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## **THE ROAD TO CUSTOMER ORIENTATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

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### **Abstract**

Customer orientation as a concept and its benefits has been discussed extensively over 60 years. Furthermore, even though the idea has been prominently discussed over the years, many organizations struggle to realign themselves in a customer-oriented direction. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the organization's focus should be to expand and make profits, the reality makes it harsh where most of the firms even find it difficult to sustain in the marketplace apart from meeting the customer's demands. This article makes a modest effort to identify various essential factors and build a holistic approach that would help organizations fight these challenges to be customer-oriented. The conceptual model has created the strategy by focusing on three aspects in this paper (1) Employee orientation (EO) factors that prepare the internal customers of the organization (2) Customer orientation (CO) process that is led by the internal customers or employees of the organization effectively (3) Performance orientation (PO) that encompasses a set of outcomes which ensures sustainability in the marketplace. The primary objective of the conceptual model through this paper is to begin an intellectual thought for researchers and manager to think holistic and act focused across different contexts. The article concludes by providing various insightful directions where researchers could explore and study extensively.

**Keywords:** - Customer orientation, Market orientation, Employee orientation, Performance orientation



## **Introduction**

Organizations' importance to sustain in a competitive marketplace has been a deep ongoing concern (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011). Organizations constantly focus on developing new market strategies and products to enhance their market share. Interestingly, the organization's focus is unison, and many goals contribute to achieving a particular outcome. An organization's goals can primarily be three things that are ensuring sustainability, enriching performance, and enhancing profitability (Slater, 2000). Many firms fail to capitalize on various strategies, which leads to degrading performance and subsequent closure of the organization (Matsuno, 2000). Organizations fail to serve customers who are willing to engage with the organization's products or services (G. Tomas m. hult, David j. Ketchen jr, 2005).

Organizations believe that the product drives customer satisfaction. The firms are highly product-centric and build product-centric strategies (Atuahene-gima, Ko, Atuahene-gima, & Ko, 2001). Not every organization takes the pain of understanding the customer needs, evaluating them and analyzing them for implementation while making new strategies or building new products. Every customer is unique in their requirements, which can be clubbed in various clusters. The organization's effort to understand the customer's needs and subsequently build a long-term relationship offers competitive advantage (Slater & Narver, 1998).

The customer orientation research domain attracted the attention of researchers for a very long time. Despite continuous emphasis and efforts, organizations lack the customer-centric orientation and lose better financial/non-financial performance. Enormous planning and resources are involved in building a customer-centric approach and organizational capabilities. At times, production or product-centric strategies are mistaken as customer-centric strategy (Shah et al., 2006).

The customer orientation approach helps the firms to devise a strategy involving the customers throughout the process. The customer-oriented approach involves designing various marketing activities like production, promotion, pricing and product development driven by the customer's needs and wants (Vlašić & Tutek, 2017). The customer-centric approach is a new age key strategy that can help firms be sustainable, enhance performance, and ensure profitability (Ruekert, 1992). With the evolution of technology and ease of disseminating information, customers have become well equipped with resources and more innovative than before (Liang, Tanniru, & Taylor, 2006). Organizations offer a competitive product or service to a customer, giving a customer a range of options to choose their desired product or service. Recently, customers look forward to organizations catering to their needs in a personalized way. The customers seek individual attention beyond the service or product, which leads to customer delight (Smirnova, Rebiagina, & Frösén, 2018). The firm's capabilities to understand customer aspirations complement the need fulfilment and result in long-term relationships and positive word of mouth/market share (Shah, Rust, Parasuraman, Staelin, Day, et al., 2006).



Customer orientation aims to fulfil the needs and wants of the customer through consumer insight, which would subsequently ensure the survival and profitability of an organization (Gummesson, 2008 ; Ross, 2009). Customer orientation encapsulates customization and personalization despite mass marketing (Balachandran, 2007). Customer orientation helps in mass customization and makes customers feel equally important (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000 ; Lamberti, 2013). The organization focuses on consumer insight to offer a customer-focused product or service is termed a customer-centric approach. The customer insight entails different aspects of consumer behaviour on marketing mix elements like product, price, place and promotion (Vlašić & Tutek, 2017). The customer-centric approach ensures customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Kumar, Venkatesan, & Reinartz, 2008). Customer centricity also increases the retention rate and customer lifetime value (Moorman & Rust, 1999).

Customer orientation is one of the constituent aspects of market orientation that focuses on consumer insights for customized and personalized products to meet customer needs. The cyclical loop of information collection, intelligence generation and intelligence dissemination build the foundation for a customer-centric approach. Holistic customer orientation leads to competitive advantage and profitability (Slater & Narver, 1994 ; Narver & Slater, 1990 ; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990 ; Theoharakis & Hooley, 2008).

## **Literature Review**

### **Relationship Marketing**

Relationship marketing is a means to attract, enhance and sustain various kinds of relationship with customers. The idea of retaining customers would be more profitable than acquiring new ones, in the long run, is the basis of relationship marketing (Berry, 2008). The organization's employees play a crucial role in enhancing and ensuring these relationships, especially in various service-based organizations (Berry, 1995).

The service companies have been included in marketing literature for a very long-time (Baumol, 1957 ; Kotler & Levy, 1969 ; LAVIDGE, 1970). In marketing services, it is necessary to have an extended role of marketing which includes not just the simple exchange of goods or services. It is also essential to constantly evaluate the complete process of marketing or the efforts being made by the organization to full fill the expectations of the customers. Subsequently, the service-based organization should not just keep an eye on the outcome only. Instead, the organization should focus on the marketing process and relationship building activities which would gradually give the organization its desired effect (Gronroos, 1999 ; Grönroos, 1993).

To ensure the above, various relationship marketing activities needs to be given to keep focus. According to (Berry, 2008), there are five elements to successfully implementing relationship marketing strategies in a services-based organization. (1) The organization should focus on the



essential services that meet the customer's needs and help them build the relationship stronger. (2) It is important to note that every customer is unique, and it is essential to cater them individually with customized services. (3) It is essential to stand different from the competitors in the marketplace by providing extra benefits to their existing services that enhance the value delivered to the customers (4) Focusing on pricing as per the customers' best interest to increase customer loyalty strengthens the relationship. (5) Including every employee in the marketing activity is its front end or back end to ensure proper synchronization while appropriately delivering the services to the front-end customers (Berry, 2008).

Relationship marketing is a very mature concept coined by (Berry, 2008) and since then, much research has been done on this across various contexts and geographical regions. Relationship marketing is a matured concept, which does not mean that the interest or usage of this has decreased. Instead, it has been included along with the marketing theory (Hennig-thurau & Hansen, 2000). Researchers find it challenging while researching such a rich yet mature field, and thus they broaden the theory by testing it in new contexts or atmosphere (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The researcher needs to be very sure about the objectives it wants to explore. In relationship marketing theory, the most critical challenge for developing this concept would be to generate industry-specific knowledge, thus integrated with the existing academic general theory base (Hennig-thurau & Hansen, 2000).

Customer orientation is considered a significant aspect of developing relationship marketing strategies in organizations (Webster, 1988). Most of the studies done in the area of customer orientation do not focus on building a theoretical framework that supports the development of knowledge which would strengthen the theory along with not referring to the underlying existing marketing concepts significantly (Kelley, 1992 ; Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2003 ; Saxe & Weitz, 1982 ; T. O. M. J. Brown, Mowen, Donavan, & Licata, 2002a).

## **Market Orientation**

(Levitt, 1960) was one of the first to introduce the market orientation concept around 60 years ago. Thus, the development of the concept helped many researchers and scholars further contribute to significant influence and application in the business. Market orientation significantly contributes to financial and non-financial areas such as return on assets, learning ability of the organization while reacting to various changes, innovation and development of product (Lukas & Ferrell, 2000 ; Narver & Slater, 1990). There is a very crucial thing to know that market orientation is different from marketing orientation. The market orientation looks at the entire organization in a comprehensive application, whereas marketing orientation focuses on all aspects and process of the marketing department (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990b ; Narver & Slater, 1990). A market-oriented organization would efficiently and effectively implement marketing while operating to deliver the desired outcome for the organization.



The marketing orientation was conceptualized by many researchers, one being (Shapiro, 1988) who believed that marketing orientation is an organizational decision-making process that starts with the information gathering and then proceeds to implementation. The employees play a crucial role, which is shown by their utmost commitment by managers, through sharing of information among themselves and allowing employees to contribute to the various decision-making process of the organization across different levels. Also, (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990b) explained market orientation as an overall strategy that involves the generation of market intelligence inclusive of present and future needs, dissemination of information across departments, and the responsiveness to the intelligence generated.

Marketing orientation was also seen from a different lens where (Narver & Slater, 1990) defined it as the culture that makes constant effort to create and deliver superior value for the customers through customer orientation and subsequently ensuring efficient inter-functional coordination organization. The customers' interest should always be the foremost important thing for the organization by creating superior value for the customers and building a sense of belief system among the employees. This process would not be neglecting the key stakeholders such as the managers and other employees who are an essential asset to the organization to promote long term profitability (Deshpande, Farley, & Webster, 1993). Marketing orientation can also be seen as a unique skill set existing in the customer's employees to understand and satisfy the customers' needs. Thus, market orientation uses information on constantly sensing the market effectively while making constant efforts to uplift the customer linking capabilities (Day, 1994). Market orientation is an integral part of the firm's culture and process as internal factors facilitate its functionality (Harris & Ogbonna, 2001b ; Harris & Ogbonna, 2001a ; Harris, 2000).

After critically understanding every researcher's point of view with regards to market orientation, there is a common theme that emerges throughout that is, and every business needs to gather some intelligence or information from their area of business or market place and take a decision or implement them based on the information to create value for various stakeholders. Market orientation can be thus defined as the constant effort of an organization to know what the customers need and want while constantly generating and implementing the information from the marketplace to create and deliver value to the customers. In this process, the firm is competitive and remains to grow through the change of needs and wants of the customer (Narver & Slater, 1990 ; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990b).

### **Customer orientation**

Customer orientation involves placing the customer's interest as the topmost priority and constantly focusing on the customer's needs to provide superior value for the product or service being availed. The market-oriented organizations adapt to various techniques and tools to enhance the value being delivered to the customer, thus reducing the overall acquisition cost and



ensuring a sustainable competitive advantage in the market place (Deshpande et al., 1993 ; (Narver & Slater, 1990). The constant concern for the organizations is what aspect or change could create enhanced value for the customers, both existing and potential. Market orientation should include the core of the organizational matters and every employee's practice. It enhances the performance and builds a stronger relationship with the customer while building a long-term capability. The organization's goal should be collecting information constantly in the correct fashion about the customer's needs and wants, which will enable the organization in critical decision making. Customer orientation is a firm's strategy to deliver desired values to the customer by laying a solid foundation of gaining in-depth insights about the present and future customers (Narver & Slater, 1990) ; (Zhou, Yim, & Tse, 2005). Customer orientation is also believed to generate information for the customers while using it to make the right decision and implement it to enhance the value to the customers (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990a). Thus, the critical feature of Customer orientation lies as a core of strategic management that constantly emphasizes the notion that customers are an essential part of the business operations in the market place (Webster, 1988). Customers are the reasons why the business are existing, or the organizations are sustaining. Thus, it is the organization's responsibility to cater to the customer to ensure that they are aware of the needs and wants of the customer, which would help them deliver a value that the customers well accept.

### **Intelligence generation**

A firm must take on a series of activities to understand the present and future needs of the customers and subsequently the present and future predictions of their competitors (Shah, Rust, Parasuraman, Staelin, & Day, 2006). This intelligence generation will enable firms to align their process parallel to various decisions, leading to more significant customer orientation. Intelligence generation would generate information on the customers only, which can be best utilized by the inter-functional coordination of various departments within the firm (Mavondo & Conduit, 2001).

### **Intelligence Dissemination**

The intelligence needs to spread freely across all the departments to take the proper steps aligned to the customer's benefit. This would ensure that all the departments have the appropriate information about the customers, enabling the firms to take a standard and correct decision about the customer and the external competition (Lamberti, 2013). The spread of information would help the firm's various departments analyze and add the right blend of value to the various products and services, incorporated utilizing the intelligence of the needs and wants of the customer. The spread of the information would help firms be as transparent as possible while serving the customers and internally among various employees (Mavondo & Conduit, 2001).



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## **Responsiveness**

The essential aspect of understanding the customer needs was intelligence generation and intelligence dissemination. However, responding to the intelligence being generated and disseminated is key to ensuring that the customer's needs and demands are taken into utmost consideration and fulfilled as per the customer's expectations (Harris, 1995 ; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Responsiveness to market intelligence includes developing, strategizing, and implementing the product or services as per the customer's present needs and future needs (Shahid, 1997 ; Wei & Morgan, 2004). The most critical aspect of customer orientation is to act upon after the information is generated and spread across various departments (Hult et al., 2005 ; Morgan, Vorhies, & Mason, 2009). After developing and disseminating knowledge, the most crucial part would be responding to the knowledge effectively, thus ensuring that the missing gaps and lost linkages are being filled.

## **Competitor Orientation**

Organizations these days are very competitive. Thus, it is required to know the strength, weakness, capabilities, competencies, and other focused information involved to attract the customer towards their products or services. The knowledge of the competitors generated helps the organization prepare themselves for the needs of the customer and market demands, which will also help the organization sustain for a more extended period (Deshpande et al., 1993) ; (Narver & Slater, 1990). Competitor orientation focuses on creating a business that constantly focuses on other key players or emerging players in the marketplace to stay focused yet ahead on delivering values to the customers. Every organization will continuously make efforts and retain customers or build new customers as per their desired target group. Competitor orientation aims to generate the right set of information about the competitors and make informed strategic decisions to ensure competitive sustainability.

## **Inter-functional Orientation**

Inter-functional coordination is one of the essential aspects of market orientation. There should be proper coordination among various departments and employees working within the organization to ensure the desired outcome. The better is the inter-functional coordination, the better would be the performance, and the customers would have a better relationship and positive outlook towards the organization (Narver & Slater, 1990). Thus, inter-functional coordination emphasizes that every employee and department is equally valuable for the organization's progress (Shapiro, 1988). The attitude of the employees is a highly influential aspect in inter-functional coordination within the organization as the employees are the face of the organization to both internal and external customers. The coordination of the activities of each day should be well communicated and ensured to maximize the performance. This would also involve



coordinated integration of resources which will help the organization to deliver richer value to their customers (Narver & Slater, 1990).

## **Employee Orientation Factors**

### **Training**

According to (Mavondo & Conduit, 2001), training is crucial for internal customers. The employees are well equipped with the knowledge about their role, organizational function, and external customers to be customer-oriented throughout the customer's buying process. Training and education can help employees understand the nature of the customers, market, and competitors better. It helps the employees get equipped with the vision, mission and objectives of the company. Thus, leading to better productivity for the organization. Training and education of employees can help make them equipped with a positive attitude, which would make them understand every other employee's role better, thus keeping away various biases and conflicts away (Mavondo & Conduit, 2001). There are also training barriers where the employee's perceptions of learning new things over traditional training consultants are handled by various training consultants, who effectively ensure the transfer of skillsets. This transfer of skillset is crucial throughout to ensure that the employees can cross various obstacles without any hindrance in the ever-changing market and meet the customer requirements constantly (Bennett, Lehman, & Forst, 1999). Training is considered the method to acquire a new skill set, but it is also an effective way to resolve customer complaints or various inconveniences (Karatepe, Yavas, & Babakus, 2007). Employees with a high level of training will have skills developed effectively, which would help employees be customer-oriented while dealing with various customers, thus helping the organization seek long-term and short-term results (Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2002).

*H1: - Training positively affects the customer orientation of an organization*

### **Empowerment of Employee**

Empowerment gives an employee a sense of responsibility in an organization and an authority that enables an employee to take steps quickly instead of following a long set of commands. This would help employees understand their customers more effectively by getting closer to them, by giving a wide range of flexibility (Karatepe et al., 2007). Empowerment can also be termed as a motivational tool for the employees, which can help the organization ensure efficiency and increase employee productivity. The employee will have the authority to serve the customer as per the needs and wants of the customer. The decision can be made quickly no matter what kind of problem arises, thus ensuring customer satisfaction (Martin & Bush, 2003). The concept of interactive marketing strongly believes that empowerment is an essential enabler for an enabler to be customer-oriented. The employee's empowerment will give the employee the authority to





interact with the customers, as per the customer's convenience, while catering to the customers' needs and wants constantly. This would help the organization stay customer-oriented throughout (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000). The empowerment of employees enhances the problem-solving ability and helps them reach their full potential while serving the customers effectively. The empowered employees have the freedom, responsibility and authority to act faster than usual without having a long chain of commands (Yavas & Babakus, 2009 ; Gazzoli, Hancer, & Park). This would also enhance the self-decision-making skills of an employee during a critical scenario. Employees empowerment can also be considered a psychological setting that helps the employee feel authoritative and thus helping the employees stay more motivated in the job and customer orientated while dealing with the customers (Ro & Chen, 2011) ; (Khalili, 2016).

*H2: -Empowerment of the employee positive affects the customer orientation of an organization.*

### **Job Fit**

The feature of an individual, environment, and situations influences an individual's behaviour, deciding if the individual is rightly fit for a specific job or role in an organization (Iacob, 2014). An individual's personality must fit the workplace atmosphere rightly, where the workplace's objective is to be customer-oriented. If a job task fits the traits of an individual working in the organization, the individual's performance would gradually enhance. The individual would work selflessly towards making the organization customer-centric with its approach (Iacob, 2014). The right job fit will ensure that the employee is aligned to the organizational motives, leading to a customer-oriented employee. Some organizations would prefer to hire the right job fit employee irrespective of having defined the organization's vacancy. The employee must adapt to the work and the organizational structure (Reilly, 2017). Suppose an employee is not fit for a particular job or work. In that case, the employee could likely affect the organization's customer orientation, which would subsequently affect the organization's long-term goals (Menguc et al., 2015). A single problem within the organization due to misfit could create a ripple effect among the customers. The aim has been to establish compatibility between the job and the employee to ensure that the organization is customer-oriented throughout (Jay, Michael, & Hwang, 2016). Job fit has also been seen as the match of skillset and the compatibility of the employee's individual values with the organisational values' cultural aspect (Farrell & Oczkowski, 2009). This will thus create a synergy between the organization and its employees in order to the customer-oriented.

*H3: - Job fit positively affects the customer orientation of an organization.*

### **Job satisfaction**

Employees satisfied with their jobs are more likely to be selfless with the service they would provide to be customer-centric. Employees have a responsibility to understand the needs and demands of the consumer and fulfil them, which is only possible if the employee is satisfied in



their respective role in the organization (Lassk, Kennedy, & Goolsby, 2004) ; (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000) ; (Saura & Contri, 2005). It is the organizations to ensure high job satisfaction among the organization's employees to ensure a high level of customer orientation from the organization as a whole. If an employee is satisfied with their respective job role in an organization, the employee would be highly customer-oriented with its approach whole meeting needs and demands of the external customers (Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2002) ; (Zhou & Zhou, 2004).

*H4: - Job Satisfaction Positively affects customer orientation*

### **Job Motivation**

Motivation is one of the critical determinants of employees behaviour towards their external and internal customers (Iacob, 2014 ; Hennig-thurau & Thurau, 2003 ; Kelley, 1996). Motivational orientation among the internal customers or employees promotes open interaction with external customers, whose needs are supported, making the customer highly satisfied with the products or services. Employees who are motivated can face any form of the situation and deal with it positively. They can also creatively adapt to various behaviours depending purely on the gravity of the situation and the environmental condition (Iacob, 2014 ; W. Kim, 2009). Motivation can influence an employee by making them more customer-oriented towards their approach while interacting with the external customers (Paarlberg, 2007).

*H5: - Job Motivation Positively affects customer orientation*

### **Performance Orientation (PO)**

#### **Innovativeness**

There is a need in the innovativeness of firms in an emerging economy these days as they need to be efficient in terms of processes that would enable them to gain a competitive position in the global market (Theoharakis & Hooley, 2008 ; Matsuo, 2006 ; Ge & Ding, 2005 ; Deshpande et al., 1993). It is strongly believed that if a firm is customer-oriented with its approach, the customers who intend to buy the firms products or services would likely feel more innovative across. The customer orientation approach involves constant change while serving the customers effectively, thus leading to innovativeness to various products and services subsequently (Tajeddini, 2010 ; Jalilvand, 2017 ; V. K. Gupta, Atav, & Dutta, 2019).

*H6: - Customer orientation is positively related to innovativeness*

### **Competitive Advantage**

Competitive advantage helps to strategize an organization to do things differently from the competitors, enabling an organization to seek a competitive advantage (Theoharakis & Hooley,



2008). This differentiated strategy is built as per the customer's needs, which does not seek tremendous demand among the customer as per the uniqueness and affordability concerning the other competitors (Narver & Slater, 1990). The organization which is highly customer orientated and focused towards understanding the needs of the customer, along with fulling their needs would invest a lot in studying the competitors and place themselves differently with the help of technology or human resource, thus giving a position to attain competitive advantage in the market place (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993).

*H7: - Customer orientation is positively related to competitive advantage*

### **Customer Service performance**

The customer service of an organization is crucial in a service firm where the employee's role towards the customer is keenly being taken into consideration while the employee is interacting with the customer throughout (Theoharakis & Hooley, 2008 ; Jones, Busch, & Dacin, 2003 ; Liaw, Chi, & Chuang, 2010). Customer-oriented firms can have much better customer service performance, which would likely attract more customer and increase the market share. Better the customer service performance better would be the customer retention rate of the firm compared to the other competitors servicing in a similar marketplace (Brady & Cronin, 2001). These days with the increase in competitors and similar kinds of products being offered to the customers, much focus has been given to customer service. Customer service has evolved as the ever-changing preferences of the customer (Theoharakis & Hooley, 2008 ; T. O. M. J. Brown, Mowen, Donovan, & Licata, 2002b).

*H8: - Customer orientation is positively related to customer service performance*

### **Market Performance**

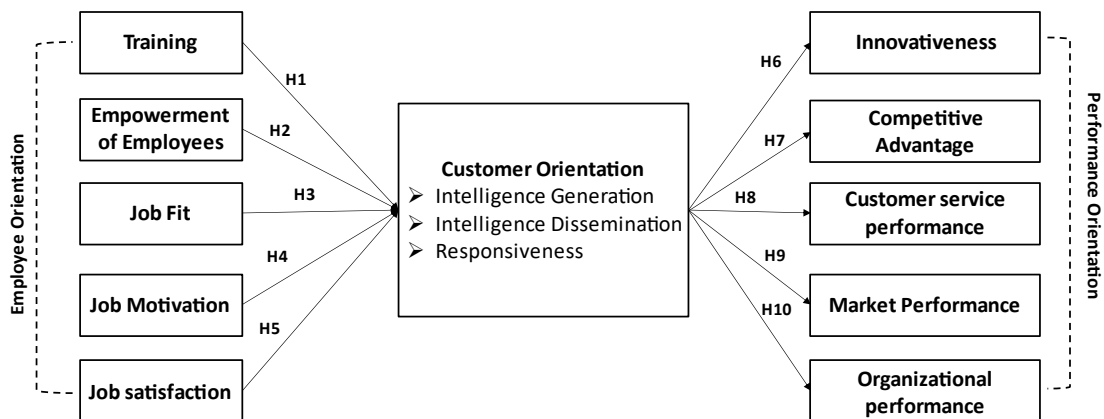
The proper implementation of a customer-oriented strategy would lead to more outstanding market performance. If an organization is customer-oriented, the firm would have a more outstanding and better market performance than the competitors (Michael K. Brady & J. Joseph Cronin, 2001). A market is a place where the customers interact with the organization to avail of the product or services desired by the customer (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). This market performance is hence majorly driven by the customers. The customer's experience or the value being delivered to the customer by an organization plays a crucial role in determining the market performance of the organization. The market performance is thus the outcome of a customer-oriented firm, which can be understood on how satisfied the customers are, how are the market share of the organization in the market place and the retention rate of the customer (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000) (Tseng, 2018) (Zhu, Nakata, Zhu, & Nakata, 2015).

*H9: - Customer orientation is positively related to market performance.*

## Organizational Performance

Organizational performance can be termed as relative firm performance and sustainable competitive advantage (Theoharakis & Hooley, 2008). A firm’s customer-oriented capability connects the firm more tightly and gives a competitive edge while enhancing the overall firm performance (Rapp, Trainor, & Agnihotri, 2010). A customer-oriented strategy is a keener on long term benefits over the short term, focusing on enhancing the organizational performance from every aspect (Pleshko & Heiens, 2000). Adopting a customer-oriented strategy by a firm ensures more fantastic firm performance and believes in the customer's superior perceived quality or service (Auh & Menguc, 2007). The organizational performance depends mainly on the return on investment, sales growth and profitability of the organization. The primary motive is to get an outcome that enhances their respective firm’s organizational performance. Customer orientation strategy is one such implementation that firms implement to seek improvement in various aspects of the firm performance (Matsuno, Mentzer, & Rentz, 2005).

*H10: - Customer orientation is positively related to organizational performance*



**Fig 1: Conceptual Theoretical Model**



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## **Theoretical Model**

The conceptual model clearly explains factors that will lead to the orientation of the employees such that they contribute towards the organization's customer orientation strategy. If the organization is thereby customer orientated, then it will ensure the performance orientation of the organization. The performance orientation is the key indicator that ensures that the organization performs well and is sustainable in the marketplace. The employee orientation (EO) factors such as training, empowerment of employees, job fit, job motivation and job satisfaction are considered essential factors that build the mind-set or practices of customer orientation. The customer orientation of an organization is driven by a vital stakeholder of the organization, its employees. Thus, ensuring employee orientation for an organization to be customer-oriented is crucial. The customer orientation of an organization is further seen by the efforts made by the employees to generate, disseminate and respond to the information from the customers. The customers' needs are focused on and catered to during customer orientation by the organization. The customer orientation strategy is built in a focused way by the organization to fetch desired performance outcomes, both financial and non-financial such as innovativeness, competitive advantage, customer service performance, market performance and organizational performance. Performance orientation is a set of objectives that an organization believes in achieving while being customer-oriented. The performance outcomes help constantly evaluate themselves and get better with time and are crucial indicators that enable a firm to be sustainable in the marketplace. The conceptual model builds a continuous relationship among EO, CO and PO, which was missing. Past researchers have discussed the factors individually in terms of their relationship with customer orientation. There was a need for an integrated framework that could be considered a standard framework of customer orientation across different contexts. The integrated conceptual model has emphasized and explained factors that build EO, which ensures CO of an organization, thus helping the organization seek outcomes that are termed as the PO.

## **Directions for Future Researchers**

The needs of the customers are evolving and ever-changing. An organization must cater to the needs of the customer constantly. There is also a rise in competition in the marketplace, irrespective of the industry. This competition is a threat to the sustainability of many organizations across different contexts. There was a need to make a standardized integrated framework for customer orientation, which can be applied across different contexts and focus on other aspects of customer orientation, such as the antecedents and outcomes. This paper builds a conceptual model that explains the continuous relationship among the EO, CO, and PO factors. The existing conceptual model provides a broad view of the concept of customer orientation. This provides an opportunity for future researchers with a canvas to explore the conceptual model across different arenas. Future researchers can modify the existing conceptual model by



evaluating the importance of the existing and possible factors. The researchers can also investigate various moderators that could affect the relationship in the current conceptual model. The conceptual model can be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative approach could help explore the model further and find new emerging factors throughout different organizations or industries. Every industry or organization has a unique set of culture and pattern of operation. Hence there could new insights that can emerge from different organizations. The quantitative study would help understand each factor's significance and test the relationship in the existing model using an adequate sample size. Future researchers can explore the conceptual model by conducting various in-depth comparative studies across different industries to understand how this model varies and finds its significance.

The concept of service profit chain (Brown & Lam, 2008 ; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2008) shows that employee-related factors lead to external service quality and subsequently fetches revenue growth and profitability. Future researchers can explain how customer orientation can complete the missing link between employee loyalty to external service quality. Employee loyalty cannot directly enhance external service quality to fetch revenue or profit for the organization. Thus, it was crucial for future researchers to find the inclusiveness of customer orientation in the service profit chain and test its significance across various industries.

There are exciting factors such as retention and decrease in the overall cost, which can significantly be the positive repercussions by applying a customer-oriented strategy. Further researchers can focus on various factors that impact the organizations' operations by decreasing the overall cost and maximizing revenue. This also increases the potential of future researchers to understand how factors of the marketing mix such as Product, price, place and promotion moderates the conceptual model. The organisation strategies marketing mix factors, keeping in mind the customer's needs and demands. Hence understanding the moderation of the marketing mix factors on the conceptual model in this paper would help future researchers to get various new insights across different industries. For example, price as a moderator in the model could be less significant in the service industry. It is subjective and does not account for various intangible aspects such as gesture, greetings, ambience and behaviour. Still, it could make a very significant difference in the case of manufacturing industries. The most crucial stakeholder in this conceptual model of customer orientation is the employees, the organization itself, and the customers. Future researchers could explore how other stakeholders such as various B2B partners and investors could be influenced by applying this model in the organization.

## **Conclusion**

Customer Orientation has always been studied by presenting few factors. The past researchers could not explain a holistic approach to understand or evaluate customer orientation across different contexts. Though customer orientation has been seen as an effective strategy to build a base of loyal customers and ensure sustainability by focusing both on financial and non-financial



outcomes, many organizations have failed to reap the appropriate essence of this strategy due to various missing factors or links. Customer orientation strategy is a necessity seeing the ever-increasing number of customers and their ever-changing needs in the current times. This article draws a conceptual model which will help researchers as a road map to explore the holistic approach and explore the application across different contexts. The conceptual model is from an organizational perspective that will ensure the managers' better decision-making approach to outstand in a competitive market and cut down all the challenges that enable an organization to be customer-oriented by fetching a set of most essential outcomes. This model will thus help researchers and managers as a starting point to explore customer orientation in a focused way that steers the organization's success yet with a holistic approach. The conceptual model makes a modest effort to portray that customer orientation cannot be due to a single antecedent or fetch a single outcome to ensure the organization's sustainability.

Nevertheless, it is a strategy that combines a set of factors that build employee orientation (EO) to ensures the process of customer orientation (CO) and which thus ensures the essential outcomes not only from the competitors or marketplace point of view but also by encompassing the customers, various financial and non-financial aspect, which is together referred to as the performance orientation (PO). The conceptual model is believed to provide a mindset to think holistic and act focused both to researchers and managers. The model also aims to evolve with time, thus accommodating the ever-changing dynamics of the market and decision-making efficacy of the managers and researchers across different contexts.

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