



The Impact of Channel Relationship Management on the Channel Partners of Telecom Industry- A Case Study of Reliance Communications in Western Uttar Pradesh Circle, India

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the kind of channel relationship marketing strategies that the Indian telecom industry is pursuing in today's rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, and to study their effect on the service quality and satisfaction of channel partners. Approaches of channel sales should focus on joint marketing activities, training support incentive schemes and a measure of hospitality. These are some of the initiatives that are considered important in managing channel relations. In today's dynamic environment, organisations are gearing up to the fact that they need consistent and coordinated methods of managing and improving their channel relationships. In the Indian telecom sector, intense competition is leading to substantial shifts in what is expected of the supply chain function. It is no longer enough to simply connect supply and demand at optimal cost

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and service levels. This study aims to identify whether Channel Relationship Management of Reliance Communications has an effective impact on the satisfaction of channel partners. The study is particularly conducted in the Western Uttar Pradesh region, India. The study depicts the result of a survey conducted among the distributors, retailers and the staff of Reliance Communications. By using correlation, chi-square, one-way ANOVA and Bonferroni Post-Hoc test to analyse the data, the findings suggest a guideline to channel members by demonstrating appropriate control systems, required levels of co-operation, what constitutes adequate empowerment or training and many other benefits of implementing marketing strategies, that has led to an increase in satisfaction of RCOM's channel members in the Western (U.P) Circle telecom market.

Keywords: Telecom; channel relationship management and channel partners.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's cutthroat business environment, improving channel effectiveness is an hourly necessity and should be aligned with the organisation's strategic objectives. In order to attain growth, increase revenue, and achieve customer delight, an organisation should make a paradigm shift from Channel Relationship Management (CRM) to True Channel Partnership. According to Richard Shaw, Miller Heiman consultants, the Channel Partner Management (CPM) programme is based on a phenomenon that provides an approach and a set of helpful items to increase channel revenues, entrench loyalty to the brand, and increase the possibilities of winning customers' trust. The sales process also gets facilitated with smooth Channel Relationship Management.

Relationship marketing, in the recent past, has emerged as a leading strategic element of business. It has a direct effect on the firm's objective performance and also suggests that relationship marketing is more effective when the relationships are more critical to channel partners and customers. [1] Organisations are considering CRM as the strategic advantage to beat competition. There should be an element of trust and transparency within business in order to strengthen CRM.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Manufacturers, service providers, distributors, and retailers have understood that the management of distribution channel activities proposes vital opportunities for organisations to generate competitive advantage and attain outstanding financial growth. Channel activities are important sources of valued-added benefits to end-users, more than the value added by an

individual company's other marketing activities. Due to this substantially added value capacity, independent or individual organisations can acquire strategic advantage of reducing the costs of performing these activities, or using distribution activities to distinguish their offering. [2].

Robert et al., (2006) suggests that effectiveness is greater when relationships are built with an individual, than with a firm/organisation. John Hidalgo [3] appraised that market dynamics and customer needs are frequently changing, and telecom service providers need to respond to these changes fast. In some cases, telecom sales managers can share this responsibility, but many do not have the capacity to dedicate additional time to channel management. To address this difficulty, many telecom companies in India have employed channel managers to supervise channel performance and modify the sales channels demands as required. According to [4], continuous and regular channel management can lead to an effectively run business, as the sales force has clarity of their roles and channel partners are aware of their targets.

Companies should have relevant data to identify underperforming channel partners and perform corrective measures that cater to the frequent changes in the market. All of these contribute to bottom-line growth. According to Shanthi M, 2005 [5], most telecom companies measure sales performance with revenue targets, rather than profitability metrics. If sales force performance is measured on revenue alone, the sales force may look effective in meeting sales goals, but they may be sacrificing margins. Futrell CM. [6] states that aligning sales performance with profitability targets should drive the appropriate sales force behaviour. These metrics should extend to channel partners and

be evaluated regularly to yield the biggest increases to the bottom line.

According to Acqua MCG Report, [7], the needs and goals of channel partners may not always be related to those of the service providers or the consumers. Channel managers are the members of the producer organisation who are responsible for distribution performance. They should be able to design effective distribution channels and work in association with the channel partners. [8] states that channel members should be prompt enough to take the corrective measures based on periodic monitoring and evaluation. According to Pravat Suryakar [9], the performance of the channel partners is evaluated in various phases on the basis of efficacy and success rates of tapping the market segment, and also to know whether they are able to earn return on investment for a given capital. The penetration of the market is also an important parameter in measuring the effectiveness of the channel's reach to customers in remote areas. Supply chain managers must be flexible to see the big picture, while also focusing on the details. The key to doing both is in frequent and multi-horizon planning sessions: Weekly reviews for short-term planning, and regular reviews for long-term planning (AT Kearney, 2013).

3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

This paper explicates that a marketing channel acts as a differentiating factor and provides businesses with a competitive advantage. Marketing channels comprise several individuals and interdependent organisations that facilitate the process of making a product or service available to end-users. Channel members play a dominant role in moving products across the marketing channel. They also perform the role of sorting, making transactions routine and contractual efficiency. In addition, marketing channels perform several functions. These involve all activities that facilitate the flow of products from the manufacturer to the end user. As the product moves through different stages, different members in the distribution channel perform the functions of exchange, logistics and other supporting functions.

Companies can develop their own distribution channels, or delegate the functions to different channel members through channel integration, and enhance channel relationship management. Channel integration involves streamlining the different channel activities and information flow in

a manner that leads to mutual benefits to all the partners concerned. The advantages of Channel Relationship Management (CRM) are manifold. It reduces transaction costs, improves inventory management, reduces business opportunism, acts as a barrier to new entrants, bridges the time lapse and variety gaps between production and consumption, and reduces the business opportunities lost due to stock-outs and delayed delivery.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The setting of the data for this paper is in Western Uttar Pradesh, India. This study is empirical and quantitative. Using both field studies that involved in-depth interviews with 70 Reliance Communications managers, 76 distributors and 700 retailers from the population of 12000 retailers and published sources (e.g. periodicals, reports, annual reports etc.), a self-administered questionnaire was completed. Close-ended (5 Point Likert's scale) questions were used. Interviews were conducted with 70 managers across all levels of Reliance Communications. Some of the managers were contacted subsequently for clarifications and to obtain further information as and when it was needed. This phase was guided by a protocol that established guidelines to ensure uniformity in coverage and depth. Eight key variables were chosen to analyse the effectiveness of Channel Relationship Management (CRM) of RCOM and to assess its impact on channel partner's satisfaction level. It was developed from CRM literature relating to Channel partner satisfaction (Ogenyi Omar and Antony Kent [10]).

These eight variables fall into in-depth channel management activities; hence they are referred to as (V). All future references to the term "V1 to V8" can be taken in this context throughout the paper. The explanation of the variables is clearly stated before the data presentation in the study.

Internal data of selected channel partners and managers, and structured interviews with selected channel partners and companies across geographies and verticals, were consolidated and analysed. An endeavour was made to see if the Channel Relationship Management pattern or trend of Reliance Communications has an impact on the satisfaction of channel members in Western Uttar Pradesh. The empirical study is adopted by engaging the statistical methods extensively. The conclusions are extracted from the analysis of the data collected. The Chi-

square goodness of fit test, standard deviation, One-Way ANOVA and Bonferri Post Hoc test is used for the research paper.

5. PILOT STUDY

A pre-testing was done by getting 35 respondents to fill in the questionnaire. The data was collected through a pre-tested questionnaire filled in by trained investigators. The questionnaire was thoroughly explained to the investigators and a few questionnaires were completed in their presence as mock calls. Every effort was made to see that correct information was obtained from the person interviewed. The pilot study was conducted on major distributors of Meerut, Management Academicians and a number of managers of Branch Office at Meerut.

5.1 Hypothesis

The hypothesis, which guided this study, was stated as follows:

H1: The Company's Channel Relationship Management has an effective impact on the satisfaction of channel partners.

Flowing from the hypothesis, the following key variables were formulated: It is to note that the researcher has denoted the Variables as (**V**) and they are used as (V1, V2, V3,V11) across the tables used in the paper.

- V 1-** Channel members are being guided by RCom's staff.
- V 2-** RCom gives proper control systems, co-operation and adequate empowerment to channel members.
- V 3-** RCom punctually compensates various types of channel's distribution cost through reimbursements.
- V4-** RCom takes care of sales margins due to higher incidences of rate fluctuations.
- V5-** There is adequate support by RCom to channel partner in implementing several market strategies.
- V6-** RCom offers satisfactory credit in terms of interest and time period limit.
- V7-** The Frequency of FOS (Foot on Street) in territory is up to the mark and satisfactory.
- V8-** RCom offers satisfactory credit in terms of amount limit.
- V9-** RCom gives proper training for better distribution management.
- V10-** Appointment of new distributors, curbing the area of operations of existing

distributors due to any relevant reason is a source of dissatisfaction for channel members.

- V11-** RCom manages to distribute new and hot selling products equally to all channel members.

6. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research was conducted by interviewing either the partner or the proprietor of the distribution firms. Out of 700 retailers covered by the study, 82 percent were the FMCG distributors. The study revealed that the industry FMCG distributor dominated. These are the distributors who have already penetrated the market with FMCG goods and it's easy for Reliance to distribute the products through them in villages and remote areas.

In the educationally developed districts of Western (U.P) circle, the survey brings to light how new avenues of opportunities are open to the literate to become self-employed. Thanks to the introduction of cell phone services, a lot of people have found new and attractive business to benefit from. Business trait is developed in educated individuals to manage daily business circumstances, to judge situations appropriately as they arise and to take suitable course of action whenever necessary.

When an enquiry was made on the educational qualification of the cell phone distributors, it is found that 77 per cent of distributors are graduates, 18 per cent of them hold diploma and 5 per cent of them have studied up to higher secondary level. The survey revealed that all distributors are educated to do simple arithmetic and accounting and have an agreeable level of communication talent. This is evident from the qualification they possess. On an average the distributors have 5 FOS (Foot on street) in their firms.

Prior to analysis of the results, the research instrument was tested for its reliability. Reliability of the measurements was determined using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. The reliability coefficient indicates that the scale for measuring sales and distribution strategies is reliable.

Table 1.1 exhibits that degree of relationship was studied between key mediating variables of Channel Relationship Management. It covers the distributors of Reliance Communications in Western U.P. Circle. The above table shows that

correlations most of the variables, are highly significant. However the correlations between V1 and V6 (.42) and V1 and V7 (.42) are significant. It also reflects that the correlations between V2 and V4 (.41), V2 and V9 (.471), V2 and V10 (.45), and V4 and V7 (.53) are significant. It is observed from the table that the correlations between the V7 and V9 (.451), V7 and V10 (.49) significant. In addition to this it is also observed that the correlations between V2 and V7 (-0.24), V7 and V8 (-0.03), V7 and V11 (-0.02), are highly insignificant. The correlations between V1 and V2 (0.10), V1 and V8 (0.38), are insignificant. The correlations between V2 and V3 (0.31), and V7 (0.004) are insignificant.

Table 1.2 reflects that degree of relationship was studied between key mediating variables of Channel Relationship Management. It covers the retailers of Reliance Communications in Western U.P. Circle. It is to note that Variables (V3, V9 and V10) are not taken into consideration in this table. These variables are not applicable to retailers in Channel Relationship Management

activities of the organisation. A T-test can be used to measure the differences in the mean of these variables among distributors and Company Personnel. The above table1.2 shows that correlations most of the variables, are highly significant. However, the correlation between V2 and V7, V5 and V7, V6 and V7, V7 and V8, V8 and V11 are highly insignificant.

The Table 1.3 verifies that the degree of relationship was studied between key mediating variables of Channel Relationship Management. It covers employees corporate office and branch office employees of RCom in Western (U.P) circle. The above table shows that although the correlations between most of the variables are highly significant but some of them are also insignificant. The correlation between V1 and V6 (.207) is insignificant. The correlation between V3 and V11 (0.257) and V4 and V6 (0.18) is non significant. The degree of relationships is insignificant between V5 and V11 (.394), V6 and V11 (.02), V8 and V11 (0.4).

Table 1.1. Evaluation of relationship between key-mediating variables of channel relationship management on responses of distributors of RCom

CRM variables	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11
V1	1	0.1	0.78**	0.82**	0.59**	0.42*	0.42*	0.38	0.79**	0.71**	0.78**
V2		1	0.31	0.41*	0.3	0.78**	-0.24	0.8**	0.47*	0.45*	0.7**
V3			1	0.99**	0.96**	0.69**	0.63**	0.68**	0.97**	0.96**	0.73**
V4				1	0.92**	0.72**	0.53*	0.70**	0.98**	0.95**	0.83**
V5					1	0.69**	0.71**	0.68**	0.91**	0.94**	0.57**
V6						1	0.004	0.99**	0.83**	0.85**	0.75**
V7							1	-0.03	0.45*	0.49*	-0.02
V8								1	0.81**	0.83**	0.73**
V9									1	0.99**	0.82**
V10										1	0.75**
V11											1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); Cronbach Alpha = 0.8152, SE = 0.1486, 95%CI = 0.5241 to 1

Table 1.2. Evaluation of relationship between key-mediating variables of channel relationship management on responses of retailers of RCom

CRM variables	V1	V2	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V11
V1	1	0.49*	0.97**	0.74**	0.76**	0.38	0.70**	0.94**
V2		1	0.44*	0.74**	0.69**	-0.4	0.7**	0.54*
V4			1	0.83**	0.86**	0.35	0.8**	0.88**
V5				1	0.99**	-0.16	0.99**	0.71**
V6					1	-0.05	0.99**	0.7**
V7						1	-0.17	0.14
V8							1	-0.02
V11								1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); Cronbach Alpha = 0.8152 SE = 0.1486; 95% CI = 0.5241 to 1

Table 1.3. Evaluation of relationship between key-mediating variables of channel relationship management on responses of company personnel of RCom

CRM variables	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11
V1	1.0	0.99**	0.5*	0.99**	0.63**	0.2	0.85**	0.63**	0.94**	0.84**	0.92**
V2		1.0	0.5*	0.99**	0.63**	0.2	0.85**	0.63**	0.94**	0.84**	0.93**
V3			1.0	0.48*	0.96**	0.88**	0.87**	0.93**	0.75**	0.79**	0.25
V4				1.0	0.6**	0.18	0.83**	0.6**	0.94**	0.82**	0.93**
V5					1.0	0.87**	0.94**	0.99**	0.84**	0.9**	0.39
V6						1.0	0.66**	0.88**	0.51**	0.69**	0.02
V7							1.0	0.93**	0.97**	0.95**	0.65**
V8								1.0	0.83**	0.91**	0.4*
V9									1.0	0.95**	0.81**
V10										1.0	0.73**
V11											1.0

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); Cronbach Alpha=0.9622 SE=0.0296

The Cronbach's α yielded a value of 0.825 indicating the reliability of the scale. The significance was tested through the non-parametric chi-square goodness of fit (Table 1.4). The chi-square goodness of fit is the sum of the difference between the observed outcome and the expected outcome. The results indicate that distributor's agree that the companies proper Channel Relationship Management has a significant impact on the satisfaction of channel partners.

The Goodness of Fit chi-square tests whether the proportions of responses within each question are significantly different from a uniform distribution. The significance level where $p < 0.05$ is used for interpretation. It compares the observed data to the expected data under the assumption of a uniform distribution and calculates the Chi - Square value and its associated p value. It is evident that the majority of the distributors strongly agreed/ agreed that they are satisfied with the Channel Relationship Management of Reliance communications except its compensation policy of distribution cost through re-imbursements, RCom's support in implementing market strategies and taking care of sales margins because of rate fluctuation.

ANOVA is used to capture the impact of categorical items on certain relationships /associations. [11]. One-way ANOVA used in Tables 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7 confirms that there are substantial differences between the channel partners of RCom for the Channel Relationship Management (CRM) variables. Bonferroni Post-Hoc test was used for multiple comparisons aiming to measure the significant differences between the arrangements of the group.

The table depicts results of Post-Hoc Test. It was carried out to test the significant differences for Channel relationship management variables amongst distribution channel of RCOM in Western U.P circle. Differences are significant between Retailers and Distributors, and Retailers and Company Personnel. There combinations of differences were found to be non-significant among Distributor and Company personnel, reflecting that both have almost similar opinion towards the Chanel Relationship Management practices of RCOM, and there were less differences in their responses towards understanding the impact of Channel Relationship Management on the satisfaction of channel partners.

7. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

According to the data analysis the alternate hypothesis is established. To bring transparency and greater understanding it is important to summarize the key findings. Reliance Communications is making efforts to optimize Channel Relations aiming to making the product available to the remotest areas in the region; delivering customer service; providing credit and financial assistance; assortment convenience; breaking bulk; and giving advice and support to retailers. Support is provided by Reliance Communications in the form of local sales promotion, visits by sales staff, etc., and it is also critical in getting the best out of the channel members. Designing appropriate incentive schemes that motivate channel members to contribute in the right direction. Reliance Communication is working on discouraging

cross-territory sales by channel members of commitment towards the channel and helps in Western (UP) circle, which reinforces the building longer-term relationships.

Table 1.4. Channel relationship management variables 'Goodness of Fit' test

Variables	Chi square	Significant p-value
CM guided by RCom Staff	216.16	0.0001
RCom gives proper control, manpower, empowerment to CM	261.26	0.0001
RCom takes care of Sales Margins because of rate fluctuations	75.07	0.0001
RCom support's CM in implementing marketing strategies	145.01	0.0001
RCom offers satisfactory credit in interest and time period limit	155.67	0.0001
The Frequency of FOS in territory is up to the mark and satisfactory	608.7	0.0001
RCom offers satisfactory credit in terms of amount limit	369.64	0.0001
RCom distributes new and hot selling products equally to all CMs	348.76	0.0001

Sig at> 0.001

Table 1.5. One way ANOVA – channel relationship management variables between the distribution channels of RCom

Parameters	Distributors	Retailers	Company personnel
CM guided by RCom Staff	277	2242	266
RCom gives proper control, manpower, empowerment to CM	197	1707	246
RCom takes care of Sales Margins because of rate fluctuations	235	2022	247
RCom support's CM in implementing marketing strategies	223	2006	224
RCom offers satisfactory credit in interest and time period limit	231	2053	210
The Frequency of FOS in territory is up to the mark and satisfactory	333	2974	228
RCom offers satisfactory credit in terms of amount limit	226	1975	232
RCom distributes new and hot selling products equally to all CMs	225	2085	262

Table 1.6. Data summary

	Samples			
	1	2	3	Total
N	8	8	8	24
X Σ	1947	17064	1915	20926
-Mean	243.375	2133	239.375	871.9167
ΣX^2	486443	37360268	461009	38307720
Variance	1798.8393	137536.57	372.2679	872260.51
Standard deviation	42.4127	370.8592	19.2942	933.9489
Standard error	14.9952	131.1185	6.8215	190.6415

Table 1.7. ANOVA summary

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Treatment [between groups]	19084038	2	9542019	204.9	<.0001
Error Ss/BI	977953.75	21	46569.226		
Total	20061992	23			

Table 1.8. Multiple comparisons of channel relationship management variables with distribution channels of RCOM confidence intervals and statistical significance

Comparison	Mean1- Mean2	95% CI of difference	T	Significant? (P <0.05?)
1: Distributor Vs. Retailer	- 1889.625	- 2168.223 to - 1611.027	17.513	Yes
2: Retailer Vs. Company Personnel	+ 1893.625	+1615.027 to+ 2172.223	17.550	Yes
3: Distributor Vs. Company Personnel	+ 4.000	- 274.598 to + 282.598	0.037	No

The study of [2], is also reinforced that the channel activities are the important source of valued-added benefits to end users, more than the value added by other marketing activities. Reliance Communications increasingly offer support to distributors by helping giving them adequate stock, responding to their financial requests promptly aiming to run their setup effectively and also provide adequate training whenever necessary. [2], confirmed in the study that RCom's is heavily relying on the 'Above the line promotion strategy' to increase the sales revenue. It is to note that Reliance Communication is also taking help of technological innovations that help in building an efficient Channel relationship Management. For example efficient MIS can enable the company and dealer to take proactive actions on schemes, promotions and overall strategy. The study of (Robert et al., 2006), also confirmed that channel relationship marketing has a direct effect on the firm's objective performance and also suggest that relationship marketing is more effective when the relationships are more critical to channel partners and customers, for example, the study revealed that RCom gives proper control, manpower, empowerment to their Channel members, because RCOM wants the channel members to be satisfied. Moreover, RCom also wants to penetrate the market by tapping the maximum number of customers through the distribution channels.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is not free from limitations, for instance, it was undertaken in 5 districts of Western Up Circle only, hence the generalization of the data should not be done based on the results of this study only because the study had not taken rural areas into account.

The study considered CDMA (Cumulative Device Multiple Services) UIMs and it was limited to Prepaid Services only, hence the generalization

of the data should not be applied for GSM and postpaid services.

The Random Sampling technique was used for the study and was not based on Census Method. The questionnaire was lacked open-ended questions and a sworn translator did not translate the questionnaire in mother tongue Hindi, but was drafted into the English language.

9. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the extracted results that the Company's Channel Relationship Management has an effective impact on the satisfaction of channel partners in Western Uttar Pradesh circle. The functions or variables of the study help to set distribution objectives, channel design, logistics, image building, inventory management, payment & credit, promotional assistance, setting targets, coverage frequency, and motivating channel to perform. The study confirms that all the functions have a significant influence on the satisfaction of the channel partners. Distributors need to be continuously coaxed for sustainable relations and to deliver required level of performance.

The credit facility provided by Reliance Communications depends on the quantity of the sales revenue generated by the distributors. The more the sales revenue generated by the distributor, the more the credit facility by RCom. The credit limit is restricted only for handsets; Reliance Communications does not give credit for UIM cards. Moreover, the study also reveals that none of the Cellular Service Providers operating in Western (U.P) circle give credit facility to distributors for Stock Maintenance of UIM/ SIM cards. There are a few factors administered by Reliance Communications in the correct manner to enhance the sales performance of the organisation. The factors are motivating channel members, providing the channel members with market knowledge, providing lucrative credit facility, constant and

effective communication and being continuously aggressive in implementing marketing strategies.

The study confirms that Channel Relationship management of Reliance Communication has a significant impact on the channel partners of telecom industry in Western Uttar Pradesh Circle, India.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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