

# Relationship marketing, relational capital and the future of marketing in public service organizations

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*This article proposes an innovative model of marketing practice for public services. This is rooted in the paradigm of relationship marketing and emphasizes the need to build relational capital between and within organizations operating in the public services arena. It is argued that this is essential for the effective management of contemporary public services in the fragmented state.*

## Marketing in public services—an opportunity missed?

As government and voluntary and community organizations (VCOs) increasingly work in partnership to make public policy and to design and deliver public services, new challenges are raised for the practice of marketing in public service organizations (PSOs: organizations from across the governmental, VCO and business sectors that are involved in the provision of public services). This task is complicated by the considerable ambiguity surrounding the role of marketing in PSOs. The very existence of a 'marketing function' in PSOs is contentious. Based on UK experience, this article offers clear conceptual foundations to guide the placing and practice of this functional discipline in such organizations.

Public services marketing practice over the past 30 years has been dominated by transactional models of marketing and the suitability and/or robustness of alternative models of marketing that might meet the needs of PSOs have not been tested (Laing, 2003).

This article addresses this gap both by exploring the utility of precisely such an alternative model for practice (*relationship marketing*). It commences by arguing that the model that has underpinned the development of public services marketing to date is inappropriate. Second, it validates this argument by presenting three 'micro-cameos' of the recent application of marketing activity to public services management. Third, it introduces the alternative model of relationship marketing and evaluates what such an alternative framework might contribute to the practice of marketing in PSOs. It does this by situating it in a broader framework of relational capital and relationship management.

## Modelling PSO marketing behaviour: the genesis of 'public sector marketing'

In the 1960s, marketing was predominantly presented as the key managerial discipline across all sectors of society. For example, Kotler and Levy (1969, pp. 10–12) argued that marketing was: 'a pervasive societal activity [and that all organizations] are concerned about their "products" in the eyes of certain "consumers" and are seeking to find tools for furthering their acceptance'. This position has subsequently been assumed by many marketing scholars and practitioners and has become the starting point for drawing marketing into the public domain, such as through social change and public education programmes (social marketing), and debates about the rationing of public services (demarketing) and about the acquisition of resources by PSOs through fundraising (Kotler and Andreason, 1975; Laing and McKee, 2000).

This perspective, however, has increasingly been subject to an ambiguity about the boundaries of marketing for PSOs. Having argued previously for marketing as a generic organizational function, key advocates have subsequently shifted their ground to introduce an element of *marketing conditionality* into the debate (Kotler and Keller, 2005).

These five conditions challenge the applicability of marketing to many public service contexts. PSOs are not always free to accept or reject public policy initiatives instigated by politicians, for example, nor can their clients/users always be free to accept or reject a particular public service offering (social control and primary/secondary education services being the most obvious examples of this).

Crucially, these early ideas about the conditionality of marketing exchange are rooted in classical economics and a model of

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exchange theory that supports a purely *transactional* view of marketing, with the firm as a unitary entity operating in isolation from other organizations. This perspective on marketing is based on a model of discrete transactions that have 'a distinct beginning, short duration and sharp ending by performance' (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). It has been criticized in the management literature, however, through the concepts of the 'new competition' (Best, 1993) and 'new institutionalism' (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). These new conceptualizations posit a model of network-based organizations that paradoxically compete by collaborating with other organizations, in order to lever in information, resources and capabilities. Such a model introduces new levels of complexity to exchange relationships that are beyond the scope and competencies of traditional transactional models of marketing and are highly relevant to the practice of marketing in contemporary PSOs.

#### **The marketing function and PSOs in the UK**

This has a comparatively recent history. It was not until the 1980s, when the 'marketization' of public services under the then Conservative government commenced in earnest, that attention was turned to the potential benefits of marketing for PSOs operating in market and quasi-market conditions (Walsh, 1991). This marketization was thus a core driver for the growth of the marketing function in British PSOs and it has had a profound influence on its trajectory since then. As a consequence, the marketing behaviour of individual PSOs has invariably been highly individualistic in nature, arguably to the detriment of whole public service system. Further, individual PSOs, and especially VCOs, have often been drawn into market scenarios for public services that have privileged competition and adversarial relationships over collaboration (Palmer, 2001). Three micro-cameo examples illustrate this argument.

##### *Health care*

First, the creation of the internal market in health care in the 1990s created competition between newly created 'trust' hospitals (service providers) and the primary care referral agents, usually general practitioners (service purchasers). The latter agents had, in theory at least, the opportunity to review a range of treatment packages from an array of providers before making their purchase. The response of many individual trust hospitals to this was to

look to the marketing function to develop their competitive position in these newly created markets (Kitchener and Whipp, 1995). The archetypal '4Ps' model, where organizations sought to strengthen their competitive position by varying dimensions of the *product*, its *promotion*, *price* and *place of distribution* (Kearsey and Varey, 1998) informed marketing practice over this period.

As a consequence, inter-hospital rivalry and competitive behaviour flourished in many areas. Individual trust hospitals succeeded by pursuing their own corporate objectives and financial security, but at the cost of scant attention being paid to overall health care policy. As a result of such behaviour, marketing as a profession in PSOs became subject to damning critiques that it had led to goal displacement and strategic drift in health care (Walsh, 1994). How could either local or central government steer health policy, it was argued, when individual health care actors were more preoccupied with their own survival than with the health outcomes of patients?

##### *Personal social services*

A second example can be found in the field of the personal social services. The National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 required local authority social services departments to create a 'mixed economy of care' for their services (Wistow *et al.*, 1994). In their early attempts to create this new mixed economy, these departments saw VCOs as a natural choice as preferred providers—both because of the perception of them as sympathetic to the needs of vulnerable people and because of their perceived (though unproven) institutional advantages, including cost efficiency, flexibility and consumer responsiveness (Knapp *et al.*, 1990). As a consequence, relationships between local government and VCOs were transformed. The previous 'grant funded' relationship between local government and the VCO sector was replaced by a performance-based 'contract culture' and the development of, often fractured, principal-agent relationships.

In 1996, the Deakin Commission emphasized that a serious breakdown in relations between the governmental and VCO sectors had resulted from this adversarial model and which needed to be addressed by a shift into more explicitly relational approaches—leading to the development of the Voluntary Sector Compact—and later to Compact Plus (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002). This represented an emergent policy framework

for building relationships across organizations that emphasized inter- rather than intra-organizational management and governance. As a result of this debate, some initial attempts were made to develop and test alternative models of the marketing function in PSOs (for example Laing and McKee, 2000; Wright and Taylor, 2005). Notwithstanding these, though, the discrete transactional model of marketing has continued to dominate practice in PSOs.

#### *Social security*

Finally, clients of the social security system in the UK are mandatory 'customers' of the Benefits Agency—no alternative provider exists. As such the agency has been encouraged by central government to promulgate a 'customer focus' as its dominant paradigm of behaviour. In addition, though, it is also required by government to implement competing policies that challenge the notion of 'claimants as customers' (Pheysey, 1993).

Specifically, the alternative concerns of central government, to tackle the perceived negative impact of the benefit system on the work incentive and to minimize fraudulent claims, has produced a competing discourse of claimant behaviour, as 'workshy' and 'fraudulent claimant' respectively. In this instance, therefore, the Benefits Agency's preferred marketing model, which was attempting to design consumerist choice into the system, was challenged by this alternative policy trajectory. Consequently, the limited transactional model of the marketing function employed by the Agency was unable to cope with this level of policy complexity and paradox (Falconer and Ross, 1999).

#### *Challenges*

These micro-cameos throw up two challenges for the future of the marketing function in PSOs:

- The originating context of transactional and operational management has constrained the development of marketing in PSOs to a focus on intra-organizational and operational debates. This has crowded out consideration of more sophisticated models of it as a basis for exploring its possible role in shaping the strategic behaviour of PSOs.
- The place of marketing in PSOs has become highly contested. In VCOs, for example, the remit of the marketing function can often be limited to fundraising alone, rather than integrated into their strategic positioning activity (Chew, 2006). Similarly, inside

governmental organizations, marketing professionals have often had to 'sail under another banner' in order to have an impact on strategic direction and positioning (Piercy and Cravens, 1995; Laing and McKee, 2000).

The conventional transactional notion of marketing clearly fails to accommodate such complexity and offers an incomplete basis for guiding marketing behaviour in PSOs. What is required, therefore, are new, policy relevant, models of marketing that can assist PSOs in developing strategic responses to the growing relational complexity of implementing public policy in the plural state. This returns us to the relational approaches to marketing and organizational management now evolving, but that to date have been little applied to PSOs.

#### **Relationship marketing**

Within the broader marketing literature it is increasingly acknowledged that relationship marketing represents an archetypal shift for marketing practitioners (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2002). This shift acknowledges that sustainable competitive advantage increasingly requires collaborative activity and that relationships are often the most valuable resource of a firm (Sharma and Patterson, 1999). This is the core of relationship marketing, that Harker (1999) has defined as an organization engaging in 'proactively creating, developing, and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with selected customers over time' (p. 16).

Groonroos (1999) has argued that a marketing strategy continuum exists. At one end of this continuum is transactional marketing, rooted in classical economics, and that deals with one transaction at a time. At the other end is relationship marketing that focuses on building relationships. The core of this relationship building is trust. Drawing on transactional economics, Selnes (1998) notes that: 'the importance of trust comes about...because of the difficulty or impossibility of acquiring information about future events or defining a contract that covers such future events' (p. 308).

Trust thus both facilitates the adaptation process that is often necessary to complete an exchange in an ongoing relationship and provides the basis for mutual commitment that 'reduces the uncertainties associated with opportunistic behaviour' in a volatile environment or market (Sheth *et al.*, 2000). Given the present emphasis in public policy on trust as a governance mechanism in the evolving

plural state (Osborne, 2006), it is surprising that relationship marketing has made only a marginal contribution to marketing practice and organizational management for PSOs. We now present the case for a more significant contribution.

### **Building the contribution of relationship marketing to public management**

Within the confines of this brief article it is not possible to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the potential contributions of relationship marketing to public management. Examples of three specific benefits will suffice for our purpose, however.

#### *Performing in the plural and pluralist state*

Osborne (2006) has argued that the 21st century has seen the evolution of the 'new public governance' in public service, where the negotiation of both plural (involving multiple actors) and pluralist (involving multiple processes) public policy-making and implementation is the dominant paradigm. Further he has argued that traditional approaches to public administration and management have failed to provide substantive guidance to public managers struggling to cope with this level of complexity. Both views are partial and flawed. Relationship marketing offers PSOs an opportunity to move beyond this simple bipolar opposition and to engage with the policy process in a way that enhances pro-active inter-organizational management.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) have argued that relationship marketing actually comprises three levels of marketing activity: the micro, the macro and the meso. This approach can offer PSOs a conceptual framework to move to a new plane of marketing sophistication. The micro level concerns the exploration of co-production with the recipients of public services—both an essential element of good services management (Normann, 1991) and a core component of contemporary public policy in the UK and Europe (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). The macro level focuses attention on both boundary spanning and boundary maintenance activities for PSOs—both essential for effective inter-organizational collaboration (Kale *et al.*, 2000; Tsai, 2000). Finally, the meso level involves the engagement of PSOs in the policy formulation and implementation process as cognizant, purposive, actors rather than as passive recipients (Gulati *et al.*, 2000). By conceptualizing marketing activity across these three levels, PSOs can clarify its overall contribution to organizational performance.

This is an essential first step in articulating a clear formulation of the place and role of the marketing function in PSOs and to replace the current ambiguity and confusion.

#### *Understanding and managing trust*

Trust is at the heart of any inter-organizational relationship, including in public services provision (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). Often, though, 'trust' appears in the literature as a reductive self-defining concept. Relationship marketing offers a different, dynamic, perspective on it, and one more suited to challenges of PSOs in the plural state. The first of these challenges is the 'principal-agent' problem (Vickers and Yarrow, 1988). This concerns the asymmetry of information that exists in relationships between two or more parties to a task. At its extreme, the principal to a partnership must employ a range of instruments in order to monitor and control the behaviour of their agent. Within a more relational context, however, both can use their trust in each other to monitor the outcomes of their relationship rather than relying on costly and bureaucratic performance management systems, with all their implied transaction costs (Bachmann, 2001). Relationship marketing provides a clear basis on which to build and maintain such trust—as well as warnings against its misuse and potential lack of transparency (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Palmer *et al.*, 2000).

The second challenge is that of dealing with risk, and its associated costs, in service innovation—a notoriously difficult activity in the risk-averse culture of PSOs (Osborne and Brown, 2005). A relational approach based on trust allows these risks and costs to be shared, minimizing the danger and sharing the benefits of a venture to each party to the relationship. It also allows opportunistic behaviour to be minimized and the dedicated skills and knowledge base of an organization to be protected (Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999).

Thus, trust is an input into relationship building in the sense that it is one of the core resources of any relationship. No relationship can survive without it. It is an output in the sense that working successfully together in a relationship reinforces and develops further the trust between the parties involved—successful relationships breed deeper, and more successful, relationships (Gulati *et al.*, 2000). Relationship marketing offers a framework for PSO practitioners to understand and mediate these trust-based relationships.

Figure 1 illustrates the challenge of moving towards such 'relational governance'. Many current relationships are still bound by the classical and neo-classical governance of individual transactions, while the policy trajectory, and the insights of relationship marketing, increasingly emphasizes relational governance. At the core of this challenge, therefore, is how to make the shift between these competing modes of governance. The concept of relational capital, from the associated field of organizational strategy, provides further assistance here for PSO managers.

*Relational capital—the heart of relationship management*

Donaldson and O'Toole (2002) argue persuasively that relationship marketing cannot stand alone in the development and governance of productive inter-organizational relationships. It has to go alongside other activity to optimize such relationships. One of the most significant concepts that the associated field of organizational strategy can thus offer to such holistic relationship management by PSOs is that of 'relational capital'. The use of the term 'relational capital' in relationship marketing should be differentiated from its use by industrial and regional geographers (such as Capello, 2002). In that context it refers specifically to spatial and 'milieu' constructions of relational capital.

Kale *et al.* (2000) define relational capital as: 'the level of mutual trust, respect and friendship that arises out of close interaction

at the individual level between alliance partners' (p. 218, our emphasis).

The key insight for PSO managers in this literature is to focus on individuals and individual relationships and their interaction with the organizational level of relationships. Too often it seems that, in PSOs, relationships are reified to the organizational level alone—the neo-corporatist assumptions of the Voluntary Sector Compact in the UK are a good example of this (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002). The relational capital approach does recognize the import of organizational factors for effective inter-organizational working. However, it also makes explicit that these factors are dependent on key relationships at the individual level (where organizational staff interact with the staff of other PSOs, policy-makers and service recipients).

Research from the private sector research has shown that between 30% and 70% of all private sector partnerships fail (for example Overby, 2006) and that relational capital is one of the strongest safeguards against such failure (Gulati *et al.*, 2000). Thus partnerships built on relational capital become key strategic resources of an organization and enables it to gain a competitive advantage over its rivals not embedded in such partnerships. The key to deriving this advantage lies in the ways in which the key individuals in organizations learn to manage the balance between trust and distrust and conflict between their respective organizations:

**Figure 1. Commissioner–provider inter-relationships in public services provision (after Ring and Van den Ven, 1992, p. 490).**

Level of pre-existing trust between service commissioner and service provider	Interaction between service commissioner and service provider	
	Low	High
Low	Market governance: discrete (classical) transactions	Hierarchical governance
High	Market governance: recurrent (neo-classical) transactions governance	Relational governance

*A firm derives its competitive strength from its proprietary assets and will be protective about losing them to alliance partners. Partnerships are fraught with hidden agendas driven by the opportunistic desire to access and internalize the partner's core proprietary skills...[Relational capital creates] a mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit others' vulnerability even if there is an opportunity to do so...[This confidence] arises out of the social controls that [relational] capital creates (Kale et al., 2000, p. 222).*

Finally the private sector literature also warns of the 'dark side' of relational capital. Just as it can strengthen organizational performance so it can undermine it, by tying in a firm to an unproductive or damaging relationship or by reducing its openness to new and potentially productive relationships (Parkhe and Miller, 2000). As a consequence it is essential to manage the creation, sustenance and impact of relational capital on an organization (Sawhney and Zabin, 2001).

### Conclusions

The practice of marketing in PSOs over recent decades has been based in a classical model of marketing that has emphasized both transactional relationships and rivalrous competition. This has been contrasted both with the current public policy trajectory and with best practice in the private sector that has emphasized the need to manage plural relationships in order to perform most effectively in contemporary inter-organizational fields. It has argued that the concepts of relationship marketing and relationship capital have significant insights to offer to marketing and organizational management in PSOs, precisely because they examine the practice and challenges of inter-organizational management and governance in the plural state. It is not our case that 'good marketing' is a substitute or proxy for 'good management'. But it does have an important contribution to make to good management and particularly to the extent that it can focus attention on essential strategic decisions about inter-organizational relationships in the plural state.

Two insights are especially important:

- First, relationship marketing and relational capital offer a framework in which to locate and articulate the position of the marketing function in PSOs and that emphasizes its strategic rather than operational significance.
- Second, they also offer a framework for the

practice of marketing in PSOs that emphasizes the challenges of the plural state and some guidelines as to intra- and inter-organizational management and governance in it.

An important concluding caveat must be entered here, however. Almost all of the theory and evidence underpinning both relationship marketing and relational capital have been developed from private sector experience. The task now is to take these insights to develop a model of relationship management that is more firmly rooted in public services and that offers real insight to PSO managers about the contribution that relationship marketing and relational capital can make to public services management. It will also need to acknowledge the limitations both of these conceptual tools and of relationship marketing in the real world. No concept or tool is an inherently positive. The limitations and dangers of relationship marketing and relational capital need to be explored as well as their positive contributions. Becoming too deeply embedded in a relationship or network can risk being drawn into an unproductive exchange or precluding the opportunity of developing new and alternative relationships, as discussed above.

The key task for PSO managers, and that relationship marketing can help with, is thus to be able to make strategic choices about the extent and nature of organizational relationships and their import for organizational performance. Central to this is the place of relational capital in making a reality of these relationships for staff and managers in PSOs, so that they can control and govern these relationships rather than be controlled by them. What the new era of public governance requires is a new generation of 'relational capitalists' who are adept not only in the core skills of their field or industry but also in facilitating, governing and sustaining the inter-organizational relationships that are now at the heart of public services provision. ■

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