Do Grateful Customers Really Repay the Company?
The Influence of Customer Indebtedness

Min-Hsin Huang,
Department of Business Management,
National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan.
E-mail: minhsin@faculty.nsysu.edu.tw

Fen-Sheng Chang,
Department of Business Management,
National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan.
E-mail: m044112035@student.nsysu.edu.tw

Wen-Min Cheng,
Department of Business Management,
National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan.
E-mail: d064010105@student.nsysu.edu.tw

Abstract

In recent years, customer gratitude has gained much attention in relationship marketing (RM) literature. A great deal of research has provided empirical evidence that customer gratitude encourages reciprocal behaviors (e.g., positive word-of-mouth and repurchase behaviors) beneficial to building and maintaining the strong customer relationship. However, little attention has been paid to the potential moderating roles on the relationship between customer gratitude and RM performance. The current research suggests that customer indebtedness influences the effect of customer gratitude on the RM performance. Data was collected from 300 service customers in Taiwan. Research hypotheses were examined by structural equation modeling and hierarchical regression. The results indicated that relationship investment led to customer gratitude, in turn, encouraged customers’ positive word-of-mouth and repatronage intention. More importantly, the effect of customer gratitude on positive word-of-mouth and repatronage intention were stronger for those with high indebtedness (vs. low indebtedness). The findings offer important implications for customer relationship management and service management.

Key Words: Relationship marketing, customer gratitude, customer indebtedness, positive word-of-mouth, repatronage intention.