

# A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING COMPARISON STANDARDS AT VARIOUS STAGES OF THE BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION

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## ABSTRACT

Satisfaction research, specifically comparison standards work, has focused predominantly on consumers and ignored the business-to-business contexts. And within the standards literature, little effort has been given to differentiating between sources of information used to form standards and the standards themselves. The authors present a framework that conceptually addresses these issues. Standards are gleaned from the literature (expectations, ideal, minimum tolerable, equity, and needs, wants and desires) and are hypothesized to play a predominant role in some stages more so than others of a business-to-business relationship evolutionary process (awareness, expansion/exploration, commitment, dissolution). The sources of information for standards formation (word of mouth, explicit/implicit communication, perceived alternatives, industry norms, and past experiences), again from the literature, are also linked to each of these relationship stages. By understanding what standards and sources are most strongly related to certain stages of a buying relationship, practitioners can best allocate time and other resources to influence the process.

## INTRODUCTION

The consumer satisfaction literature has received much attention from both practitioners and academic researchers in the last two decades. Much of this research has focused on single, individual transactions in the consumer markets. We feel that satisfaction research needs to be extended not only to ongoing relationships and transactions but also to the business to business buying markets. In this arena, many use experiences with the vendor's offering take place between exchange transactions.

Customer satisfaction and the disconfirmation paradigm is a major component of business to business relationship quality and is thought to lead to long term relationships. Studies in close

interpersonal relationships have found that satisfaction leads to committed, long term relationships (Rusbult, 1983). In these studies, satisfaction is the key variable in relationship development and plays a unique role at different stages in the relationship. Customer satisfaction can be instrumental in attracting new exchange partners, propelling relationships toward mutual dependence, and solidifying relationship in the commitment stage.

Although much debate exists on exactly how to measure service quality and customer satisfaction, researchers agree that part of the post-purchase response by customers involves employing a comparative evaluation process. Consumers compare their evaluations of product and service performance to certain comparisons standards (Oliver, 1980). While some argue that this comparative process is measured best through perceived performance results alone (Cronin and Taylor, 1994), others argue to measure the construct through an explicit disconfirmation process (Oliver, 1980). The dominate paradigm in disconfirmation theory has been the use of expectations as a single comparison to performance. Many researchers suggest that buyers use multiple comparison standards in addition to expectations to evaluate products and services (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987; Forbes, Tse and Taylor, 1986; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Wilton and Nicosia, 1986). Discussions on standards can easily become entwined with discussions of sources of information used to form the standards themselves. In an attempt to add clarity to this issue, we make a distinction between actual comparison standards and sources of information pertaining to and creating standards. The predominant comparison standards used by consumers for comparison of perceived performance identified by researchers include expectations in general (Miller, 1977, Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993), desires (Olshavsky and Spreng, 1989), equity (Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988), minimum standards (Miller, 1977; Olson

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and Dover, 1979), ideal, deserved (Miller, 1977; Prakash, 1984), desired (Clemons and Woodruff, 1991; Swan and Trawick, 1980), other products and brands (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987), and industry norms (Woodruff and Gardial, 1995). We have identified the following list to be sources of information that help create comparison standards: explicit and implicit promises by the seller (Woodruff et al., 1991), word of mouth (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993), experience based norms (Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1993), and perceptions of alternatives (Clemons and Woodruff, 1991; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983). A review of the standards research also reveals a dearth of work in the business-to-business setting. To date, the majority of the work on comparison standards has been in the consumer area. It is in this area of business-to-business marketing that we feel a next step should be taken.

Some researchers suggest that multiple standards are likely to be used for a given purchase evaluation (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987; Gardial et al., 1993; Forbes, Tse and Taylor, 1986; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Wilton and Nicosia, 1986). This research suggests that multiple comparison standards can be used simultaneously in product/service evaluations. In addition to pre-purchase specific situations, researchers have found evidence which indicates different comparison standards may be used over time during post-purchase evaluations (Gardial et al., 1993, 1994). Continuing with that finding enables us to view an evolving relationship as a continuous post-purchase situation. The complex and continuously changing business-to-business relationship cannot be considered as one post-purchase situation. It is due to this complexity that the standards issue must be explored at various points in time during different stages of the relationship evolution. We posit that the standards used for comparison as well as the sources of information leading to the formation of those standards will in fact be different at various stages of the business relationship.

The issue of multiple standards along the relationship evolution path is important for several reasons. For practitioners, having an idea of which standards are being employed by a buying center given a certain stage in a relationship between the firms as well as knowing which ones

can be controlled or influenced, would provide important information for the efficient and effective use of sales and marketing efforts. It is imperative for practitioners to know what standards their performance is being compared to and the source of those standards. By understanding this phenomenon, practitioners will be better positioned to deliver superior customer satisfaction. From the scholar's perspective, researchers have a great opportunity to extend the standards issue beyond a single transactional evaluation and to move the issue into a relationship context. If the relationship is considered the "product," our approach could be seen as an evaluation of standards being employed throughout product use.

In the competitive business environment the importance of business-to-business relationships has grown tremendously. Joint ventures, strategic alliances, just-in-time agreements and buyer-seller relationships are the focus of many firms and are extensively researched in academic journals. Most firms are striving to find ways of achieving a competitive advantage and as a result, are developing committed buyer-seller relationships. Day and Wensley (1988) state that "relational exchanges can provide firms with a competitive advantage because they are not easily imitated."

Given that multiple standards are being employed and that relationships pass through evolutionary stages (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987), several key questions arise. What are the standards business buyers use to compare to the perceived performance of a particular supplier, how do these change over time as the buyer-seller relationship evolves, and what sources are used at these various stages? Due to the limited research on comparison standards in long-term business-to-business arrangements, we will attempt to transfer what we know from the consumer literature and construct a framework for the business-to-business situation. On this notion of changing standards over time, for example, Gardial et al. (1993, 1994) found that consumers use different standards prior to purchasing a product than they do in post purchase evaluations.

Based on both the multiple standards point and the differing standards across purchase stages issue, we propose that different sets of standards play dominant roles in various stages of a buying

relationship. This paper establishes a conceptual framework in which the standards issue can be explored across various stages of the business-to-business buying relationship evolution. Initially, an overview is provided on the nature of the business to business relationship evolution process. A conceptual framework is then offered that hypothesizes on the primary location of the various standards at certain stages of the relationship evolution. We have identified the external sources of information regarding the standards as primarily being the marketer or the environment.

### **THE NATURE OF BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION**

Although similar to many concepts of consumer purchases, the literature has recognized that business to business buying is different in a number of ways. We will identify only those differences that are relevant to our discussion of comparison standards and customer satisfaction. Business-to-business buyers often rely more heavily on product related services. Thus, the development of interpersonal relationships between buyers and sellers is a critical component of and prerequisite to business-to-business buying. Within this relationship, many transactions and interactions take place and as such many opportunities develop for buyers to compare products, services, and the relationship itself. In other words, there are many aspects to a business buyer-seller relationship which have impact on the standards being employed at various times. So, business buying's reliance on product related services, interpersonal relationships, and the ongoing buying situation are expected to influence the comparison standards that are employed during the evolution of the buyer-seller relationship.

Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) have developed a time sequence framework to study buyer-seller relationships from an ongoing process perspective. The relationship development process is characterized by five stages: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution. Although no two relationships are the same and not all relationships experience all of these stages, general themes and similar processes of each stage have been identified. The model is dynamic in that relationships can proceed at

different speeds and take different paths. While some relationships develop and reach the commitment stage, others may never get passed the awareness stage. Development implies that the relationship is moving forward; however, it is possible for committed relationships to dissolve and terminate or to digress back to the exploration stage. We would add that a relationship may move from commitment back to the expansion/exploration stage in many situations. In the case of a monopoly supplier, a relationship may move from awareness to commitment directly. In essence, the relationship is not strictly linear, nor does it always have to move to dissolution. For the purposes of this study, we have combined the exploration and expansion stage to represent a single transitory stage since they are similar in regard to forming buyer expectation levels. Customer satisfaction is a key variable to understanding and predicting the relationship evolution process. In the early stages, customer satisfaction attracts and propels the relationship forward. Satisfaction is thought to solidify a relationship in the commitment stage, while dissatisfaction will lead to the dissolution stage.

#### **Awareness**

Awareness is the recognition of a potential exchange partner. This stage is characterized by unilateral communications where the potential exchange partner tries to communicate its potential value to the other party and their ability to satisfy the customer on certain dimensions.

#### **Exploration/Expansion**

Exploration begins bi-lateral interactions and will involve searching for and testing certain exchange partners. This stage involves many subprocesses such as attraction, communication and bargaining, development and exercise of power, norm development, and expectation development. The relationship is relatively new with knowledge and trust of the supplier being relatively low. Meeting or exceeding the invoked comparison standards will result in satisfaction propelling the relationship forward to the commitment stage. Thus, the buyer must rely on the seller's communication (explicit and implicit),

perceived alternatives, self perceived roles and his/her past experience.

### **Commitment**

The commitment stage is characterized by the mutual expectation that the relationship will continue. The seller is most likely a "prime vendor" or has a substantial amount of business with the buyer. This phase can be depicted by cooperation and a unifying attempt to achieve mutual goals. The customer has gained a great deal of first hand knowledge of the supplier's operations and capabilities and is satisfied with the product/service/relationship offering delivered by the supplier. Due to their high satisfaction level, the customer will not be exploring other potential exchange opportunities with the frequency and intensity as in the other stages.

### **Dissolution**

Dissolution represents the disengagement process or withdrawal from the relationship. Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) also discussed the notion that dissolution first involves an intrapsychic phase where the buyer evaluates the relationship and determines that s/he is not satisfied or that the costs outweigh the benefits of continuing the relationship. At this point, partners may begin to devalue the relationship and begin dismantling it. The dissolution stage can be thought of as relationship erosion leading to termination.

## **COMPARISON STANDARDS: SOURCES AND THEIR LINK TO THE RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION PROCESS**

This paper is not meant to serve as a comprehensive literature review on comparison standards, but instead draws a distinction between actual comparison standards and the sources of information concerning those comparison standards. We posit that the standards used for comparison change during the evolution of a relationship. Along with this we also suggest that buyers will rely on different sources of information regarding standards as the relationship develops. The framework in this paper addresses the likely

standards in each stage of the relationship along with the probable source of information to influence the standard. The source of standards is identified as driven by the specific marketer in the relationship or the external environment.

We have identified expectations, ideal, equity, minimum tolerable, and interpersonal needs, wants and desires as relevant standards. Expectations generally relate to what the buyer expects from a particular exchange relationship given the costs associated with it. We feel that buyers always have certain expectations. The more interesting question here is how do the sources of information for or the expectations themselves change over time? Buyers may have an ideal or normative standard of performance (Miller, 1977; Prakash, 1984; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983; Woodruff and Gardial, 1995) whereby they think of what an offer or exchange experience ought to be like. Equity as a comparison standard focuses on the fairness of the exchange. Buyers compare the performance received with their own concept of fairness (Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988; Oliver and Swan, 1989). Equity theory extends fairness especially to social interactions such as buyer-seller interactions. There is also a minimum standard that buyers set for comparing offers and performance (Miller, 1977; Olsen and Dover, 1979). Needs, wants and desires represents the values or desired benefits of the buying firm overall and the individual members of the buying center and is a standard recognized by previous researchers (Westbrook and Reilly, 1983; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983).

As previously mentioned, the marketer in the relationship is a source of information that can be the origin or influence of a specific comparison standard. The marketer can influence standard formation through explicit communication, implicit communication and past experience with the customer. Marketers' communications through promotions, advertisements and sales calls can help form comparison standards. These explicit promises concerning product performance and service levels often create buyer expectations (Woodruff et al., 1991; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Implicit communication is actually perceptually based and can be a source of standards. Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman have characterized implicit communication pertaining to

tangibles and price or cues that lead to the perception of superior performance. A newly renovated warehouse facility and advanced ordering systems (EDI), refers to tangible items that implicitly communicate the value in the offering. Perceptions or first impressions of the salesperson or selling team are offered by the authors as extensions to implicit communication in the business-to-business arena.

The external environment can also be a source of comparison standards. The external environment consists mainly of the other suppliers and a network (trade associations) of similar buyers. These sources of standards would include word of mouth, perceived alternatives, industry norms, and past experiences. Word of mouth is communication amongst network members

concerning general standards and company specific standards. Word of mouth often occurs between similar buyers, sellers, consultants, and trade association publications (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1993) identified perceived service alternatives as a source of a comparison standard. The business buyer who has a waiting room full of "hungry" vendors might hold his/her current vendor to a higher standard due to his/her perception of the competitive forces in the marketplace. Buyers also use the norms of the industry to form standards (Woodruff and Gardial, 1995). The concept of experience based norms (Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983) proposes that buyers form standards from an array of industry experiences.

**Figure 1**  
**Comparison Standards & Relationship Evolution**

	Awareness	Expansion & Exploration	Commitment	Dissolution
<b>Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Expectations</li> <li>•Ideal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Expectations</li> <li>•Minimum tolerable Standards</li> <li>•Equity</li> <li>•Industry Norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Expectations</li> <li>•Equity</li> <li>•Interpersonal Needs &amp; Desires</li> <li>• Industry &amp; Vendor Norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Expectations</li> <li>•Equity</li> <li>•Ideal</li> </ul>
<b>Sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Word of Mouth (E)</li> <li>•Explicit Communication (M)</li> <li>•Perceived Alternatives (E)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Explicit Communication (M)</li> <li>•Implicit Communication (M)</li> <li>•Past Experience: Product / Best Brand Norms / Best Relationships (E)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Experience with this Vendor (M)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Word of Mouth (E)</li> <li>•Explicit Communication (M)</li> <li>•Perceived Alternatives (E)</li> </ul>

(M) = Marketer

(E) = Environment

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

At this stage we present a conceptual framework for exploring multiple standards employed simultaneously by the buyer/buying center over the evolution of a relationship (Figure 1). A general hypothesis might therefore be:

**H1:** At different stages of a buyer-seller relationship evolution process, certain comparison standards and sources will have more impact than others.

### Awareness

In addition to expectations, the "ideal" comparison standard is hypothesized to be a dominate standard employed in the awareness stage. As the members of a buying center become aware of a need, they begin to think of what product/service offering and vendor would ideally meet their needs. Buyers will usually have in mind some standard at which the product or service should perform.

Word of mouth, explicit communication by the marketer, and perceived alternatives are hypothesized to be the predominant sources of standards employed in the awareness stage of a relationship. At this stage in the relationship, the buyers will have limited first hand knowledge of the specific marketer and thus must rely on the marketer and external environment for information. They will most likely employ standards based on what they've heard or hear from other people. These people may be other purchasing agents in their own company, other purchasing agents who have bought similar products/services, or even anyone in the company who may have dealt with the potential supplier (e.g. engineers, production supervisors, finance). Buyers will also establish a standard using explicit advertising and promotional literature from the potential vendor. This may actually be compared to what they hear by word of mouth, which will set an initial assessment that either helps or hinders a potential vendor before they are even aware that they are a potential vendor. At the awareness stage, a firm may compare a potential supplier's offering with all of these alternatives and the costs associated with each. Thus, an initial research

hypothesis might be:

**H1A:** In a business-to-business buying context, an ideal comparison standard and expectations are the standards positively and most strongly related to the awareness stage of the relationship, as compared to minimum standards, equity, and interpersonal needs, wants and desires.

**H1B:** In a business-to-business buying context, word of mouth, explicit communication, and perceived alternatives are the sources positively and most strongly related to the awareness stage of the relationship, as compared to implicit communications, experiences with the vendor and industry norms.

### Expansion / Exploration

In the expansion/exploration stage of relationship evolution, both parties are exploring the costs and benefits of the relationship. In a business-to-business sense, this may be anywhere from 6 months to the first year or two of contracts. Products and services are supplied many times yet both partners are assessing the value of the relationship and the desire to move to the next stage.

Equity and minimum tolerable standards are thought to be the relevant standards, in addition to expectations, employed in this stage of the relationship. Equity is inherent in comparison standards once transactions begin between exchange partners. Oliva, Oliver, & MacMillan (1992) showed that equity is especially relevant whenever a crisis or problem arises. Equity also pertains to interpersonal interactions and is a key component of trust. Trust is defined as a "willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman, Deshpande and Zaltman, 1992)." This view of trust results from the suppliers reliability or expertise and that the buyer will be treated fairly in the exchange. If this equity standard is not upheld, trust in the supplier will erode and the relationship is likely to dissolve.

Minimum tolerable standards are likely to pertain to the expansion and exploration stage. If

the supplier can not meet these standards in the initial trial orders, the likelihood of a continued relationship is doubtful.

Sources of standards such as explicit and implicit communication, industry based norms and past experience are the most likely to have impact in this stage. To be considered as a potential exchange partner, the salesperson is communicating the potential value of his/her product/service offering. Seller promises about the offering and contract negotiations are typical forms of explicit communications. Implicit communication are really a form of perceptions the buyer forms about the seller. The buyer will be looking for physical or tangible clues that the seller can indeed meet his/her needs. Plant tours displaying the latest technology in product and service capabilities are often used to achieve this goal. A salesperson's accessibility can be implicitly communicated through voice mail, E-mail, beeper, and other communication technologies.

Past experience or industry based norms will also be a major component in forming comparison standards. Since the buyer has little knowledge of this particular supplier, s/he must rely on his/her past experience with other suppliers or the norms of the industry. If the buyer has received bi-weekly deliveries in the past, s/he will likely expect this from his/her new supplier. If the buying center members have experience or information about other products or a best brand, they may compare performance against these standards here. We also include best relationship here. If we go back to the analogy of the relationship as the product, we can assume that a buying center may compare the performance of the relationship, in all its contexts, to that of their best relationship, even if in other product categories.

**H1C:** In a business-to-business buying context, equity, minimum tolerable and expectations are the standards positively and most strongly related to the expansion/exploration stage of the relationship, as compared to ideal and interpersonal needs, wants and desires.

**H1D:** In a business-to-business buying context, explicit communication, implicit

communication, industry norms and past experience are the sources positively and most strongly related to the expansion/exploration stage of the relationship, as compared to word of mouth, perceived alternatives, and experiences with this vendor.

### Commitment

The commitment stage of relationship evolution represents that stage at which both parties are committed to one another. The buyer's past experience with the seller is a key component to his/her comparison standard at this point in the relationship. At this stage, the buyer has a great deal of experience-based knowledge and a high degree of trust with the seller. The buyer is familiar with the seller's capabilities and knows the degree of trust associated with those capabilities. Less search is conducted to explore other vendors or customers to replace the parties in the relationship. Ideally, parties work together to help each other grow. Both parties are expanding and are looking for continuous improvement and new ways of reaching strategic goals. Members of the buying center will look to their supplier for ways to improve the relationship so that they can achieve their personal and organizational goals. Reaching goals pertains to interpersonal needs, wants and desires.

At this stage, we hypothesize that equity and interpersonal needs, wants and desires, in addition to expectations are the standards most often employed by the buyer/buying center. Equity retains the same meaning as earlier in the expansion/exploration stage. In this case, their may be more at stake, however. The buyer can also now compare recent performance with past experiences with this vendor. If performance is improving, the relationship may strengthen. If not, there may be cause for concern. Buyers might also be comparing their perceived value received with interpersonal (relationship) needs, wants and desires. Now that the relationship is one of a committed, long-term interaction, their needs to be a certain chemistry among the parties involved. This notion of interpersonal needs attempts to capture this idea. Past experience with this particular vendor becomes the primary external source of information for standards

development. This leaves us with the following hypotheses:

**H1E:** In a business-to-business buying context, expectations, equity and interpersonal needs, wants and desires are the standards positively and most strongly related to the commitment stage of the relationship, as compared to ideal and minimum tolerable standards.

**H1F:** In a business-to-business buying context, past experience with this particular vendor is the source positively and most strongly related to the commitment stage of the relationship, as compared to word of mouth, explicit communications, implicit communications, perceived alternatives, industry norms, and past experience with other vendors.

### **Dissolution**

At this point the current supplier is about to become a past experience, with the buyer searching elsewhere for a new supplier. This experience might be a salient standard used to evaluate new suppliers. While the relationship is in a state of erosion, word of mouth and alternative seller communications are likely to be sources of information for the buyer. Alternative sellers are persistently pursuing a relationship with the members of the buying center and are looking for indicators of a dissolving relationship with the current vendor. In these interactions, alternative sellers are explicitly and implicitly communicating their value as a potential supplier. This information can possibly influence the buyer's comparison standards thus causing or accelerating the erosion in the current relationship.

In the dissolution stage of a business relationship, the parties begin to devalue the relationship and may eventually dissolve it. This can be based on many factors. It is hypothesized that there are essentially two broad categories of comparison being employed by the buyer/buying center. The first is a general satisfaction assessment of the relationship itself. The second, is the comparison with other vendors, products, services and alternatives. Essentially, the

dissolution of a relationship with one company, leads to the awareness stage of a potential replacement partner. The cycle is continuous.

**H1G:** In a business-to-business buying context, expectations, equity and ideal are the standards positively and most strongly related to the dissolution stage of the relationship, as compared to minimum tolerable and interpersonal needs, wants and desires.

**H1H:** In a business-to-business buying context, word of mouth, explicit communications (other vendors') and perceived alternatives are the sources positively and most strongly related to the dissolution stage of the relationship, as compared to explicit communications by this vendor, implicit communications, industry norms, past experiences with other vendors, or experiences with this vendor.

### **CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH**

We have attempted to demonstrate that the issue of multiple standards being employed simultaneously can be taken to the next step by first assessing the concept in an business-to-business setting and second, linking the standards to various stages of the relationship evolution process. The issue of concern is whether multiple standards are used by business buying centers at various stages of a relationship. If so, what are the sources of information used to form those standards at the various stages? The answer to such a question is relevant to both practitioners as well as academic researchers. More focused effort will lead to more effective and efficient marketing as well as customer retention. By exceeding the buyer's standards, a marketer may be able to facilitate the movement of the relationship to the next stage in the evolution, if so desired.

Many research opportunities exist for academic researchers. By exploring the use of multiple standards across time within the product use situation, we gain greater insight to how standards evolve and aid in relationships. Which of these standards in each stage of relationship evolution has the most impact? What sources are used when? Oliva, Oliver & MacMillan (1992)

have suggested that equity has the most impact in crisis situations. Are there other situations or contexts in which other standards play a dominant role in leading to customer satisfaction? Future research needs to look at the context in which standards are formed and satisfaction evaluations take place. Do different role players in the buying center employ different comparison standards. Are the same comparison standards consistent in each phase of the relationship for different role players? Research tends to focus on the primary decision maker, yet we argue that other roles in the buying process need to be studied in regard to comparison standards and satisfaction evaluations.

Emotion has been recognized as a major component of customer satisfaction (Hausknecht, 1988; Hunt, 1993; Muller, Tse and Venkatasubramaniam, 1991; Westbrook 1980, 1987; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Woodruff, 1993). Customer satisfaction researchers have suggested that emotion could be a response to dis/confirmation or the satisfaction response itself (Oliver, 1980; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983). In either case, it begs the question, is emotion present in the formation of comparison standards for business buyers? Do some comparison standards involve more emotion than other standards? If emotion is present in comparison standard formation, how does this affect the dis/confirmation process and customer satisfaction?

Business-to-business buying involves a product, service and relationship as part of the total offering. Do the comparison standards associated with any of these components have more impact on customer satisfaction evaluations? In what stages of relationship development do each of these components have the most impact? Are the standards used for each of these components the same in each stage of the relationship or are they different? What is the proportion of each component in the offering in regard to the customer's satisfaction? Do business-to-business buyers place emphasis on the product and delivery service in choosing a vendor, yet change their emphasis to the interpersonal relationships and customer service when forming satisfaction evaluations? Does this occur and how does this change throughout the different stages of the relationship? The literature on personal and

organizational values has suggested that values affect our behavior, decision making, perceptions and evaluations. What is the link between personal and organizational values and customer satisfaction? Which components of the offering has more impact in satisfying the buyers values and how does this affect satisfaction?

A yet unexplored area worthy of further investigation relates to stimulus events or triggers as they relate to satisfaction research. Specifically here, what events trigger a change in standards used or standard levels? Do some sources consistently lead to more dramatic shifts than others? What events trigger a shift in sources used? Can these trigger events be classified? Can some of them be predicted? How does knowledge of the trigger events and their relationship to comparison standards impact the manner in which marketers operate?

This article proposes hypotheses and a research agenda concerning comparison standards and their relationship to stages of relationship evolution in business-to-business buying. Business-to-business buying has long been neglected in many areas of research including customer satisfaction and the formation of comparison standards. Numerous research opportunities are present and need to be pursued concerning business buying and customer satisfaction.

We have introduced a conceptual framework that depicts the role of customer satisfaction in the evolution of ongoing business-to-business relationships. Our framework has looked at the dynamic nature of comparison standards exploring how and why they change during different stages of the relationship. We have also made a distinction between actual comparison standards and sources of comparison standards in regard to the buyer, external environment and the specific marketing firm. This framework can be the basis of numerous studies exploring the dynamic nature of comparison standards in ongoing relationships.

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