

# ANTECEDENTS OF TRUST IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM ADVERTISING SECTOR

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## RESUMEN

*This paper explores trust and antecedents of trust in B2B professional services. Although trust has been widely addressed in the literature little practical evidence has been provided, especially applied to this particular service. We recognize that trust is a basic element for the development of long-term business relationships, but question whether it can be a determinant factor in the decision to begin a relationship, ex ante. Therefore we aim to investigate those factors affecting trust at the relationship initiation stage.*

*This study is based on multi-case study of advertising agencies in Spain, with extensive interviews with key managers. The aim is to identify those trust-related factors that are critical for attracting new clients in professional service.*

## Palabras clave:

Relationship marketing, professional service, trust, advertising agencies, multi- case study.

## 1. Introduction

Since the rising interest for B2B relationships at the beginning of the 1980s (Håkansson, 1982), many authors have studied the factors of business relationship success (e.g. Ganesan, 1994; Gummeson, 2002; Bose, 2002; Appelbaum and Steed, 2005). Among these factors, trust has been well documented to be a decisive one in beginning and conducting a rewarding business relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Berg et al., 1995; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Halinen, 1997; Sichtmann, 2007). The main research interests on trust have focused on its antecedents, sources and consequences (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Moorman et al., 1993; Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Ganesan and Hess, 1997; Michell et al., 1998; Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Sichtmann, 2007) and, although there is a lot written on these aspects of trust it is not clear yet what they do exactly embrace for different business sectors. For example: for an airlines company, a lawyers company and a private hospital trust is crucial for them to get clients. In these three cases the companies' managers will define their specific processes for trust development. Thus, for example, for an airlines' customer the prestige of the pilots is not a decisive factor to trust the company. Pilot's skills are practically always taken for granted. However, for the potential customers of the lawyers company and the hospital it will be decisive to get to know how prestigious their professionals are to start to trust them. Other factors that would influence customers trust conferring at different levels could be success and failures rate, negligence occurred, other customers' public prestige and popularity, news on company's quality, physical evidence, etc. In this sense, more empirical research must be done in order to understand the complexity of trust and trust-related phenomena. In this paper we focus on the initial stage of the trust process. We study this in the context of professional business-to-business (b2b) service. Specifically, we aim to explore in more depth trust and trust related factors that are considered critical in attracting new clients in b2b professional service. We start from the premise that trust is a basic element for the development of a long-term business relationship (Håkansson 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), however, we question whether trust is a determinant factor when taking the decision to begin the relationship

The structure of this paper is fourfold: first, professional service particularities are described; secondly, an approximation of the concept of trust is provided according to theoretical definitions in the literature; thirdly, trust-related factors influencing the initial stage of business relationships are explained; finally, multi-case study conducted in advertising agencies in Spain is presented in order to analyze the supply perspective on trust inspiring factors for prospects.

## 2. Professional service features

Professional service has specific features that deserve a special treatment. Their intellectual nature (Gummeson, 1981; Van Doren and Smith, 1987; Stewart, et al., 1998), the high risk perception of the client associated to their purchase (Gummeson, 1981; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Thankor and Kumar, 2000), the difficulty to assess technical quality and the high degree of customization (Gummeson, 1981; Thankor and Kumar, 2000) are some of the characteristics that make relationship factors especially important in their marketing strategy.

In order to delimit the conceptual frame we will define professional service as a service of a predominantly intellectual nature, which consists of advice, opinion or action offered by a professional who holds appropriate qualifications. In this context, Gummeson (1981) advises that the development of relationships between professional and client should be encouraged in order to create an understanding and trusting environment which permits the reduction of the high perceived risk often associated with professional services. One of the main implications of this for relationship management is that the professional service organization must also take into consideration the importance of the personal characteristics of the business relationship. This concerns human factors such as trust, uncertainty or commitment. Relationship management requires special effort by professionals who, in many cases, are focused on their technical tasks (Crane, 1993; Lapierre, 1997; Amonini, et al., 2010; Díaz-Méndez, 2010) resulting in relative neglect of the personal relationship aspects. These aspects play a major role in the final evaluation of service quality and client loyalty may depend on them (Ritsema van Eck-van Peet

et al., 1992; Stewart et al., 1998; Feurst, 1999). Therefore it is necessary to *look* into the analysis of factors affecting trust in the establishment of what we call “interpersonal business relationships”, that is, b2b relationships where interpersonal relationships turn out to be the essence of the relationship.

### **3. Trust conceptual framework**

Mayer et al. (1995) and Gounaris and Venetis (2002) pointed out that frequently in the trust literature several factors are inter-related. There is also a tendency to regard as evidence of trust some elements which a priori only inspire trust, such as competence, honesty, reputation, etc. The lack of consensus among researchers about what actually trust and trust-related factors are exacerbate the need to narrow the collective perspective on trust conceptualizations (McKnight and Chervany, 1996). The definition of trust has been approached for decades in the literature from different knowledge fields, but so far we cannot provide a globally accepted definition. Anderson and Narus (1986:326) define it as “the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm, as well as not take unexpected actions that would result in negative outcomes for the firm. McAllister (1995: 25) consider it as “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another.” McKnight, Cumming and Chervany (1998: 474) contend it takes place when “one believes in, and is willing to depend on, another party”. For Walter et al. (2000:3) trust represents the “client's belief in the supplier good intention, honesty and competence to act in the best interest of the relationship.” There are many other definitions of trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ganesan, 1994; Grönroos, 2007) that point to trust involving both personal and professional aspects expected from the provider. According to the common aspects to the previous definitions we can define trust here synthetically as one's belief in other party's values both professional and personal.

In order to delimit these and avoid misunderstandings throughout this article, we will define the trust-related concepts addressed here: (1) trust before the relationship is started and (2) trust during the relationship process. (1) To refer to trust before the relationship is started the concept *antecedent* is used and embraces all factors that inspire trust before service experience. They represent the focus of this research; (2) when the relationship is in process trust is been worked on (whether by increasing or reducing). Those factors affecting trust during the relationship process are referred here as *sources of trust*.

### **4. Antecedents of trust in professional services**

Professional service purchasing normally implies a perceived high risk by clients as it usually represents an important investment both in economic and trust terms (Ford, 1980; Gummesson 1981; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). On many occasions clients must give the professional delicate or confidential information about their business and this information can only be provided under conditions of trust and confidentiality. Therefore, the nature of professional service requires a high-trust environment during service process. Trust or a lack of it affects every action the client and supplier take and may determine the final outcome of the service.

However, trust cannot usually be established immediately simply by the signing of an agreement, although Berg *et al.* (1995) claim that trust can sometimes appear even in the first stages of the relationship. Some other authors consider that more often it is a gradual process that requires interest and repeated effort by both parties. It is a dynamic process that strengthens or weakens along time based on client experiences (Rempel *et al.*, 1985; Bailey *et al.*, 2002, Sichtmann, 2007). If a prospective client requires a professional service, they will look for suppliers who inspire more trust, which is not the same as choosing the one they trust more, since they do not know the professionals in advanced. Therefore, a marketing and management key for the professional services company would be the management of a set of trust-inspiring elements -trust antecedents-, so far without personal interaction with prospective clients.

Iyer *et al.* (2006: 613) claim that a company's reputation can replace trust: “reputation developed through the firm's process and outcomes consistency serves as an effective basis for

assurances and guarantees to the relationship that may otherwise have been obtained through interpersonal trust.” In these sense, we agree that reputation is indeed a decisive factor in the purchasing decision and may replace trust in that context. However, once the relationship is started it is difficult to avoid the perception of trust from the client, because business relationships are managed by people and trust is a human element that is present in all relationships. It can be perceived as a high or low trust environment but it is difficult to imagine doing without it altogether. Process and outcome consistency would inevitably act as sources of trust after the beginning of the relationship.

Some factors have been addressed in the literature as antecedents of trust such as reliability and consistency (Moorman, et al. 1992; Sheppard and Sherman, 1998), benevolence (Ganesan, 1994; Graf and Perrien, 2005), honesty (Bromiley and Cummings, 1995; Bailey, et al., 2002), integrity (Davies and Prince, 2005), credibility (Ganesan, 1994), competence and professionalism (Butler, 1991; Iyer, *et al.*, 2006), responsibility (Barber, 1983; Cook and Wall, 1980; Butler, 1991) and predictability (Rempel, et al., 1985). All of them represent trustworthiness cues a prospect wishes to encounter in the service process but cannot be guaranteed in advanced. Prospects feel attracted by companies that convey the aforementioned cues. Halinen’s concept of attraction refers to the efficiency aspects expected from a business relationship (1997: 241): “attraction is a firm interest in making business with another one, focusing on economic costs and benefits expected from a long term relationship”. Therefore, in the selection of the service firm the prospect would only consider those companies that convey the desired trustworthiness cues. Competence and service quality are also considered in the literature as antecedents of trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; McAllister, 1995; Gounaris and Venetis, 2002; Sichtmann, 2007). Although competence is a very important factor for a company to render a good quality service, for a prospect it is not competence what prompts them to trust a service firm but competence signs they get from the service firm. That is, a professional can be very competent but if nobody knows it will not do to attract new clients. Competence itself does not convey trust to the non-customers, the reference of a client or the publication of a fact regarding the competence of the company may do. Also, Gounaris and Venetis (2002) propose customer bonding as an antecedent of trust. They state that efficient customer bonding techniques may serve as minimum guarantees at the beginning of a relationship. However, according to our initial definitions, their “customer bonding” acts here as a source of trust since the relationship is already established.

## **5. The research**

### **5.1. Methodology**

We studied advertising agencies in Spain. The methodology is of conceptual and theory-generating nature using multi-case study research (Gummesson, 2000, 2007; Yin, 2009). *In situ* in-depth interviews were conducted so as to offer direct and interactive access to informants in an environment of privacy. The interviews followed the phenomenological focus, that is, from the perspectives of the participants (Thompson, et al. 1989). The main objective of this type of methodology is to understand participant’s experience as closely as possible as they perceive it (Haytco, 2004). The depth-interview method offered the opportunity to gain insight into the account managers’ subjective experience of their personal relationships with their interlocutor. We studied the agency-client relationship from the supply perspective so as to get to know how they perceive brand new clients’ trust. Agency account managers were selected as informants since they are the link between the client and the agency.

### **5.2. Cases selection**

For the selection of cases, the Spanish market structure had to be taken into account. The market has three important characteristics that influenced the selection. First, it is an atomized sector. It is quite easy to start an agency, so many businesses are small. In those, marketing management has a lower academic and scientific priority than in the bigger ones. Second, the sector is highly concentrated. Around 30 agencies manage 95 per cent of advertising investment (according to Infoadex data base). Finally, there is a big difference in management between

multinational agencies, which handle the bulk of advertising investment, and those of Spanish origin. Multinational companies have become the role model, leading to the fact that smaller, national companies with less resources, must “tow along” behind the major ones.

Taking these circumstances and our research resources into account we considered it feasible to handle 40 agencies in our study. Their invoicing represented 97% of the market. In our sample we considered several relevant Spanish agencies in order to find out the possible differences between multinational and domestic ones. The specified sample was finally made up of 11 national and 29 international agencies. Out of these 40 agencies 20 agreed to participate in the study. They were located in Barcelona, Madrid and San Sebastian, representing approximately half of the controlled advertising investment in 2009. Six agencies were Spanish, fourteen multinational.

The cases selection method is based on the replication logic (Yin, 2009), which consists of selecting cases in order that they can provide either literal replications or theoretical replications. The former refers to those analyzed cases expected to show similar results; in the latter, cases were expected to be different from each other and enable comparisons among them which add to theory.

### **5.3. Results and discussion**

Results analysis is accomplished by providing most relevant data and interviewees’ most illustrative quotations from *in situ* in-depth interviews.

1] In the first part of the interview interviewees talked about the reasons why their clients came to them in the first place. Some answers stood out. The account manager of a local agency whose owners had worked for a multinational agency years ago said:

- a. *“Some clients come to us because they believe we have the same know-how as our former agency”.*

Two account managers of two different multinational agencies pointed out:

- b. *“We have a strong brand and a good background that provide our clients with credibility and reliability. Although our chairman’s personal relationships and his good reputation are also important in attracting new clients”.*
- c. *“We got part of our client portfolio through advertising contests, part through our agency brand image and part through our CEO and Chairman personal relationships. And also references of our clients have influenced”.*

Then interviewees were given different tools to be assessed according to their power of attracting new clients. The account manager interviewed in the pilot interview suggested including top managers’ personal relationships as an important mean to attract clients to the agency. The respondents were asked to mark in a scale from 1 to 10 the following instruments and offered to add any other else, resulting in these figures: top managers’ personal relations (8.2), word of mouth (7.8), presence in the media (6.5), corporate communication (6.1).

The results confirm that in order to attract clients communication is the mean to convey the information clients require, especially that coming directly from other people like agency’s managers or former and current clients. This links to our concept of “business personal relationship” when realizing that clients rather trust people to information. There is wide evidence in the literature that word of mouth and presence in the media are two types of communication that influence corporate image to a greater extent than other communication activities drawn up by the company (Arndt, 1969; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Crane, 1989, 1993; Grönroos, 1990; Martínez, 2002). Credibility conferred to word of mouth comes from the fact that it is usually generated by clients and other professionals independent from the company and, therefore, it is considered objective information. In this study, presence in the media together with corporate communication seems to be less worthy -although also relevant- pointing at the fact that clients seem to convey more credibility to the information coming from a trustful person.

2] The second part of the interview was also oriented towards antecedent of trust. It aimed at finding out what account managers thought their agencies should work on in order to convey trust to prospects:

- i. *“Strong competition forces us to stress our differential value. Big agencies have fewer difficulties in attracting new clients, they already have a strong brand, their services are backed up by experience and their chairman and CEO have an already consolidated contact network. On the contrary, we have to work not only for our clients’ marketing but for ours as well”.*
- j. *“Brand image is very important to attract new clients, not only because it conveys trust to them but because of the synergies that come out from being related to a well-positioned brand”*
- k. *“In order to attract new clients we strive to make our brand stronger by means of appearing in the media regularly. Our chairman popular image contributes to send trust signs to the market”*
- l. *“To stand out of competitors we get sometimes extremely focused on appearing in rankings highest positions. Some times, this may lead our work towards being given important awards at the expense of our client’s requirements. But I can assure you that prospects are very concern about agencies’ awards. Yeah, awards convey trust no doubt”.*
- m. *“Each agency tries to show itself different from competitors through variables like creativity or the good treatment to clients, we promise ‘work, work and more work’. And we communicate our philosophy through our website, in agency presentations, and every time we can. However, for me it is basic that our chairman keeps on working on personal relationships. He is very good at public relations and so far the business is growing”.*
- n. *“We have to work on clients’ satisfaction. This is our best ‘trust-transmitter’”*

In accordance with answers provided by informants in the previous point, they insist in the importance of top managers’ relationships to create an inspiring trust atmosphere for prospects. In addition, they also bring out the role of corporate image to reinforce market position. It is interesting to note that only 4 out of them said that the agency they belonged to should work further on service quality.

3] Finally, with the aim to know what factors interviewees think their clients assess in order to repurchase the agency service and get to know what makes them trust, some questions about clients’ satisfaction after the service experience were asked. Hence, gathering information about potential word of mouth creation. The most remarkable comments are presented:

- i. *“The most important thing here is that outcomes be measurable. Nevertheless, in this sector hardly ever it is possible to measure them accurately as many factors of the marketing mix affect the results of the client company as well”*
- j. *“Relationship is more and more important for the client but at the end of the day it is the outcome what matters”*
- k. *“The most relevant variable from the point of view of the client when assessing global quality is relationship. Some of them came to us because they had a bad relationship with their former agency which made the development of the service very difficult”.*
- l. *“To be honest, many clients tell you that they leave the agency because there has been a change their company’s policy but it is simply an excuse to change to another agency. The main reason why a client finishes the relationship is dissatisfaction with the service”*

- m. *“Relationship quality influences the quality perception of the client. I try to get along with all brand managers I deal with, but inevitably, personal features play an important role in personal relationships and I keep some relationships better than others...and in general, those with whom I have a good relationship seem to be more satisfied with us, taking into account that we provide a good service as well. Not everything is about relationships in business”.*

Through the answers of the interviewees we can gather that in this particular professional service outcome cannot be easily separated from relationship in the client's value perception. However, interviewees' statements need further explanation. 13 out of the 20 account managers considered the outcome to be more important than relationships in client's evaluation of the service. But meantime, 16 out of the 20 managers considered the outcome measurement the main element to assess advertising service quality. These data indicate that account managers think their clients are more relationship-oriented than they are. This is a strange conclusion since only 7 out of them considered the outcome of their service was possible to be measured. Hence, a lack of clarity criteria is denoted: account managers do know what their clients want and try to act as if they were coordinated with their client expectations although they are quite aware that it is very difficult to measure the outcome of an advertising service just after rendered. Probably, that is why most of them consider relationships aspects more and more important. But advertising service has two types of results (Halinen, 1997), the outcome and the final outcome. The outcome will be the tangible part of the service, for example, an advertising campaign or a commercial; and the final outcome represents the objectives pursued by the client through the tangible outcome, for instance, a change in its brand image. In this sense, the advertising agency must face a double client assessment: one immediate and other in the mid or long term. We think that this has to do with the apparent conflict with their answers.

## **Conclusions**

1) *Trust is not a critical factor in making the decision to start a relationship with a professional service company; an atmosphere that inspires trust is the critical factor.* Marketing literature on trust has focused mainly on the role of trust in an established relationship. Trust before the relationship is started, i.e., trust for the non customer is still less study. We have found in our study that, in advertising agencies, prospects seek to trust the company through relying on someone trustful for them before making the decision to purchase certain service. Account managers participating in this study agreed. Most of their clients had received some trustful information whether from another client or from the agency's top managers. Interviewees also said that those who did not have a previous personal contact with anyone related to the agency claimed that the corporate image of the agency inspired them trust through the information that they got from different sources like rankings, awards and news. Therefore, trust, especially focused on personal trustfulness, is important for the non customers whether in the form of inspiration, expectation or intuition.

2) *Interpersonal aspects turn out to be crucial for professional service firms in order to develop an inspiring trust atmosphere.* The multi-case study revealed that word of mouth together with top managers' personal relationships are the most relevant instruments to achieve the objective of attracting new clients to the agency. Corporate image was also stood out to influence trust perception by prospects, but still account managers' answers linked top managers' relationships to corporate image together with agencies' awards and service quality. Presence in the media was found not to be so important. This fact may be related to the business sector considered. For example, Kautonen et al. (2007) conclude in a research on trust carried out in mobile market that presence in the media was the most important source to convey trust to the market; it was even more important than clients' own experiences.

3) *Real trust is achieved in professional service after a service process is concluded.* Our study points to the outcome as the ultimate determinant of the level of trust a client vests on the advertising agency. Interpersonal features such as top managers' relationships and customers' referrals through word of mouth play a decisive role to inspire trust to agency prospects;

however, real trust is mainly obtained through objectives achievement. Nevertheless, professional service firms like advertising agencies face an important obstacle in this situation since the measurement of the service outcome is not always feasible. In any case, results suggest that professional service management has a great component of personal features that should be taken into account by managers in order to gain clients' trust. In this sense, it is interesting to bring out what Iyer *et al.* (2006) contend that the image developed through consistency of the service process and outcome guarantees a sustaining relationship that may otherwise have been obtained through interpersonal trust. We share that there are different sources of trust but depending on the type of service, every source has a different weight. In professional service interpersonal trust has higher importance than, e.g., in a transport company. Interpersonal trust cannot replace the corporate image but can influence it indirectly. Similarly, image cannot replace interpersonal trust since clients interact with people representing the agency image and not with the image itself. This accentuates the strong personal component in the relationships between firms in most professional service.

### **Managerial implications**

This study provides some managerial implication for advertising agencies and for other professional service. The most important implication is that regarding the role of trust in attracting new clients. The results point to the client's need to trust the agency and that this trust is however linked mainly to personal factors associated with individuals. This makes sense in view of the high level of uncertainty associated with the selection of a professional service provider. Advertising marketing management should focus on references management through striving to render a satisfying service to their current clients who, in the end, will act as a strong promotional communication tool for the agency. Encouraging the organization of events or activities to gather people involved in the advertising sector where the top managers could broaden their relationships would also be valuable for the future of the agency, as it is been highlighted in this study that personal top managers relationships were an important factor for attracting clients.

Also, our results suggest that, although clients consider relationship quality when assessing the global service, it is the service *outcome* what determines the level of trust vested to the service company. In this sense, it is important for the service company to manage expectations by making clear from the beginning of the relationship what the client can expect from it.

### **Future research directions**

This paper has explored trust and trust related concepts in professional service marketing. We have also mentioned that each professional service has some specific characteristics. Our empirical data are limited to the relationship between advertising agencies and their clients and it is grounded in the perspective of agencies; in this sense it is a one-party study. To make our research more complete a natural next step could be to expand it into a broader study. For these reasons it would be useful to undertake similar empirical studies in other professional sectors in order to compare results and analyze the special characteristics of each sector.

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