural commitment. Behavioural commitment is not positively associated with relationship performance. This suggests that meeting the needs of the customer is a two-edged sword. Consequently, behavioural commitment is not necessarily a key variable that mediates successful relationship marketing. This study shows that behavioural commitment contributes to the sustaining of a business relationship, and therefore supports Morgan and Hunt's (1994) finding that commitment is a key variable to the maintaining of business relationship. But behavioural commitment does not enhance performance in international distribution channels, which is a finding that contradicts Skarmeas et al.'s (2002) finding suggesting that commitment is a key variable for improving international channel performance.

Practicing a customer-oriented culture benefits the exporting firm. A firm that is characterized by a high level of a customer-oriented culture has established ways of doing things and procedures that are applied when dealing with customers in general. This means

that all customers are treated on an equal basis. The salesperson performs his/hers predetermined roles, which means that they are guided by norms and behaviours expressed by the firm's customer-oriented culture. Exporting firms characterized by a high level of a customer-oriented culture have greater access to information from their customer and helps improve the quality of the product and the customer service. Greater access to information also improves the firm's response rate when a customer has a complaint.

High behavioural commitment is indicated by a salesperson who shows caring about the customer. The salesperson not only performs external focused behaviours that are predetermined by the firm's customer-oriented culture, but provides also extra help to its customer as required by various situations (Kim & Frazier, 1997). Commitment requires investment and takes time to build. Thus, to provide maximum efforts at maintaining a specific business relationship should not be taken without due consideration (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Findings suggest that Norwegian seafood exporters have not made careful considerations with regard to salespeople's practice of behavioural commitment which means that firms go to a great length to help the customer when problems occur. Providing benefits that are superior to the offerings of alternative partners may not pay. In fact, this study shows that exporting firms that perform a high level of customer-oriented culture, and thus practice behaviours that take customers' needs into account, do not need to develop behavioural commitments to specific customers. Firms performing a customer-oriented culture show to their customers that they are given high priority. Customer-oriented culture cultivates a high level of information exchange which implies close ties between business partners. Consequently, there is no need to contribute with further assistance to the specific customer.

6.1. Managerial implications

Findings show that the argument addressing the view that firms succeed when they meet the needs of customers (Rundh, 2007) is a two-edged sword. Management should make careful considerations with regard to how customers' needs are met. Exporting firms that have well established norms and practices that help members of the firm understand organizational functioning and provide guidance for behaviour that take the customer's needs into account should not spend further resources to provide extra help to customers. Investing in behavioural commitment is a waste of resources if the firm is characterized by a high level of a customer-oriented culture. Firms characterized by a high level of a customer-oriented culture signal to their customers that the relationship is important, and therefore do not need to spend further resources to ensure that the business relationship is maintained and that rewarding results are produced. To go to a great length to help the individual customer when problems occur does not pay; performance is not enhanced.

Management should be careful when selecting sales personnel. Individuals responsible for sales represent the most visible signs of a firm's success (Brown, Widing, & Coulter, 1991; Rich, Bommer, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Johnson, 1999). Salespeople have an important role to play to differentiate a market offering (Humphreys & Williams, 1996), and they have a key role in implementing marketing strategies and managing customer relationships (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Thus, salespeople must be selected based not only on their professional qualifications but also on their competence to effectively implement practices that reflect a customer-oriented culture as well as manage communication with their business partner. Management must make sure that salespeople are aware of the distinction between practicing a customer-oriented culture and performing behavioural commitment. This is required to keep away from behaviours that apply to a specific customer.

6.2. *Limitations and future research*

This study investigates the role of a customer-oriented culture in the Norwegian seafood exporting industry. Future research could carry out a more comprehensive study which aim is to obtain a larger sample which also includes other industries exporting. As a part of this, one may also include other relational characteristics such as trust and cooperation. Testing out the nomological validity of various components of commitment could be a part of this. Commitment is composed of three components in a study carried out by Skarmeas et al. (2002): continuance, affective and behavioural. As pointed out above, Skarmeas et al. (2002) find that commitment is positively related to performance. Future research could treat each component separately to investigate to what extent they differ with regard to their association with performance. Gounaris (2005) shows that the following two components of commitment – calculative and affective – have different roles with regard to the behavioural intentions of corporate clients of professional services providers.

A literature review shows that there is no clear view with regard to how to define and operationalize the variable customer-oriented culture. One of the problems is the large number of definitions causing the concept to remain fuzzy and vague (Kalé, 2003). This study has on the basis of a literature review given a definition of a customer-oriented culture and developed a scale of the same variable which attains a high alpha score and does well when tested for validity. Future research could develop the customer-oriented culture scale further. The objective could be to enhance the understanding with regard to how a customer-oriented culture is manifested in a firm. More specific measures of a customer-oriented culture could improve managerial guidance further. To make a distinction between small and large firms and type of industry (manufacturing versus services) may be a fruitful approach in this kind of study.

In this study the firm itself assesses the customer-oriented culture. Future research could try to find a way to include both partners in the assessment of a firm's customer-oriented culture, or take the customer's view. The mean value of customer-oriented culture is most likely up-ward biased because this scale was assessed by respondents in the export firm. The mean value is in this study 3.98, on a Likert scale 1 to 5. There is an ongoing discussion among researchers who focus on organizations' customer-orientation regarding who should assess customer-orientation. Researchers argue that evaluations of how customer-oriented an organization is should preferably come from its customers rather from the firm itself (Deshpandé et al., 1993). Research shows that customer-orientation scores are significantly higher when self-assessed (from the marketer/selling firm) than when customer-assessed (Deshpandé et al., 1997). Alternatively, one may take a dyadic approach including the assessment of both business partners, which would allow the consideration of differences in perceptions between the partners involved in a business relationship (Kelley, 1992). However, collecting data from both sides within an export-marketing context is resource intensive (Skarmeas et al., 2002). Another concern that is likely to limit studies on matched pairs relates to respondent participation (Aulakh et al., 1996; LaBahn & Harich, 1997).

Researchers argue that a more accurate assessment of customer-orientation is obtained from the customer (e.g. Kelley, 1992; Deshpandé et al., 1993). Future research could ask customers to assess the customer-oriented culture performed by Norwegian seafood exporters. Getting the customers' view on this issue should be of high relevance for the Norwegian seafood exporters. Recent trends show that buyers are restricting the number of suppliers and managing the network of suppliers with whom they work (Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004; Williams & Attaway, 1996). It should therefore be of current relevance to ensure that exporters' customer-oriented culture conforms to the buyers' expectations.

Appendix 1 Constructs, items, factor loadings and Cronbach Alphas

Constructs and items	Factor Loadings	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha ¹
<i>Customer-oriented culture</i>		3.98	0.50	0.78
Cum1: In our firm it is the practice to take steps immediately when a customer has a complaint.	0.84			
Cum2: In our firm it is the practice to respond as soon as possible to the customers' requests.	0.78			
Cum3: The firm has a very good understanding of how the customers judge the quality of products and the customer service.	0.71			
Cum4: The firm regularly evaluates the satisfaction of the customers with regard to quality of the product and the customer service.	0.71			
<i>Behavioural commitment</i>		4.31	0.57	0.78
Becom1: Our firm makes adjustments for this buyer when necessary.	0.73			
Becom2: Our firm goes to a great length to help this customer when problems occur.	0.87			
Becom3: Our firm responds immediately when this company asks for help.	0.88			
<i>Information exchange</i>		3.88	0.57	0.82
Inf1: Exchange of information between this customer and me takes place frequently and informally.	0.84			
Inf2: This business relationship is characterised by two-way communication.	0.80			
Inf3: In this business relationship, information that is of any use to the other part is given.	0.70			
Inf4: In this business relationship we communicate our expectations to each other.	0.77			
Inf5: In this business relationship, each of us informs the other part about events or changes that are of significance to the other part.	0.60			
<i>Relationship performance</i>		4.21	0.57	0.90
Relpe1: The relationship between our firm and this buyer has been very productive.	0.87			
Relpe2: Our firm has found the time and effort spent on this relationship very worthwhile.	0.93			
Relpe3: The relationship between our firm and this buyer has been very effective.	0.88			
Relpe4: Our firm has a very rewarding relationship with this buyer.	0.78			

N=108

¹ Standardized Items

Appendix 2. Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Customer-oriented culture		0.352**	0.262**	0.404**
2. Behavioural commitment	0.352**		0.328**	0.260**
3. Information exchange	0.262**	0.328**		0.407**
4. Relationship performance	0.404**	0.260**	0.407**	

N=108

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

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