

## Aspects of CRM Systems Employed by Export Companies in Thessaloniki Area

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the degree of adoption and the implementation dimensions of customer relationship management systems (CRM) employed by export Greek companies in the area of Thessaloniki. CRM features which could influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, retention and repurchase intention have been examined. Moreover, it was extracted that when information technology is set, some marketing variables are written down in the CRM system of the enterprise. An attempt is made to measure the customer-centric orientation of the export companies' management, where it was found that most of the respondents have a positive attitude. Additionally, the majority of the companies have a strong brand loyalty strategy. Finally, five factors of successful application of a Global CRM (GCRM) system were extracted. These factors are: management infrastructure and support, IT infrastructure, business and CRM strategy, marketing strategy and enhancement of the global customer.

**Keywords:** CRM, GCRM, export companies

### 1. Introduction

The CRM approach has received increased attention as a marketing strategy over the last 15 years (Sin et al, 2005; Wahlberg et al, 2009). Hence, customer relationship management has become a necessary contributing factor for many organizational strategies (Bull, 2003). This increased interest in CRM has spawned a proliferation of research studies that investigate companies adoption of CRM. Although, a large volume of literature is available on CRM, the topic is still under development. For example there are few studies attempting to examine the adoption of CRM by export companies.

With the increasing globalization of markets, and given the rapid growth of the internet, most enterprises are striving to attract customers in the highly competitive global market (Doukidis, 2010). Companies with a global outlook, have to work harder at developing relations with their customers in order to deliver high value to them, build customer loyalty, create

satisfaction and maintain their existing customers. In the meantime, they have to face differences of relations in the marketplace arising from differences across countries and cultures (Ramaseshan, 2006).

The point is that companies often have difficulties to access the appropriate information regarding customer expectations (Endacott, 2004). Further customers across the globe demand more personalized marketing and have heightened expectations (Drohan et al., 2009). To this end, companies that take their international efforts seriously may endeavour to win support for their efforts through a CRM initiative.

Greek companies have recognized the need to adopt customer focused strategies and systems. However, the percentage of Greek companies that have implemented at least one CRM application is still relatively low. This study aims to address some issues related to the implementation of CRM projects employed by firms operating in multiple countries. In particular, the purpose of this paper is to identify aspects of CRM systems adoption and implementation in export companies of Thessaloniki area. The specific objectives of the study are to find out:

- whether companies implement a CRM system in the framework of the adoption of a customer-centric business orientation
- the characteristics and functions of the system and/or software employed
- how company's export management invests in customers' satisfaction and how it encourages customers to complain
- the attitudes of export managers and company owners towards customer-centric orientation
- the degree of adoption of brand loyalty strategies in order to improve customer retention
- the factors most valued for CRM success by export managers and owners

The structure of this paper is divided as follows: an extensive literature review has been undertaken in order to present a CRM discussion and especially to analyze some crucial factors for the implementation of global CRM (GCRM). Next, the research methodology used in an empirical research conducted in export companies of Thessaloniki area is presented. Finally, findings from research are provided and analyzed followed by a discussion, conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

Customer-relationship management has rapidly become one of the leading competitive business strategies in the new millennium (Jonghyeok et al, 2003), enabling companies to optimize revenue and increase customer value through understanding and satisfying individual customers' needs (Liu and Yang, 2009). Academics appear to agree on the assertion that CRM has developed from relationship marketing. When a firm adopts customer-centric orientation, and therefore exercises relationship marketing, it is attempting to develop and establish long-term relationships with each individual customer. Hence, it is aiming at improved customer service and satisfaction, thus retaining and further increasing the sales level (Sarmaniotis and Stefanou, 2005). In short, CRM has been defined as a management approach directed towards increasing retention of economically valuable customers (Fjermestad and Romano, 2003).

The increased role of ICT on CRM implementation (Rigby et al., 2002; Sigala, 2006) has frequently led to misunderstanding and confusion. Many firms believe that as CRM is a technology tool, it will automatically improve their business even though they ignore implementation of basic marketing and management functions. Moreover, practitioners maintain that since CRM is a software package, its wide range of features and suits are applicable globally. However, it should be underlined that CRM is first of all a management philosophy (Stefanou et al, 2003) and differences in the global environment entail CRM philosophy and software adaptation in various countries (Ramaseshan et al., 2006).

Up to date, there is limited research exploring differences and difficulties in GCRM implementation. Ramaseshan et al. (2006) identified three categories of factors which affect the success of firms practicing CRM across national boundaries. The first category involves customer expectations, drivers of satisfaction, loyalty, profitability and customer value. The second category of factors has arisen from differences in the competitive environment, technological infrastructure, political systems and regulatory variations around the world. The third category has to do with the challenges faced by global firms in forming a customer-oriented organization. Ali and Brooks (2009) focused on the cultural factors, where CRM implementation and use is influenced by differences in customers' expectations, preferences, and behaviours across countries or cultures. In addition, they mentioned on the cultural aspects of multi-channel customer management, which is a basic component of a CRM system. Harrigan (2009) tried to apply relationship marketing principles on the small and medium sized enterprise (SME) and he suggested some managerial implications. Sigala (2006) examined the impact of culture on effective e-CRM implementation and provided

useful implications for developing and globalizing e-CRM practises and business processes. However, Sigala focused on globalizing the software of e-CRM and its functionality and not on marketing variables. Conway (2000) pointed out that the success of a relationship marketing strategy is heavily dependent on various factors, especially when this strategy should be transferred from a domestic to an international context. According to Conway these factors are largely a consequence of different cultural value systems and can be synthesized in the concept of “psychic distance to one’s market”.

Coupled with the previously mentioned literature review suggestions, the formulation and adoption of GCRM strategies becomes more important than ever, as the Internet is a global communication and distribution channel and firms need to address their customers and their diversity (Sigala, 2006). However, although CRM is one of the fastest growing management approaches being widely adopted, many CRM initiatives have failed (Rigby et al., 2002; Gartner Group, 2003). Despite that fact, it is strongly argued that CRM applications can assist company management to improve company’s profits if some key factors are followed (Sarmaniotis and Stefanou, 2005).

Concluding, it should be underlined that a lot of studies have been conducted worldwide on CRM in various industries over the past years but there is a relative lack of empirical studies examining the aspects of adoption of CRM systems employed by export companies and complete lack of studies investigating the topic in Greece export companies.

### **3. Methodology**

The questionnaire has been constructed by both using measures from the literature and developing new variables in order to reach the research needs. A tentative measure consisting of attitudes towards customer-centric orientation (ATTCCO) of the export companies’ management is employed. This measure is under development and it was used for the first time, to the best of our knowledge, in another research conducted by the authors (Sarmaniotis et. al., 2010). The tentative measure consists of 19 Likert-scaled variables with agree/disagree answers (from 5 “strongly agree” through 1 “strongly disagree”). Some indicative items of the measure are: “Customer is in the centre of business processes”; “Customer satisfaction leads to customer loyalty and further to customer retention” etc. Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the measure was 0.77, which is of an acceptable level (Nunnally, 1978; Hair et. al., 1998). The measure was developed taking into account, on the one hand, analogous sentences found in the literature (Luck and Lancaster, 2003; Lo et. al., 2010) and on the other by considering experts’ (colleagues and export company managers) opinions.

The questionnaire consists from the following parts: first, company and respondent demographics; secondly, questions about the existence of a CRM system/software are posed as well as the features and modules it includes; in addition, another part of the questionnaire includes marketing variables. Besides the degree of adoption of the CRM philosophy (system) and its characteristics are examined through the fore-mentioned tentative measure. Finally, in order to identify some broad determinants of CRM system success, factor analysis is used on 24 Likert-scaled sentences. They measure the opinions of the respondents regarding key success factors on CRM system implementation. The sentences are mainly proposed in the literature (Sarmaniotis and Stefanou, 2005; Ozgener, 2006,) and in addition some sentences have been suggested by experts'. Moreover, statistical tests such as chi-square and one-way ANOVA are used to check out if there are statistical significant relationships among variables.

The sample, of 220 companies, comes from export companies of Thessaloniki area. Data were collected through personal interviews with export companies' managers.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Demographics of the Sample**

52.8% of the interviewees were males and 47.2% were females. The majority worked in the same company for more than 5 years (55.2%), whereas 28.4% for 3-5 years, 11.3% for 1-3 years and 5.2% for less than a year. Long-lasting work at the same company probably means that the respondent had a better and a clearer view about potential CRM implementation and practices adopted by the enterprise. Regarding the education level, 46.2% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, 30.8% a master's degree and 17.4% have graduated from high school.

The export companies are divided to several product categories. Specifically, 30.7% export foods and wines, 24.3% textiles, 12.1% construction materials, 10% chemicals and the rest of them are distributed to a large range of product categories. As to the number of years the company is involved in export activity, it was found that 8.2% of them have been exporting for less than 5 years, 32.0% from 5 to 10 years, 29.9% from 10 to 20 years and 29.9% for more than 20 years. In terms of number of employees, 25.1% of the companies in the sample employ more than 50 employees, 25.1% 21-50, 26.7% 11-20 and 23.1% employ less than 10 people. The majority of the sample answered that there is a separate exports department (54.6%), whereas 70% answered that they are exporting directly and about 30% indirectly. The majority of the companies (61.7%) respond that their customers are only wholesalers and

31.9 % are only retailers. As to the countries that they export 74.5% are exporting to European countries, 4% to Arabian countries, whereas 18.5% to the rest Asian countries, 1% to African, 1.5% to American and 0.5% to Australia.

#### 4.2 Marketing Variables and CRM

One of the objectives of the research was to measure whether companies adopt a CRM system in the frame of a customer-centric business orientation.

In order to measure this orientation a tentative multi-item measure was constructed called “Attitude Towards Customer-Centric Orientation (ATCCO)” of the company management as mentioned in the methodology section of the paper. A Likert-scaled group of sentences was used in order to measure the ATCCO of the firm giving a new variable, which is the summation of the values of the nineteen sentences. In this research the mean value of the ATCCO is 72.4 (minimum 57.0, maximum 91.0, St.D.7.33).

It has been found in the literature that one of the main reasons that CRM fails, although a CRM software is installed, is due to the fact that CRM system is short of marketing variables. In our survey the companies were questioned whether they had an electronic or other system, where they could record some marketing variables such as customer’s satisfaction, complaining, or special customer demands. The companies, which recorded customer-related data, without electronic means, were a minority. On the other hand, when an electronic-CRM system existed, the majority replied that those variables, i.e. “special customer demands” and “complaints”, were stored for further processing, but surprisingly the customer’s satisfaction was electronically recorded by the minority (marginally though). Thus, the necessity to support electronically the CRM system is obvious. Related findings are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Recording of marketing variables

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Yes (%)</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
Customer’s satisfaction stored <b>electronically</b>	45.6%	54.4%
Customer’s satisfaction stored by other means	32.4%	67.6%
Customer’s special demands stored <b>electronically</b>	56.1%	43.9%
Customer’s special demands stored by other means	35.3%	64.7%
Customer’s complains stored <b>electronically</b>	52.6%	47.4%
Customer’s complain stored by other means	40.3%	59.7%

In order to identify potential relationships between ATCCO and other nominal or ordinal variables, one-way ANOVA was used. Results illustrated that there is no relationship between ATCCO and the CRM software installation ( $p>0.10$ ). Hence, information technology is not

used extensively by exports companies, although most of them have a positive attitude towards customer-centric orientation. Perhaps, this is due to some special characteristics that exist in export companies, which prevent the embedment of the information technology in a CRM system. Further, there is no relationships between ATCCO on the one hand and on the other variables such as the education level ( $p>0.10$ ) of the respondent, the existence or not of a system recording complaining ( $p>0.10$ ) and the existence or not of a system recording customer satisfaction ( $p>0.10$ ). Nevertheless, there is relationship between ATTCCO and the existence or not of a system recording demands of the customers ( $p<0.05$ ).

Customer-centric orientation might expectedly lead to the adoption of a brand loyalty strategy from the company. The loyalty strategy is measured using a group of variables collecting information about the motivations that the company offers to their customers in order to increase their loyalty. For example, a company can offer motives for re-sales, advertisement support, personal contacts, encouragement of customers that have not bought for a long time, new marketing strategies etc. The higher the motivations offered, the stronger the brand loyalty strategy of the company is. In Table 2 below it can be seen that more than 80% of the companies in our sample have a moderate, intensive or very intensive brand loyalty strategy

**Table 2.** Brand Loyalty Strategy

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
No strategy	1.5%
Weak strategy	18.4%
Moderate strategy	36.7%
Intensive strategy	35.7%
Very intensive strategy	7.6%

### 4.3 CRM Software Characteristics

The majority of the respondents had a positive ATCCO (see section 3 of the paper). Nevertheless, relatively few companies installed any CRM software (29.1%). However, it has been found that CRM software installation is related to the company's turnover ( $p<0.05$ ). It appears therefore, that if companies pursue to maintain a high level of turnover, they should adopt CRM information technology. Moreover, a relationship was also found between CRM software existence and the degree of CRM software exploitation ( $p<0.05$ ), since 71.3% are using this software extensively. Moreover, they respond that the benefit of the CRM software usage is high (79.8%). On the contrary, no relationship between the existence of the CRM software and the number of employees ( $p>0.10$ ) exists.

It seems that the degree of CRM usage has to do with the specific modules and features of CRM software and its possible deficiencies. Hence, 83.6% of the respondents replied that the utilized software had modules for sales management (i.e. communications management, customers' history, duties and responsibilities, appointments etc.), and 60% of the respondents replied that they had modules for customers' service and management (i.e. history of support cases, automatic task's assignment for customer service etc.). However, these modules can be parts of a standard Management Information System software like ERP and not necessarily included in a CRM software. It is worthy to mention however, that there is a lack of modules regarding marketing activities (32.7%), like marketing automatization (i.e. campaign's planning, promotion's automatization, performance evaluation and reports etc.) and 43.6% of similar modules such as analysis and information utilization (i.e. forecasting of customer's preferences, marketing campaign response analysis, salesmen performance evaluation, customer's complains and demands analysis etc.).

#### 4.4 Determinants of CRM Implementation Success

In order to identify some broad determinants of CRM system implementation success, factor analysis was utilized on the 24 sentences as mentioned in the methodology section. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure for sampling adequacy was of an acceptable magnitude (KMO 0.867). Moreover, Bartlett's sphericity test gave a significance level of 0.000. Hence, all assumptions for carrying out factor analysis are met. The extraction technique chosen was principal components and the rotation method was varimax.

Five factors were extracted out of the twenty-four sentences. Factor analysis converged after 10 iterations. These factors explain 58.2% of the total variance. In our paper, the cut-off point for accepting sufficient loadings was 0.3 (see Table 3). The factors are named as follows:

1. Management infrastructure and support
2. IT infrastructure
3. Business and CRM strategy
4. Marketing strategy
5. Enhancement of the global customer

Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.852 to 0.389 for the five factors.

The first factor, labeled "**Management infrastructure and support**", entails, among others, the notion of customer knowledge. Obtaining customer-related knowledge is specified as the



means to attain CRM objectives (Stefanou et. al., 2003). Since a major part of the collective expertise and intelligence of a company refers to customers (Nonaka, 1991), it is concluded that CRM is strongly related to customer KM (Romano, 2000; Massey et al., 2001).

The second factor, labeled “**IT infrastructure**”, entails IT developments. Company relationships with customers can be greatly improved by employing information technology (IT) (Karimi et al., 2001). IT enables companies to retain “economically valuable” customers, through the deployment of sophisticated CRM software systems.

The third factor, labeled “**Business and CRM strategy**”, includes the ideas of profit increase and of most-valuable customers focusing strategy. These notions are in the heart of the customer-centric orientation of an enterprise.

The fourth factor, labeled “**Marketing strategy**”, consists of notions like the quality of the product and the services, the quality of the enterprise's actions, etc. Traditionally, emphasis has been given in obtaining high quality products and services that lead to brand switching from competitors (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). In the face of increasing competition defensive marketing is becoming more attractive and popular (Chattopadhyay, 2001). Customer retention, in its turn, seems to be related to profitability (Oliver, 1999).

Finally, the fifth factor, labeled “**Enhancement of the global customer**”, consists of notions like globalization and customer retention that illustrate the company's will to retain the foreign customer, i.e. the global customer.

## **5. Conclusions**

It was found that the majority of the export companies of Thessaloniki area adopt CRM philosophy. The degree of adoption of a CRM strategy by companies' management was measured through a tentative measure. It was found moreover that this variable, labeled “attitude towards customer-centric orientation”, is not related to the existence of a CRM system. Another finding was that, when an electronic-CRM system existed, the overwhelming majority of the companies recorded customer-related variables. Besides, results showed that a satisfactory minority of the companies recorded customer-related data without electronic means. Moreover, most of the respondents stated that the company followed moderate, intensive or very intensive brand loyalty strategy. Finally, 5 key success factors for CRM implementation were extracted.

**Table 3.** Specific and broad determinants (factors) of successful CRM implementation

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Loadings</b>	<b>Initial Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Variance Explained</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
<b>Management infrastructure and support</b>		7.748	32.285%	0.852
Behaviour and training of the company personnel	.387			
Support and commitment of the company management	.670			
Administration oriented to the satisfaction and retention of the customers	.758			
Customer knowledge and exploitation when making decisions	.665			
Successful solution of the customers complains/problems	.594			
The intention of the company to maintain long term relations with the customers	.528			
Determination of the future perspectives of the customers	.730			
The effective services management	.628			
Honest and frequent communication with the customers	.546			
The individuation approach of the customers	.562			
<b>IT infrastructure</b>		2.151	8.964%	0.776
The usage of a data base with elements and preferences of the customers	.425			
The automation of the sales services	.772			
The development of new products/services	.474			
A web page designed particularly to the customer relationship management	.743			
<b>Business and CRM strategy</b>		1.540	6.417%	0.389
The idea of profit increase	.670			
The idea of gaining new customers	.315			
The demands of costs reduce	.750			
Most-valuable customers focusing strategy	.695			
<b>Marketing strategy</b>		1.295	5.397%	0.745
The quality of the enterprise' s actions	.445			
The quality of the product and the services	.581			
The intention of the company to gain the competitive advantage	.769			
The familiarisation of the customers with the company using personalised products-services	.651			
<b>Enhancement of The Global Customer</b>		1.228	5.115%	0.671
<u>Globalization</u> and recent IT developments	.710			
The idea of customer retention	.718			

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