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What makes a website relational? The experts' viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, companies have launched an abundance of websites to reinforce their links with customers. While these websites include relational features (e.g., communities and areas for regular visitors, electronic bulletin boards, forums, and RSS feeds), can they be considered relational according to the relationship marketing paradigm? To answer this question, we conduct a qualitative study with 19 Internet experts. The results show that two approaches can be used to define a relational website. The first approach suggests that a website's relationship proneness (WRP) is driven by three dimensions: content, exchange, and look and feel. The second approach is enumerative: the more electronic customer relationship management (eCRM) features a website offers, the more relational it is considered to be. Managerial and theoretical implications lie in the complementary relationship between these two approaches.

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1. Introduction

In August 2016, more than one billion websites existed worldwide, representing an increase of almost eighty million websites since July 2016 (Netcraft, 2016). This rapidly growing context is marked by the coexistence of a multitude of website types, including e-commerce websites, community websites, brand websites, corporate websites, and informational websites. Irrespective of the website type, a company can use a website to easily create links with its customers (Dou & Krishnamurthy, 2007; Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Keeling, Keeling, & McGoldrick, 2013; Piccoli, Brohman, Watson, & Parasuraman, 2004). Websites offer new challenges to relationship marketing (Bonnemaizon, Cova, & Louyot, 2007) and can provide personalized communication and facilitate relationship development with visitors (Eastlick et al., 2006; Florès & Volle, 2005; Müller, Florès, Agrebi, & Chandon, 2008; Rowley, 2004; Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2009).

In marketing research, some authors consider a website's relationship proneness (WRP) to be a trait (Toufaily, Rajaobelina, Fallu, Ricard, & Graf, 2010), whereas others consider relational websites to be a category (Boisvert & Caron, 2006; Florès & Volle, 2005). Even if the "relational/relationship website" appellation is commonly

used by professionals and academicians, the literature does not offer a clear and detailed definition for this term. Can we consider an interactive website that offers personalized services to be relational? Are there one or many approaches to defining WRP? Where does a company website fall along the relational continuum of websites?

The answers to these questions are important, as relationship marketing must consider three main website-related changes:

1.1. The lack of a contact person

Interpersonal relationships disappear in web interactions; the visitor interacts with a website (Keeling et al., 2013). He/she shops without the physical assistance of a salesperson and introduces his/her personal information when sharing his/her opinions and testimonials on the website's forum.

1.2. The advent of web 2.0

Web 2.0 tools changed relationship marketing's scope and practices, which primarily resulted in two consequences:

- a) The exchange concept has evolved: Blogs and online brand communities have placed the visitor at the center of a triangular relationship that connects him/her to the brand and to other members of the website. As developed by Bagozzi (1975), the exchange concept between the company and its customers has expanded to encompass a website's other members.

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- b) The visitor is involved in website content: Through witnesses and original idea corners, bulletin boards, and online brand communities/fun clubs, the visitor has become a co-creator of information and value. He/she participates in the daily life of the website and the brand.

1.3. The advent of web 3.0

Extending the participative paradigm of Web 2.0, Web 3.0 is based on networked digital technologies and users' cooperation. In terms of marketing opportunities, it makes the development of behavioral advertising possible (Tasner, 2010). By tracking consumers' online activities, marketers can deliver advertisements that target consumers' outside interests. Moreover, as Erragcha and Romdhane (2014) outlined in their work, Web 3.0 invites more opportunities in marketing practices through individualization and immersive experiences.

In this context, several companies have launched websites that they refer to and put forward as relational ones: *in the US*, Amazon (Amazon.com) (Larson, 2009) and Coca-Cola (mycokerewards.com) (Choueke, 2009) and, *in France*, Aigle (espritdefamille.com) (Morel, 2012), Kraft Food, and Unilever (mavieencouleurs.com) (Morel, 2011). From a managerial perspective, this research attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What criteria should managers use to classify a website as relational? (2) How and with which tools can managers implement relational programs (electronic customer relationship management [eCRM] programs) through their websites? (3) What common ground for relational practices can managers use to benchmark their websites with those of their competitors?

This research defines and identifies the dimensions of the WRP concept. The concept's formative dimensions (the constitutive dimensions and sub-dimensions) are identified, and an external dimension that plays a mediating role is proposed. We study the relationship proneness of company websites (i.e., corporate websites, brand websites, e-commerce websites); social websites that can be considered relational are not examined in this research (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). In the first part of this article, we review state-of-the-art research that addresses WRP. The second part explains the study's methodological framework based on nineteen interviews with Internet experts. The last part of the article presents the empirical results and the managerial implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Taking stock of relationship marketing in the context of websites

Websites are considered a very important tool for creating and developing customer relationships (Ab Hamid, 2005; Dou &

Krishnamurthy, 2007; Thorbjørnsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002). Kumar and Benbasat (2002) suggest regarding websites as social actors and treating the relationship between websites and their visitors as an interpersonal relationship. The authors speak of a parasocial presence, which refers to the "extent to which a medium facilitates a sense of understanding, connection, involvement and interaction among participating social entities" (2002:12). The prefix "para" is used to (meaningfully) capture and cover the emerging interaction between a website and its visitors.

Furthermore, we note that the term "relational" is employed in connection with different categories of websites: e-commerce websites (Fassott, 2004; Rowley, 2004), brand websites (Florès & Volle, 2005) and corporate websites (Cho & Cheon, 2005). We can regard the relational website as an archetype that extends a website's first aim, which is to sell, inform, promote, and entertain. In a similar way, WRP can be considered a trait that can be applied to various types of websites (see Fig. 1).

For example, Rowley (2004) considers relationship development to be a suitable application for the e-commerce context. According to the author, relationships are built through communication, customer service, customization, and communities. Using the dimensions of interpersonal relationships, Keeling et al. (2013) compare retail relationships in a human-to-human context to retail relationships in a technology-based context. Based on four dimensions—equality, intensity, cooperation, and socio-emotional development—Keeling et al. (2013) find that plain websites show the most similarity to human-to-human relationships in the cooperative dimension compared with other technologies, such as 3D avatars and helper robots. They also find that customers have more encouraging perceptions of their relationships with retail websites than with those with door-to-door salespeople.

Other non-merchant websites have high relational potential. According to Florès and Volle (2005), brand websites are tools for creating and developing relationships with a brand's best customers. The authors note that a brand website is visited by less than 5% of the total population. Nevertheless, it allows the brand to remain in contact with 15% of its best customers. Florès and Volle (2005) assign a relational potential to brand websites without deeply explaining its dimensions. Corporate websites also have relational potential, as they can create and/or develop relationships with different targets (i.e., investors, customers). Leichty and Esrock (2001) distinguish between "static" and "dynamic" corporate websites. They believe that a relationship implies, at a minimum, repeated interactions with the visitor and the ability to use past interactions to configure future interactions. However, Leichty and Esrock (2001) remain unclear regarding the relationship between the "dynamic", "relational", and "interactive" concepts. They note conceptual problems in appreciating WRP because static websites can hold interactive features,

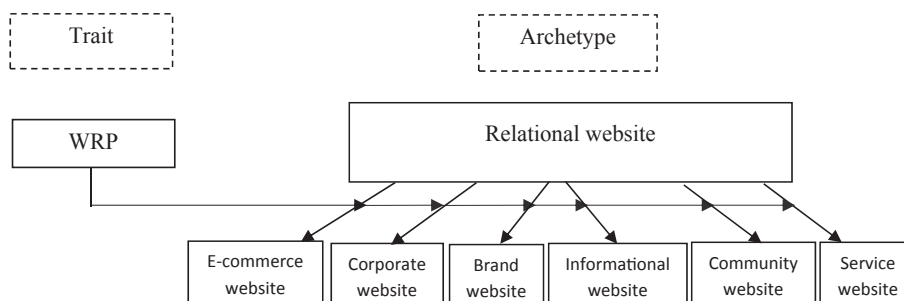


Fig. 1. Clarification of the conceptual status of relational websites.

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