Using triangulation and multiple case studies to advance relationship marketing theory

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the contribution of qualitative methods and techniques in extending the understanding of relationship marketing theory.

Design/methodology/approach – The study investigated six Australian sporting organisations using multiple data collection methods including semi-structured interviews with several senior executives within each organisation, secondary and historical data sources and participant observation. The application of triangulation and multiple case studies is discussed in relation to their contribution toward a greater understanding of relationship marketing practice in the professional sport industry, as well as the barriers to the adoption of this strategy.

Findings – Using triangulation and a multiple case study approach provided a richness of information which, upon analysis within and across cases, revealed a number of commonalities and some limited diversity. Using this approach maximised the depth of information and increased the transferability of the findings to allow for the development of a conceptual model, which advances relationship-marketing theory.

Originality/value – Triangulation has not been used extensively in case study research nor has a multiple case study approach been commonly applied to the sport industry. This paper deconstructs the methods and their subsequent contribution to the findings of this study.

Keywords Relationship marketing, Qualitative methods, Leisure activities, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The use of multiple data sources can provide the case study researcher with a richer set of data and promote the transferability of the study's findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yin, 1994). The process of triangulation involves corroborating data from multiple perspectives to enhance the depth of understanding of a particular theme and to provide verification (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005; Creswell, 1998). Despite the benefits of this technique, it has been commented that researchers have not used it effectively (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2008). Further, the use of triangulation has been subject to interpretation and misunderstanding (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005). Silverman (2000, p. 289) cautions that "simple-minded triangulation of data fails to do justice to the embedded, situated nature of accounts."

In addition, case study research can benefit from using multiple cases add this adds "confidence to findings" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 29). The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling and the overall study is therefore regarded

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as more robust (Herriot and Firestone, 1983). Multiple case studies allow for exploration, description and explanation within each case, as well as across the cases to help provide "lessons learned" (Creswell, 1998, p. 249).

This paper demonstrates the benefits of the effective use of both triangulation and multiple case studies by outlining the application and contribution of these methods to a study undertaken to investigate consumer relationship marketing approaches in professional sporting organisations in Australia. Adopting these methods led to the development of a conceptual model to enrich existing theory in the relationship-marketing field. Data for this study were gathered from six organisations using multiple depth interviews within each organisation, historical and secondary documents both internal and external to the organisations as well as participant observation.

The following sections will outline the background to the research, the methods used and the contribution of triangulation and multiple case studies to the findings of the study. Finally, recommendations for researchers considering these techniques will be discussed.

Background to the study

While the focus of this paper is to discuss the contribution of the methods used, it is necessary to provide the context for this discussion in terms of the purpose of the study. This research sought to extend the understanding of relationship marketing in the context of an industry evolving in its strategic approach to marketing. In particular, this research sought to examine the factors driving the adoption of relationship marketing within major professional sporting organisations in Australia.

Relationship marketing more broadly is an established paradigm in modern marketing practice (Egan, 2004; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2002). Relationship marketing adopts a customer focus and its main benefits include greater customer retention, increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, and greater profits (Berry, 1983, 1995; Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Christopher *et al.*, 2002; Gronroos, 1996).

The propulsion of relationship marketing into prominence is commonly ascribed to the result of convergent influences. Generally, technology is agreed upon as a key-driving factor in the growth and relevance of relationship marketing (Berry, 1995; O'Malley and Mitussis, 2002; Sheth, 2002; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2002; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). In addition, authors such as Bitner (1995), Buttle (1996), Gronroos (1994), Peppers and Rogers (1995) and Sheth (2002) have identified increased competition, more demanding and sophisticated consumers, changing buying patterns, increasing quality standards, innovation, supplier partnering, the unreliability of traditional marketing and the inadequacy of quality in itself to create sustainable competitive advantage.

The practice of relationship marketing can be thought of as a holistic approach to marketing, rather than a distinct set of strategic tools. It is a philosophy of doing business that focuses on keeping and improving existing customer relationships (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2002). However, many authors have indicated particular strategic approaches and benefits that may occur from this holistic approach. For instance, Christopher *et al.* (2002) indicate that the changing of focus to a relationship marketing approach will assist the firm to retain customers, offer superior product/service benefits, pursue long-term vision, emphasise exemplary customer service, engender customer commitment and ensure quality. Similarly, from the customer viewpoint and to emphasise the win-win nature of relationship marketing, benefits accrue to the customer who engages in long-term relationships with the firm, such as, achieving greater efficiency in their decision making, reducing the task of information processing, achieving more cognitive consistency in their decisions and reducing the perceived risks associated with future purchase choices (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Varki and Wong (2003) further indicate that relationship marketing is an increasingly important strategy for retaining customers and that in certain industries consumers who are more involved express greater interest in engaging in relationships with providers.

While the tenets of relationship marketing are well accepted (Egan, 2004; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2002), further research is required to understand the application, operation and understanding of this approach across specific industries – in this case, professional sport. Lachowetz *et al.* (2001, p. 184) suggest a need for more research on relationship marketing and state that:

> [. . .] more sport organizations . . . should incorporate relationship-marketing practices into their strategies to develop a more loyal customer base.

This view is reiterated by Bee and Kahle (2006) who indicate that, despite significant study of relationship marketing in numerous contexts, little research and theoretical development has occurred in sport. Increasingly large numbers of people follow sporting events across the world, bringing substantial profit to a number of sport-related industries (Lavarie and Arnett, 2000). Sports tourism alone is valued at over US$51 billion worldwide (Biddiscombe, 2004), while global sponsorship of professional sports teams exceeded US$33 billion in 2006 (de Mesa, 2006). Given the size and growth of the industry, it can be argued that it would be valuable to understand how this particular context may affect the adoption and successful implementation of relationship marketing practices.

The recognition that sport can benefit from a relationship marketing approach is well accepted (Brenner, 1997; Kelley *et al.*, 1999; McDonald and Stavros, 2007) and the notion of referring to fans as customers has been noted in the literature (Cohen, 1996). Reasons cited for the embracing of relationship marketing within sport are increased technological innovation, the maturing of sport marketing research, and increased entertainment and leisure options leading to greater competitive challenges (McDonald and Milne, 1997). Shani (1997) offered the first insights into the application of relationship marketing in sport by proposing a theoretical model developed from several existing models in the literature. Subsequent research however has been limited and has primarily adopted a narrow focus (e.g. Tower *et al.*, 2006). Further, case study research in this area has tended to focus on individual sporting organisations without necessarily transferring findings to broader theoretical development (e.g. Cousens *et al.*, 2001; Kelley *et al.*, 1999; Lachowetz *et al.*, 2001; Lapio and Speter, 2000).

Given the previous research efforts, insufficient literature exists to evaluate the extent of relationship marketing practices in the sport sector or to attempt to provide a framework for understanding the strategic approaches or the value that relationship marketing may bring to sporting organisations. Further, while relationship marketing is a prominent topic in the academic literature, the majority of studies overwhelmingly focus on the consumer's perspective, primarily seeking to further understand the drivers and motivations for people wishing to establish an on-going connection to an organisation or brand. While this understanding is important, the relationship is ultimately vested within the organisation, which has the power to shape the product offering and associated marketing elements, as well as to initiate the appropriate relationship management systems.

This study thus sought to address the gaps in theory in two ways. First, this study focused on relationship marketing from the organisational perspective, specifically exploring the factors driving the adoption and application of this strategy. Second, this study examined these issues across a diverse range of sporting organisations.

Methods

The focus of the study required an intimate understanding of the operations of various organisations, a charting of events in their history and an identification of strategies, issues and contemporary practices. The research question suggested a need for the richness of data that qualitative case studies are able to provide. This approach can provide details of the processes that lead to the results, rather than focussing on the results themselves, and "get under the skin" (Gillham, 2000, p. 11) of an organisation to explore the complex issues that are beyond the scope of quantitative approaches.

Six cases were ultimately undertaken for this study. Stake (2000) argues that with case studies the sample size is too small to warrant random selection and that for qualitative inquiry "a purposive sample, building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study" (Stake, 2000, p.446) is appropriate. Primarily, the cases examined in this study were selected because they allowed insights into the major sport organisations as identified by revenues and attendance. This decision was also based on access, location, cooperation, relevance in terms of size, scope and operation, reduction of heterogeneity, theoretical applicability, likely outcomes, possible uniqueness and representation of the Australian sporting landscape. Ultimately, leading team sports by attendance were represented. These were Soccer, Australian Football, Basketball and Rugby League. Cricket was considered from a national governing body perspective and the study also included motor racing in the form of the Australian Formula 1 Grand Prix.

One aspect that characterises good case study research is the use of many different information sources to provide depth to the case (Creswell, 1998). It has been suggested that triangulation is fundamental to ensuring quality in case studies and greater use should be made of this practice (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2008). As highlighted in the introduction, triangulation of data sources was used to uncover a diversity of information in a context that would allow transferability both within and across cases. The collection methods used in this study are discussed as follows.

Semi-structured interviews with key personnel at each organisation were conducted and followed up with additional interviews as necessary. Initial contact was made with the senior marketing person in each organisation and preliminary discussions were undertaken to determine the people most suitable to interview. There was great variety in job titles amongst the organisations, with some firms having one person responsible for the overall marketing function, while others had a variety of defined areas. For example at one Australian football club, informants included a Director, a Chief Executive Officer, two types of "Membership Manager" and a Communication Manager. There is limited guidance in the literature as to the number of interviews that should be conducted, both within an organisation and with an informant. Prior to the interviews, a brief guide was developed to assist the researcher cover key issues for discussion. This guide was not given to informants and was only loosely referred to by the researcher once interviews began. Interviews were conducted in the informant's organisation and each interview lasted approximately one hour. These sessions were taped or, in the few instances where this was not possible, detailed notes were taken. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and presented back to informants for adjustment, comment and to establish their compliance with the issues noted. The interviewer sought permission from the informants to contact them again should additional questions arise and informants were agreeable to this. Follow-up interviews, when conducted, sought clarifications of comments made, or were used to discuss new events that were of relevance.

Informants were encouraged to be frank and forthright and some of the sensitive information that was ultimately provided suggests that this occurred. Questions were related to the type of database system utilised, relationship marketing strategies previously undertaken, strategic goals that had been set as well as the internal marketing and organisational structures that existed to support marketing activities. The interviews for the various organisations were not conducted in any planned order as each organisation was treated independently. A deliberate decision was made during the interviews not to refer to the findings, thoughts, discussion or outcomes of interviews with other organisations. It was considered important in this study to initially preserve the individuality of the organisations before the data analysis began. This process focused the interviews on the informant's views, rather than an interpretation of the researcher's observations or influences from other organisations.

Participant observation also formed an integral part of the approach used in this study. This technique is considered appropriate for studying relationships among people and events, the organisation of people and events and the processes undertaken (Jorgensen, 1989). Aside from attending the events of the organisations considered in this study, where possible the actions and operations of the organisations' marketing and managerial functions were observed and noted. These activities included meetings, customer functions and management discussions, providing insights, such as conflicts over strategic priorities, which could not have been obtained in any other way.

In addition, all informants were asked for appropriate documents that had relevance to the discussion. Historical and secondary data documents are seen as providing an insight into actions, events and reasons that might not otherwise be readily available (Stake, 1995). Yin (1994, p. 81) suggests that for case studies, the most important function of documents is to "... corroborate and augment evidence from other sources". Similarly, information from a variety of sources, including promotional material, press reports and industry and government reports, was independently obtained and analysed. This information was particularly helpful in providing background and, where possible, secondary information on the particular sport organisation was collected and read prior to interviews being conducted. This approach allowed specific incidents to be mentioned and commented upon. The very public nature of sport meant that considerable information was readily available. For example, numerous books have been written about the establishment of World Series Cricket in the 1970s, which in itself heralded a new approach to consumer interaction with the sport. Similarly, most of the informants were particularly open about sharing strategic plans (where they existed). In the case of cricket for example, the strategic plan is a publicly available document. Only one organisation was guarded about documents and releasing information.

Data were analysed using within case analysis in the first instance to identify themes, content and issues. The data were then presented in a format that best suited the nature of the information collected in line with the methodological approach outlined. Prior to reaching the final case study structure, each organisation was analysed independently. Once all the necessary information was collected, the transcripts and additional information were read and re-read to gain a sense of the situation in each organisation and most importantly, to allow diversities to emerge. This process served to identify key issues and also provided the opportunity to seek clarification where necessary or, on occasion, additional information. This complete immersion in the data was followed by writing up a preliminary case study for each organisation. These early cases contained facts, interpretation and links back to the literature where necessary. These "raw cases" varied in style, format, length, content and structure.

The transcripts of interviews, secondary data and participative inquiry data were then revisited, and utilising the foundation of the raw cases, for the first time the cases were thought of as a whole. Issues, concepts and variables that would bring the researcher closer to answering the research questions were identified. Comments, incidents and repetition were extracted by considering the words as well as the documented actions and attitudes of respondents and the approach of organisations. The aim at this point was to produce a set of case studies in a format that would allow commonalities to emerge.

Triangulation and multiple case studies in practice

While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the findings of the research study but rather the methods involved, it is useful to briefly comment on the outcome of the study to provide some context for the subsequent discussion. The findings suggest that while relationship marketing is acknowledged, and indeed welcomed as a concept by professional sport administrators, their efforts at implementation have been rudimentary, largely unplanned and generally sporadic. Relationship marketing efforts often reflect a reactive rather than proactive strategic approach. A range of barriers to relationship marketing were noted as follows: inefficient databases, inappropriate organisational structures, limited internal marketing, financial constraints, overambitious targets, limited research and poor planning processes. On the other hand, there were examples of organisations that have progressed to incorporating aspects of a relationship marketing philosophy into their organisational and operational structures. Ultimately, a number of key themes emerged across the cases that, in conjunction with the existing literature, allowed for the development of a conceptual model that highlights the likely progression from a transactional to relationship marketing approach in sport. Along this path from a customer acquisition focus to a customer retention focus are a catalyst to readjust marketing, community engagement, internal marketing, consideration of the most valuable new and exiting markets, appropriate research systems and a suitable database. This study significantly extends Shani's (1997) theoretical model and presents the first empirical insights into the issues pertaining to the adoption of relationship marketing in professional sport.

It is unlikely that the richness of data needed for the development of the model would have eventuated without the use of a multiple case approach and triangulation of data, as described in the previous section. This section will discuss the contribution of these qualitative research methods in advancing the development of relationship marketing theory. The following discussion will focus on the contribution of the multiple case study approach, the multiple and repeated interviews and the application of triangulation in practice.

Multiple case studies

The use of purposefully selected, multiple case studies was considered critical to this study as it allowed a broader view to be undertaken across the industry. The sport industry is relatively heterogeneous, with considerable diversity amongst the range of activities and operations of each organisation. Within Australia there are several competing codes of football played nationally as well as a range of other highly attended sports and sport events. By ultimately selecting organisations from across the major team sports, as reflected by attendance and revenues, the data provided a more robust representation of the state of relationship marketing than would have been achieved by focusing on one or two sports. This approach allowed the researcher to achieve a level of saturation that ultimately revealed common issues and themes pertaining to the industry in general. While certain issues were more prevalent in some cases than others, ultimately a number of commonalities, such as the need for an appropriate database, became apparent. This finding facilitated an explanation as to why relationship marketing had not been fully adopted within the industry and identified the barriers that had been encountered. These themes or issues ultimately served to address the original research question and, most importantly from a methodological perspective, allowed the study to offer some degree of transferability. By distilling the information from these organisations into a series of common issues, the researcher could ascertain with greater confidence the extent of the application of relationship marketing within the industry. Further, the researcher could identify the circumstances that would allow this strategy to be fully integrated into marketing practice.

These emergent themes thus provided a framework for discussion and the foundation for a conceptual model based on empirical evidence drawn from a wide variety of qualitative approaches. The issues exposed were applicable within case but also across the different sport organisations. Ultimately, it was revealed to the researcher that organisations within the sport industry are more similar than they are different. For example, these similarities included a unified view of the industry's benchmark organisation, Manchester United, as well as frustration with the limited amount of research available and surprise at an inability to bring season-ticket renewals to a level comparable to other service industries, despite the fanaticism of sport consumers.

Multiple interviews

Another critical aspect of the methods used in this study was the use of multiple interviews within the organisation as well as multiple interviews with some of the informants. While the concept of relationship marketing suggests that it is driven by the marketing department, within the sporting industry context a marketing department is not always readily identifiable. The original research plan envisaged interviews with the marketing director or equivalent. However, it was soon discovered that not all organisations had this role, and where the role was identified, responsibilities varied. For example, the senior marketing role on occasion focussed almost exclusively on sponsorship, rather than the consumer-interface. As a result, the initial interview conducted with each organisation's senior executive to ascertain the structure and responsibilities across the organisation was critical to the identification of the appropriate people for interview. Further, this preliminary discussion proved fruitful in not only identifying internal structures but also management philosophies. Multiple interviews within a sport organisation were typically essential given that responsibility for customer relationship management is often shared across a number of roles such as the season ticket manager, marketing manager, public affairs and media manager as well as the general manager. Often, the views of the different managers were not aligned, which provided an interesting insight into the organisation.

The initial plan to conduct a single interview with the appropriate staff member was soon abandoned as it became apparent that a series of interviews would yield greater depth of information and more appropriately lead to the sense of saturation as advocated by Guba and Lincoln (1994). The data that was gained through a second and third interview, as staff became more forthcoming, was of significant benefit to this study. In the latter interviews, the elements of "conversation" referred to by Carson *et al.* (2001, p.74) were evident and a sense of trust had been established. This aspect of trust related to the extent of secondary data that was provided by the organisation. What had been "difficult to locate" or "unavailable" initially, was readily produced in later interviews. Further, the frank and forthright information provided in these latter interviews was testimony to the rapport established. For example, data provided by one organisation indicated that attendance figures were altered in order for the team to appear more popular to the broader community and in doing so, increase attendance at games.

Triangulation

Utilisation of triangulation of data collection methods not only helped to understand the motivating factors behind the move towards a different marketing approach, but also the historical context within which such events occurred. In addition to the interviews, data were generated through participant observation as well as qualitative and quantitative secondary sources such as media reports and company documents. These documents were particularly useful for providing a sense of the historical context for various aspects of the organisation and served as important records of activity. One of the key findings of this research was the role of a crisis in providing the impetus for a sport organisation's adoption of relationship marketing. This fact was acknowledged in the interviews and corroborated by historical documents, including management and media reports that had deconstructed or evaluated financial or other survival pressures. One example of these pressures shaping future activities was an organisation that had used a proposed merger in the 1990s to totally reorganise their operations including a move towards a modern marketing orientation. This event was well captured by various historical sources, but was also a prominent component of interviews with various staff members who indicated first-hand how the traumatic nature of certain events had galvanised the organisation.

The use of secondary data, either gathered from the organisation or from external sources, proved a critical component of this study. These data sometimes contradicted statements made by informants in interviews or highlighted incidents that were not mentioned in an interview for various reasons. The secondary data also provided tangible examples of the issues alluded to in interviews. For example, in one organisation several management reports (or lack thereof) confirmed comments that inadequate strategic planning had occurred. In some instances management reports detailed unrealistic objectives, such as season-ticket numbers, or assumptions that highlighted the misunderstanding of relationship marketing or reflected inadequate resource planning for it to occur successfully. A decision was made in this study to consider secondary data prior to the interview stage; however additional sources often emerged during or subsequent to the interviews. Where these new data raised questions pertinent to the research question, a follow-up interview was sought. This proved helpful in terms of clarification and in also revealing insights that could not have occurred using a singular data source. There were also instances of documents that indicated inconsistencies with respondent interviews, which proved particularly enlightening.

In cases where company documents were not available or would not be provided, the nature of the industry meant that alternative sources were often available. The sport industry is relatively transparent and widely monitored by a range of organisations such as the media, government and supporter groups. It is not unusual for a sport, particularly a major one receiving government funding (which is the case with almost all sport in Australia), to have multiple stakeholder reports available. Where the obvious alternative sources of information are not available to a researcher, consultation with fringe groups, which have been incorporated into the study to increase the depth of understanding behind the actions of various groups, can be fruitful. For example, one organisation's reluctance to produce attendance figures was ameliorated by an outside group who had also been interviewed. This environmental protest collective had taken action against the event organiser due to the location of the event and in the process had conducted an analysis of attendance patterns. They were happy to release this information to the researcher.

The participant observation component of this study was a powerful method of collecting data, providing context and identifying commonalities across cases. In many instances, similar challenges and the manner with which they were dealt with were observed. The findings from this aspect of the data collection were important in establishing the (lack of) relationship marketing orientation of the organisations considered.

The following extracts from the researcher's notes illustrate the value of the observation process, in this case highlighting the differences between the organisational and consumer perspectives on the same issue:

> One organisation introduced fan forums as a way to improve communication with supporters. Held twice a year, the sessions are conducted prior to matches in a specially set up venue that allows for a small theatre atmosphere. The researcher attended the first forum and approximately 250 supporters were in attendance. After a brief presentation by the CEO of the national league in which the club participates, a lengthy question and answer session occurred in which club and league executives provided frank and forthright answers to questions from the floor. It was apparent that the supporters had many questions about decisions the club had taken and had felt confused by mixed messages communicated through the media. One member asked the league CEO if the organisation was truly committed to a club in this particular city, as there was a sense that they were very much focussed on other markets. The CEO insisted that the city was a critical component in the league's long-term plans and that the league wished to work more closely with the club in that city to help it establish a greater presence in the state. This helped to quell rumours circulating that the club was to be relocated or disbanded altogether.
>
> The club CEO's opening comments at the forum were particularly significant in that he indicated that the club really belonged to the members and that he and those on stage with him (other executives) were merely custodians of the team in this relationship. Whilst stirring in tone and spirit, this was strongly questioned afterwards by a club member who indicated that "… in reality the [club] is a business" and should the owners of that business decide it was no longer viable or could be more viable elsewhere, "… they were free to pack up and move if need be, irrespective of what club members felt." The CEO's response to this was essentially the entire supporter relationship concept of the club in a neat capsule. He admitted that "… yes the [club name] were a private business" but supporters and members needed to "… look past that" and think of their bond with the team as being crucial in its development. Whilst the member who asked the question was not able to follow up given time constraints, it appeared from his body language that the answer did little to alleviate his concerns.

Participant observation also allows spontaneous, informal interviewing to occur, opening up insights and perspectives from groups that may not be readily reached, particularly during the experience of sport product consumption. On several occasions the researcher was able to interact with consumers and add to the observations. One of the limitations of observational research, despite the ability to see what is happening, is the inability to understand why it is happening. By being present as well as able to interact with the club supporters, it was possible on occasion to clarify the "why" component. As an example, in the above fan forum scenario, the researcher spoke to several members after the event. These members explained that they were generally delighted at the forum concept and particularly pleased with the honesty with which their questions had been answered, despite the appearance of disgruntled faces at times. It was clear that the forum had provided an outlet to fans and was valuable in establishing a sense of openness.

Of particular value was participant observation undertaken within the organisation. Attendance at meetings, planning sessions and corporate events allowed a greater understanding of the dynamics within a group, particularly where a hierarchical process exists. It was not uncommon to see a misalignment of corporate objectives espoused by senior executives and the issues faced by staff who had to deal with the customer interface. In some instances a focus on short-term success belied the need for a longer-term marketing approach. In one example, unrealistic membership targets by a team president that were stated at a board meeting necessitated a desperate transactional approach to marketing operations that confounded any attempts by a lower-level manager to introduce membership retention as a priority. Thus, by watching an organisation as a collective, the richness of data and depth of understanding was greatly enhanced, providing a stronger contextualisation of the processes undertaken and the factors underlying them.

Implications and conclusion

The application and extension of relationship marketing is particularly important given its dominant presence in the modern marketing paradigm. By testing and understanding its implementation in the field, researchers can gain unique and helpful insights into the issues that have facilitated the progression of relationship marketing, or conversely, hampered its adoption. Using the context of this study, this paper has identified the positive and unique contribution that triangulation and multiple case studies can make in advancing theory. In this study, these methods provided a richness of data, which allowed a number of commonalities to emerge relating to the adoption of relationship marketing within an industry. As a result, these findings were developed into a conceptual mode,l which makes a contribution to the existing theory.

As outlined in the previous section, the qualitative methods utilised facilitated insights that would have been difficult to ascertain in other ways. These insights were greatly enhanced by specifically adopting a triangulated data collection approach through the use of interviews, secondary and historical data and participant observation. In particular, the practice of conducting follow-up interviews, contrasting internal and external data sources and correlating and unearthing discoveries through the prism of participant observation.

We would encourage case study researchers who seek to develop theory to consider methods that add to the quality of their findings. In particular, triangulation and, where possible, a multiple case study approach can enhance the robustness and transferability of qualitative research. These approaches should focus not just on revealing information, but also matching, assessing and contrasting data sources and seeking to unravel information from respondents in a longitudinal series of encounters, where a conversation can develop.

These recommendations are not straightforward, given the variety of approaches that exist within the qualitative research field. The nature of multiple data sources and multiple cases throws up long held debates and possible limitations that can polarise researchers. These controversial issues include determining an adequate number of cases to be studied (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), the appropriateness of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 2000) and the correct use of triangulation (Silverman, 2000). Triangulation should not be used to compensate for the weaknesses of one method or with the aim of providing the complete picture (Silverman, 2000). Conversely, each data source should be appreciated in its own context and used to increase the rigor and richness of diversity in the data and finally, to allow for the emergence of an inconsistent picture, which, to qualitative researchers, is considered to be a welcome and additional source of data (Denzin, 1989).

By using triangulation appropriately across multiple cases, researchers can justifiably harness this diversity and rigor and, as is the aim of this special issue, help with the advancement of marketing theory.

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