Making Customers Successful: Customer Success Management a New Management Approach

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ABSTRACT

Customer Success Management is emerging as an increasingly important area of study in marketing practice. However, there are many unresolved questions regarding the conceptualization and delineation of Customer Success Management, which is surprising specifically since it is already considered a common management practice in SaaS companies and even in some manufacturing companies. The article attempts to fill this research gap and aims at contributing to a growing body of literature. From a methodological perspective, we conduct a systematic-based literature review to examine the broader customer relationship literature. Since Customer Success Management lacks a conceptual foundation, the literature review guarantees to fully encompass the research field and to identify related topics and their most important concepts. This approach is intended to illustrate why Customer Success Management is new and an evolution in business research.

Keywords: Customer success management, Marketing, Sales, Business management, Servitization

INTRODUCTION

Originating in the software-as-a-service (SaaS) industry, Customer Success Management (CSM) emerged when service providers in the business-to-business landscape noticed difficulty succeeding with their recurring revenue models based on subscriptions (Eggert et al., 2020). Recurring revenue models promise great benefits, as selling companies can ensure a continuous flow of revenue from their customers (Mehta et al., 2016). However, this business model also reduces switching barriers, which leads to higher churn rates if customers are not satisfied with the provider's service (Gelb et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2020). Since customer acquisition tends to be more expensive than the value received by the provider after the first period of use, a firm loses significant revenue through early customer churns (Heuberger et al., 2019). To overcome these issues and reduce churn, vendors need to shift their focus from selling just product features to proactively selling Customer Value and focus on the customer outcome of usage. This is where CSM gains its relevance. Hochstein defines the concept as "the proactive (versus reactive) relational engagement of customers to ensure the value

potential of product offerings is realized by the customer" (Hochstein et al., 2020, p. 3). Today, many well-known service suppliers (such as Microsoft, ServiceNow, and Adobe) have built up customer success capabilities in business markets (Vaidyanathan & Rabago, 2020). Nonetheless, the function is no longer limited to SaaS companies, industries such as industrial steel and electrical installation have also found their way to make use of the emerging management discipline.

In the academic literature, the term CSM first appeared in the work of Fawcett & Cooper (1998), in which the authors applied the concept to the logistics industry, while also Berry (1995), in his article on "Relationship Marketing of Services", described the first basic features of CSM without mentioning the term itself (Hilton et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2020). Despite these early developments and the illustrated importance in corporate practice, marketing science has so far been very slow to adopt these phenomena in academic literature (Eggert et al., 2020). It was only in recent years that the literature has been enriched by pioneering works from Eggert et al. (2020), Hilton et al. (2020), Hochstein et al. (2020, 2021), Zoltners et al. (2019) which leads to the first academic discussions. Nevertheless, particularly in comparison to other important research streams in marketing, it seems clear that the concept of CSM is still very fuzzy and needs further scientific analysis.

Critics in this particular research field mainly address the question whether customer success is really a novel topic, as it encompasses several well-established concepts within the marketing literature (Eggert et al., 2020). Previous articles have addressed this issue and made first attempts to clarify which areas are associated with CSM and how they interrelate. Gelb et al. (2020) and Hochstein et al. (2021) distinguish the role of a customer success manager from sales and service roles, such as the established function of a Key Account Manager in B2B. Hilton et al. (2020) demarcates the discipline of CSM as the next evolutionary development in customer management and therefore classifies it historically as evolving from Customer Relationship Management, Customer Experience, and Customer Engagement. Other research incorporates additional established approaches such as Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Customer Value and Service Quality into the consideration of CSM (Eggert et al., 2020; Hochstein et al., 2020; Prohl & Kleinaltenkamp, 2020; Ulaga, 2018). Following-up on previous studies, we argue that to truly understand and acknowledge the emerging focus on customer success, we need to take a step back and review its origins and related issues in academia. In summary, it seems clear that the aforementioned disciplines should be taken into account when considering CMS, although no systematic, all-encompassing analysis has yet been conducted. Therefore, our objective is to provide the first literature review-based analysis of CSM and to answer the following research questions: (1) How can CSM be classified and delineated within the marketing literature? (2) What methods can be derived from the literature streams of CSM and its related disciplines?

RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employs a systematic literature review method (Cooper, 1988; David & Han, 2004; Randolph, 2009). The sampling process contained several selection criteria, which are briefly described in the following: First, only published articles were considered as they went through a review process that acts as a quality screening and allow for a certain level of methodological stringency (David & Han, 2004). Second, to identify appropriate and relevant publications we used three electronic databases (EBSCO Host, Web of Science and Google Scholar) to cover the entire research field and obtain a comprehensive initial sample. To begin, we focused on existing literature reviews by requiring the keywords to appear in the title of the selected articles. After narrowing down to only English-language literature from the last 20 years, we obtained an initial sample of over 300 papers. In the next step, the abstracts and subsequently the full texts were screened for their suitability for our purposes. As a result of our systematic sampling process, 19 articles were identified that fit our research objective. Randolph further asserts that electronic searches yield approximately only ten percent of articles that comprise an exhaustive review. To identify the remaining 90%, he suggests searching in the references of the selected articles, checking for relevance, and repeating the process until a saturation point is reached (Randolph, 2009). Hence, the final step in the literature selection process was to screen the references of the selected articles (go backward) as well as identify articles that had cited relevant literature. (go forward) (Webster & Watson, 2002). This resulted in an additional 12 important articles to be added to the final sample of 31 articles.

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"Lessons Learned" From Related and Previous Concepts

Following, we summarize all analyzed literature reviews to depict what is the contribution of the related disciplines to CSM as well as which methods and concepts, that could be relevant for CSM.

Customer Satisfaction. A critical component of understanding and managing customer success is the ability to measure and monitor customer reactions to the company's services. Most of the conceptualizations of satisfaction are based on the expectation and disconfirmation paradigm. According to this paradigm, the customer's feeling of satisfaction is the result of a comparative process between the perceived level of performance and a set of comparative standards, such as expectations. Satisfaction is achieved when the customer feels that the performance of the product is what he anticipated (confirmation). The question of how to satisfy customers is a main concern of most companies nowadays. Therefore, understanding the components of Customer Satisfaction, how to measure them, and how to use them become an urgent need for managers. Following Ngo (2015), Customer Satisfaction can only be managed if it is measured. In his literature review, he defines two approaches for measuring Customer Satisfaction. With the first approach, Customer Satisfaction is directly measured as it is assumed that the predefined attributes are best suited to determine satisfaction. Well-known methods

such as CSI, NCSI, MUSA and DEA can be subsumed into this approach. In the second approach, Customer Satisfaction is not estimated directly, but the development of suitable instruments for assessing Customer Satisfaction can be encouraged. Methods such as SERVQUAL, ordered logit/ordered probit model, IPA and cluster analysis can be included in this approach (Ngo, 2015). To evaluate customer perception, Customer Satisfaction serves as building blocks for the general understanding of CSM and form the foundation for its measurement.

Customer Value. CSM is ultimately about creating value. However, value cannot be determined by the supplier's assumptions, but by the customer's perceptions (Salem Khalifa, 2004). In their literature review, they identify three categories on Customer Value, namely: value components models, utilitarian or benefits/costs ratio models, and means-ends models. The models look at the concept from different angles, with means-ends models providing the most complete view of Customer Value (Salem Khalifa, 2004). Kumar & Reinartz (2016) see value as a dual concept where value is first created for the customer and then some of that value is extracted in the form of profit and value creation for the company. More recently, the service dominant (S-D) logic of marketing has challenged this more traditional view on Customer Value. Accordingly, value cannot simply be delivered to the customer, but is co-created in the joint sphere with the supplier and determined by the value in use (Vargo & Lusch, as cited in Eggert et al., 2018). Before making recommendations for value-based management, measuring value is the natural starting point (V. Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). Established metrics to measure and manage Customer Value are recency-frequency-monetary value (RFM), past Customer Value (PCV), Share of Wallet (SOW) and Tenure/Duration. Yet, traditional metrics only provide a backward-looking approach that only considers a customer's past activities. Whereas Customer lifetime value (CLV) is a forward-looking metric that takes into account the variable nature of customer behavior and allows companies to differentiate and treat individual customers differently (V. Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). This evolution of value in business markets benefited the development of CSM and the measurements of value can serve as key performance indicator. This is especially true for CLV, as the metric ensures that resources are allocated correctly, and Customer Value can be enhanced (V. Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

Customer Loyalty. Another important key figure for CSM is Customer Loyalty. Initially, loyalty was simply characterized as repeat purchase, which is also termed as behavioral type of loyalty (Bardauskaite, 2014). Subsequently, attitude-based loyalty manifested in research. This form represents an overarching, enduring commitment of a customer to the organization that cannot be inferred only by observing the customer's repeat purchase (Shankar et al., as cited in Bardauskaite, 2014). Lastly, Bardauskaite mentioned so-called cognitive loyalty as a further conceptualization, where the customer is extremely loyal and does not consider switching providers (Dick & Basu; Gremler & Brown, as cited in Bardauskaite, 2014). If we look at the different dimensions of loyalty, it becomes clear that CSM is much more concerned with achieving attitudinal or cognitive loyalty than behavioral loyalty. Especially with new business models such as recurring revenue business, it is crucial

for a company to retain its existing customers, as acquiring new customers would be much more expensive (Karunaratna & Kumara, 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand how to manage loyalty. Three of the most important feedback measurements are net promotor score, repurchase likelihood and number of recommendations. Although most measurements of loyalty tend to be backward-looking, the methods can also be useful in achieving customer success.

Customer Relationship Management. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as corporate function is another related concept to CSM. CRM evolved in the 2000s as companies faced challenging competitive environments and understood the importance of retaining profitable customers (Sota et al., 2018). According to the literature review by Ngai (2005), CRM covers three major functional business areas, namely: marketing, sales, service and support. Wahlberg et al. (2009) categorized the topics of CRM research into four clusters: strategic, analytical, operational, and collaborative. Components in strategic CRM are include the implementation of CRM strategies, the CRM paradigm, the integration of all activities and processes and the organizational coordination. In contrast, analytical CRM is dominated by the concepts of data mining, customer knowledge, and predictive modeling. Collaborative CRM is primarily concerned with Internet marketing and web and mobile channels. Lastly, operational CRM focuses on improving customer service and sales force (Wahlberg et al., 2009). Further, Sota et al. (2018) note that loyalty/rewards programs are a major area of interest in CRM research. These programs are considered as the most common technique for building long-term customer relationships. Different authors have tried to conceptualize CRM and developed models to prevent the implementation from failing. CSM builds on the foundations of CRM and draws inspiration from its existing conceptualizations and processes, interdisciplinary nature, and data-driven approach.

Customer Experience. Moreover, CSM relies on the experience of the customer and is an extensive construct and can be presented in three overall phases: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Bueno et al., 2019). Ismail et al. (2016) consider the dimensions of Customer Experience in particular in the service industry, as theories such as the service-dominant logic have shifted the focus from a product-centric to a service-centric view. In order to actively manage Customer Experience, it plays a major role to make it transparent and measure it (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Yet, there is no clarity on how to best measure overall Customer Experience (Bueno et al., 2019). However, researchers have developed specific metrics, such as the customer service experience scale (EXQ) derived from SERVQUAL (Klaus & Maklan, as cited in, Bueno et al., 2019) or the brand experience scale, which measures the dimensions of the customer's brand experience (Brakus, as cited in, Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Other methods in the literature include customer journey analysis to map the customer's decisions at each touchpoint, as service blueprinting in service management, whose goal is to develop an optimal service design (Bitner, as cited in, Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Taken together, managing the stages of the Customer Experience and touchpoint analysis are valuable insights for CSM.

Customer Engagement. To conclude the consideration of the roots of CSM, we will also analyze Customer Engagement as a customer-focused construct. In recent years, organizations have shifted their emphasis gradually from the objective of "selling" to "emotionally connecting" with their customers (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Chandni (2020), conducted a literature review on Customer Engagement and examined the conceptual aspects of employee engagement. As a result, they found that Customer Engagement is significantly influenced by employee engagement. That being said, organizations need to be able to derive value from engagement, otherwise it is not profitable to invest in such relationships (van Doorn et al., 2010). Kumar et al. (2010) conventionalized and made the value of Customer Engagement (CEV) measurable through four core dimensions, namely: customer purchasing behavior (corresponding to CLV), customer referral value (CRV), customer influencer value (CIV) and customer knowledge value (CKV). Finally, the so-called customer engagement matrix enables satisfaction and emotions to be controlled and to actively increase engagement. For this purpose, specific strategies are proposed for each of the four boxes (satisfaction high or low; emotions high or low) (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Overall, as the latest major shift in customer management practice, Customer Engagement brings valuable insights to the discipline of CSM. Two important contributions should be highlighted (1) Customer engagement incorporates the value of non-purchase interactions into CSM. (2) Engagement of the customer depends on the engagement of the employees.

Key-Account-Management. The most associated role of a customer success manager in corporate practice is that of a Key Account Manager. The origin of the discipline lies in the fact that a company cannot lose its most valuable customers without getting into serious trouble (Zupancic, 2008). Therefore, Key Account Management programs serve to provide intensive and coordinated support to the most important business customers. In conclusion of screening the reviews, there are many ways in which the research on KAM contributes to the development on CSM. The most important aspects are (1) Active management of the customer relationships (Homburg et al., 2002). (2) Value co-creation with the customer (Guesalaga et al., 2018). (3) Use of technology to improve customer contacts (P. Kumar et al., 2019). (4) Customer-centric organizational culture (Guesalaga et al., 2018). (5) Need for top management support (Homburg et al., 2002).

Service quality. Finally, Service quality can be found as a influential theory for the basic assumptions of CSM. In the service industry, delivering superior service is seen as the key to success (Arora & Narula, 2018) and Service Quality has gained significant attention in the literature. However, there is no single method for Service Quality measurement (Kunz & Hogreve, as cited in, Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Various researchers have developed models with different dimensions. The most common and widely used measure of customer perceived Service Quality is SERVQUAL. The traditional models (such as SERVQUAL) were designed when service was delivered primarily through physical contact. Today, service is delivered largely through online interactions without a human component, and quality must be assessed through new attributes. Therefore, e-Service Quality measurements including SITEQUAL

(Webb and Webb, 2004) or WebQual (Barnes and Vidgen, 2002) and IT/IS service models including ASP-Qual (Sigala, 2004) or SaaS-Qual (Benlian et al., 2011) have increasingly evolved (Hartwig & Billert, 2018). Collectively, the quality of service measurements and especially newer measurements such as SaaS-Qual can be highly relevant for CSM.

To summarize, our findings in the previous section show that CSM is related to other customer-facing functions. Indeed, our literature review took a detailed look at the constructs and how they influence the understanding of CSM. Overall, this allows us to confirm that CSM is based on a variety of foundations from related disciplines.

New Dimensions of Customer Success Management

Nevertheless, our literature review also revealed significant differences between CSM and the other concepts reviewed, which will be analyzed in the following: First, when we look at the first customer relationship metrics, namely satisfaction and loyalty, we see that both define a good basis for generating customer feedback. However, they are mainly based on post-purchase behavior and are therefore lag indicators rather than lead indicators (Hochstein et al., 2020). Second, Customer Value can be considered as an important concept in relationship management. Yet, value-in-use in the context of CSM goes much further since it uses technology for constantly measuring the Customer Value provided and therefore also predicts customer behavior (Hilton et al., 2020). Third, according to our hypothesis, Service Quality can be seen as one antecedent of CSM. However, it is fundamentally based on the SERVQUAL model, which is used to measure subsequent customer perceptions and thus is backward-looking. CSM requires Service Quality measurements that incorporate a forward-looking approach (Hochstein et al., 2020). Fourth, even though there is much overlap, CSM, unlike KAM, is not a sales function and consequently strives to treat not only the most important customers but all customers with special service. In addition, the primary role of a Customer Success Manager is to ensure the continued successful use and adoption of products to ensure customer retention and growth. In contrast, a Key Account Manager is mainly concerned with building long-term relationships with the most important customers without considering the quality of the relationship (Hochstein et al., 2021). Fifth, many important constructs for CSM such as retention, loyalty, satisfaction, commitment, and trust are embedded in the business function of CRM (Boulding et al., as cited in, Hochstein et al., 2021). Nevertheless, CRM practices are seen in most companies as a tool kit for salespeople (Hochstein et al., 2021), and CSM is much more than a pure sales role. Yet, CSM also builds on the data-driven approach of CRM, but goes beyond it by deriving utility insights from customer data and forecasting future customer utility (Hochstein et al., 2020). Sixth, Customer Experience is an important customer management practice and offers many valuable methods for CSM, such as customer journey analysis to understand customers' touchpoint decisions at different stages of purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The data obtained allows measuring customer responses and improving products and services

reactively (Hilton et al., 2020). At the same time, CSM suggests a proactive versus a reactive approach (e.g. Hochstein et al., 2020). CSM builds on the foundation of Customer Experience by seeking to improve the customer's product experience, but CSM goes further by focusing on the customer's broader operational and strategic goals (Hilton et al., 2020). Finally, Customer Engagement incorporates the value of non-purchase interactions into CSM, providing an important basis for relationship management development. Nevertheless, it is more focused on customer goal achievement than pure engagement behavior. Hilton et al. (2020) describe an example, indicating that CSM is more interested in reducing unproductive time in an app than increasing total time spent. Based on the differences outlined, it becomes clear that CSM should be understood as a construct which extends existing customer management practices. CSM requires appropriate methods that enable the successful implementation and execution. At this point, there is little empirical research on the most relevant traditional and emerging methods of CSM. Currently, the most widely applied method is the Customer Health Score, which measures customer health using several related concepts from marketing theory, such as satisfaction, loyalty, retention, Service Quality, and more recent data-driven analytics. The Health Score combines lead and lag indicators, as it is based in part on traditional methods such as NPS, SERVQUAL, and satisfaction, and extends them with predictive algorithmic engagement scores (Hochstein et al., 2020). However, again there is little ambiguity about exactly how the health score is conceptualized and how well it can be used to measure customer success. Thus, these are only the beginnings of conceptualizing the method and more research in the area is needed.

CONCLUSION

Our insights showed that on the one hand, CSM is built on the foundations of pre-vious, related concepts. On the other hand, CSM differentiated itself as a proactive rather than a reactive approach (e.g. CRM). In addition, this particular concept can be considered as rather success-oriented than efficiency-oriented (e.g. KAM), and rather future-oriented than backward-looking (e.g. Satisfaction). We also examined the methods and metrics of the related concepts suggested. As a result, we found that the Customer Health Score, as the first articulation of methods in CSM, includes several of the dis-cussed traditional methods (Hochstein et al., 2020). Therefore, we emphasize that CSM, even as a stand-alone construct, can benefit from traditional Customer Relationship Management methods by modifying and adapting them for its own purposes.

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