

## A Mediating Role and Influence of the Relationship Marketing Success Toward Cluster Productivity in Thailand

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**Abstract:** Global industry trends in a new dimension place much importance on building collaboration networks among industrial groups. Not only does this encourage the development of the efficiency of joint production but also stimulate competition to upgrade the enterprises' competitive potentials within the networks and at the international level. According to some previous research on cluster operations the success factor resulted from building the relationship of members within the clusters harmoniously and continuously based on the existing resources in order to mutually produce overall productivity of the cluster. However, it was found that there were not many research studies on the factors influencing the success of clusters in the area of the mediating role of the relationship marketing success toward cluster productivity in Thailand. Thus, the objectives of this research are to study and present the conceptual framework of the influential factors, namely, relational factor, resource factor, information technology factor, relationship benefits factor and entrepreneurs' characteristics factor. Hopefully, the research findings will add more valuable knowledge on the relationship marketing and be useful to cluster development in Thailand.

**Key words:** Relationship Marketing (RM), RM success, cluster, productivity, knowledge

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### INTRODUCTION

New marketing theories has put much emphasis on the overall plans by balancing between the production-centric principle and the customer-centric one. So, it needs to create an awareness on the relationship between businesses and customers; building interaction is the main factor in making the balance. At present, enterprises have to change their marketing paradigm. The ultimate goal is not to obtain the highest sale volume but to maximize the satisfaction of the customers as a result of relationship management between the enterprises and customers (Brito, 2011). It is generally seen that every enterprise has given much importance on building the relationship among enterprises such as the relationship with suppliers, distributors, government sectors and even competitive businesses. Besides, good relationship will lead to collaboration between businesses to be able to share and exchange resources. Practically, new marketing trends tend to follow the relationship marketing concept by integrating the relationship of all sectors concerned with corporate development and marketing activities (Brito, 2011; Ford and McDowell, 1999; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Other studies indicated that the role of relationship marketing affected organization competency. For example,

the relationship marketing can increase benefits and create value for customers in the long run (Brito, 2011; Luigi and Mihai, 2011; East *et al.*, 2005; Wagner, 2005; Hakanson, 2005; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). In other words, the relationship marketing is an effective mechanism in offering values to customers (Barry and Terry, 2008). Lusch *et al.* (2010) pointed out that relationship marketing also helps building business networks and is a tool for supply chain management (Malshe and Sohi, 2009; Mentzer and Gundlach, 2010; Stock *et al.*, 2010), leading to increase organizational competency and sustainably competitive advantages. Moreover, a balance of the relationship throughout the supply chain enables enterprises to meet the needs of customers when needed (Hult, 2011; Scheer *et al.*, 2010) which subsequently decrease the uncertainty risk of market demand (Kanagal, 2009; Alam, 2012).

In the dynamic global world and new industrial trends, it was found that international enterprises have placed much importance to collaborative networks among industrial groups, aiming to enhance collaboration, assistance and development of each industrial enterprise. Networking not only promotes efficiency development of joint production of entrepreneurs but also stimulates competition to upgrade the potential level of each enterprise and align it with other enterprises within the network to be able to compete at the international level (Andersen and Bollingtoft, 2011).

The past research indicates about the basic factor within a cluster that often times, the cluster consolidation is affected by the internal structure especially in terms of different rules and regulations in various groups of interdisciplinary cooperation (Welter *et al.*, 2011). Emphasis is also placed on creating the relationship between stakeholders and business partners (Payne *et al.*, 2005) to make the enterprise sustainable and increase economic value in the form of voluntary exchange to the stakeholders which is in accordance with a research study which specified that one significant success factor of cluster is due to the harmonious and continuous relationship of members within cluster based on corporate existing resources for overall productivity (Hult, 2011; Sweeney *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, the researcher aims to get the answers to the following questions: what are influential factors on the relationship market success and how are they influential? Does the relationship market success affect the productivity of the cluster in Thailand? This research is distinguished from other previous ones in that most studies have investigated the success factors of the operation of enterprises or entrepreneurs not of the clusters. So far, there have been few research papers with similar purposes and there has been no research that aims to relate the influential factors to the cluster success with respect to the influence of the relationship marketing success on the cluster productivity in Thailand.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS

**Relational factor:** The model by Hunt *et al.* (2006) on the relationship marketing success is based on commitment-trust theory. The research points out six influential relational factors on the relationship marketing success including trust, commitment, cooperation, keeping promises, creating shared values and communication. According to most research studies, the influential factors on the relationship marketing that affect the formulation of shared values are trust and commitment factors as they are the main influential factors on relationship marketing (Handfield and Bechtel, 2002; Zabkar and Makovec Brencic, 2004). Similarly, Amett and Badrinarayanan pointed out that the influential factors on the relationship marketing success comprised the factors on trust, commitment and communications (Abodor, 2002; Anderson and Narus, 1990; Czepiel, 1990; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Simpson and Mayo, 1997; Verhoef *et al.*, 2002; Wilson, 1995; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Heffernan *et al.*, 2008) which complied with Vieira *et al.* (2011) who said that those factors were basic supportive factors for the relationship marketing

success and would lead to honesty and loyalty and customer satisfaction (Alrubaiee, 2012; Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer, 2010; Bahri *et al.*, 2013). Another research finding suggested that there was a clear evidence pointing out that the three influential factors on relationship marketing had a direct effect on organization competency. According to Amine *et al.* (2012), the influential factors that affected businesses directly were communication, trust and commitment. Likewise, Bahri *et al.* (2013) said that the factors on trust, commitment and communication had a direct effect on organization competency in terms of customers' satisfaction aspect in service industries. In this study, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

- H<sub>1</sub>: the relational factor has a positive influence on the relationship marketing success
- H<sub>2</sub>: the relational factor has a direct influence on the cluster productivity

**Resource factor:** In this research, researcher has studied the resource-based view theory which influences corporate competency. Most research works have presented similar findings that resource use within the whole organization and among allied organizations can create competitive advantages for the cluster (Hunt *et al.*, 2006; Penrose, 1959; Wenerfelt, 1984; Hunt, 2012; Sweeney *et al.*, 2011; Chicksand *et al.*, 2012). Besides, Hunt *et al.* (2006) specified that relationship marketing theory gave much importance on the influential factor on the relationship marketing based strategies which is supported by Penrose (1959). Furthermore, Lippman and Rumelt (1982) and Wenerfelt (1984) cited that resource-based view can be used as an input process to enhance competitive advantages (Paladino, 2007, 2009; Hunt, 2000; Hunt and Morgan, 1995) which is in line with McCafferty *et al.* (2013) who pointed out that dependence on resource within and between businesses is a basic method in creating relationship. According to Das and Teng (2000), enterprises may have inadequate or excess resources for operations sharing resources with business partners can complement to success and create competitive advantages (Hult, 2011; Achrol and Kotler, 1999; Das and Teng, 2000; Sarkas *et al.*, 2001). Besides, business partners and stakeholdres can also help increase values to customers with respect to resources within the cluster (Johanson and Vahlne, 2011). Likewise, Sweeney *et al.* (2011) supportively indicated that the consolidation of the business clusters to make use of the resources of the allies makes an operation more efficient than doing business alone. The study by Carlson *et al.* (2011) indicated that sharing resources

within organization and among businesses can lead to successful production of new merchandise. Therefore, researcher proposes the following hypothesis.

- H<sub>3</sub>: the resource factor has a positive influence on the relationship marketing success
- H<sub>4</sub>: the resource factor has a direct influence on the cluster productivity

**Information technology factor:** Information Technology (IT) System is a very important component in businesses because it is a tool used for practicing and solving problems as well as reminding organizations of creating shared values among organizations and business partners (Hammervoll and Toften, 2010; Zablah *et al.*, 2005). Shin (2006) pointed out that SMEs operation would gain more benefits through IT facilitation by strengthening the relationship between organizations (Sandulli *et al.*, 2012). Michael (2007) also found that the expenditure on hardware investment has a negative effect on businesses and Return on Assets (ROA). Other research studies proposed considerations in consolidating production power with various organizations to gain more benefits by using IT system (Ravichandran *et al.*, 2009). In SMEs' export businesses, IT is also essential in marketing management to increase performance efficiency (Lucchetti and Sterlacchini, 2004; Sandulli *et al.*, 2012). According to the surveys of export businesses, IT resources have increased the efficiency of exporters (Zhang *et al.*, 2008). It was also found that there is a positive correlation between IT resource and financial abilities of SMEs export businesses in China. In addition, Liu and Ravichandran (2008) revealed that the service industries that were consolidated geographically and supported the use of IT and the relation with various organizations have increased organization competency. The finding was in congruence with Chari who gave a remark that an increase in financial management was closely related to the use of IT. The researcher therefore proposes the hypothesis as follows:

- H<sub>5</sub>: the information technology factor has a positive influence on the relationship marketing success
- H<sub>6</sub>: the information technology factor has a direct influence on the productivity of the cluster

**Relationship benefits factor:** True relationship requires a balance of exchanged items and returns gained (O'Toole and Donaldson, 2000; Wagner and Lindemann, 2008; McGinn *et al.*, 2003). Mburu analyzed the benefits incurred from the relation between buyers and suppliers and used it to measure the performance of the buyers. This research showed the relationship success and its direct and positive influence on the buyers' efficiency as well as the development of other infrastructures which

supports the successful relation between buyers and suppliers. The benefits gained from the strong relation strengthens the relationship between organizations and results in improvement of organization competency (Luo *et al.*, 2006). Besides, Ghosh also stated about the increased competency of organization, namely, reduced capital, value-added innovation and tacit relation in organizations (Wathne *et al.*, 2001; Uzzi, 1997). Based on the findings mentioned, researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

- H<sub>7</sub>: the relationship benefits factor has a positive influence on the relationship marketing success
- H<sub>8</sub>: the relationship benefits factor has a direct influence on the cluster productivity

**Entrepreneurs' characteristics factor:** A cluster takes place from the relations by means of consolidating various business organizations into groups to complement and support one another based on competitiveness which will lead to the an increased efficiency of the business group members. The previous research pointed out in harmonious voice that the influential entrepreneurs' characteristics are those who determine the relationship marketing which affects the organization competency (Rody and Stearns, 2013; Sadler-Smith *et al.*, 2003; Immyxai and Takahashi, 2009; Sam *et al.*, 2012; Covin and Slevin, 1988; Naman and Slevin, 1993; Wiklund, 1999; Chandrakumara *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, Daft specified that job responsibilities of managers and entrepreneurs are complicated and require a variety of skills for organization management including business conceptualization, human relations and technical skills whereas Alessandri (2008) verified that the influence of risks would lead to decision making process. Consequently, decision-making process has an influence on the decision of entrepreneurs (Mahmood, 2008). Ramo *et al.* (2009) mentioned about the abilities of entrepreneurs in terms of emotional socialization skill and organization productivity. To conclude, managerial skills have a significant effect on risk management and product development. Besides, organization innovation and learning organization factors support and complement entrepreneurs to have competitive advantages (Garcia-Morales *et al.*, 2006). The entrepreneurs' managerial abilities have a significant positive influence on the operation of SMEs (Dani *et al.*, 2012). Based on the above findings, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

- H<sub>9</sub>: the entrepreneurs' characteristics factor has a positive influence on the relationship marketing success
- H<sub>10</sub>: the entrepreneurs' characteristics factor has a direct influence on the cluster productivity

The diagram illustrates a research model with five input boxes on the left and two output boxes on the right. The boxes are: Rational factors, Resource factors, Information technology factors, Relationship benefit factors, and Entrepreneur characteristic factors. The output boxes are Relationship marketing success and Cluster productivity. Arrows indicate the following hypotheses: H<sub>1</sub> from Rational factors to Relationship marketing success; H<sub>2</sub> from Rational factors to Cluster productivity; H<sub>3</sub> from Resource factors to Relationship marketing success; H<sub>4</sub> from Resource factors to Cluster productivity; H<sub>5</sub> from Information technology factors to Relationship marketing success; H<sub>6</sub> from Information technology factors to Cluster productivity; H<sub>7</sub> from Relationship benefit factors to Relationship marketing success; H<sub>8</sub> from Relationship benefit factors to Cluster productivity; H<sub>9</sub> from Entrepreneur characteristic factors to Relationship marketing success; H<sub>10</sub> from Entrepreneur characteristic factors to Cluster productivity; and H<sub>11</sub> from Relationship marketing success to Cluster productivity.

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

Based on the studies and review of related literature, researchers has set the research conceptual framework by applying the influential factors, namely, relational factor, resource factor, information technology factor, relationship benefits factor and entrepreneurs' characteristics as shown in Fig. 1.

Based on the review of related literature, the conceptual framework assumes that relational factor, resource factor, information technology factor, relationship benefit factor and entrepreneur's characteristics factor have an influence on the relationship marketing success and the cluster productivity and this assumption needs to be verified.

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