

Member Value Creation and Recognition in Co-operative Enterprises

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Abstract

Co-operative enterprises comprise some of the largest and most enduring business entities throughout the world, and are an important element within the wider social economy. Unlike conventional investor owned firms (IOF), co-ops have a dual purpose that is both economic and social. Their success and sustainability depends on their ability to deliver value to members who are both customer/suppliers and owners, which complicates the process of managing a co-op. Although marketing science has a strong track record of measuring value perception, customer commitment and loyalty, little attention has been given to co-ops in past research. This paper outlines the nature of co-op member value creation and recognition, and proposes that extant marketing theory and method can be applied to co-ops.

Keywords: co-operatives, perceived value, member loyalty and trust, marketing.

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Introduction

Although they represent some of the largest and oldest business entities in the world, co-operative enterprises have not enjoyed the same level of public profile or academic attention as other forms of business. According to the International Co-operative Alliance co-operatives employ around 100 million people globally and support the livelihood of an estimated 3 billion people (ICA 2008). Such enterprises were found in all countries and a wide range of sectors. The 300 largest co-operatives had annual turnovers ranging from US\$600 million to US\$53 billion (Cronan 2007).

Co-operatives (co-ops) existed in France and Scotland from the 16th Century (Williams 2007; McFadzean 2008), however, the modern co-operative movement traces its origins back to the foundation of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844 (Fairbairn 1994). By the end of the 19th Century co-ops were found throughout Europe (Gide 1922), and across the world (Birchall 2011).

Designed as a mechanism to assist impoverished weavers, the Rochdale Society established a set of principles that continue to guide co-ops almost unchanged to today. These principles include voluntary and open membership, not subject to religious, racial, gender, and political or social bias; and a democratic member control based on a one-member-one-vote principle. Membership involves a trading (patronage) relationship with the co-op, and importantly does not imply charity (Holyoake 1908).

An important consideration for co-ops is how to recognise and reward members for their patronage, and ensure that member loyalty is retained through a perceived value by members of their engagement with the co-op. The purpose of co-ops is to enhance the economic benefits of members by lowering costs or improving prices at point of sale (Royer 2004). However, they also have other purposes not associated with financial goals (Birchall and Simmons 2004). Some members also engage in greater patronage while others free ride, creating potential tensions (Cook 1995).

Little research has been undertaken into the relationship between member value creation and recognition and the impact on member loyalty within co-ops. James and Sykuta (2005) suggest that research should focus on the nexus between organisational trust, member property rights and organisational design. In this paper we explore the application of marketing theory in the field of customer value perception and loyalty to the measurement of member value in co-ops. Of importance in this analysis is the unique nature of the co-operative enterprise. Members have both a patronage relationship with the enterprise as is the case for suppliers or customers in mainstream businesses, but they are also the owners of the entity through their control over the share capital and voting rights.

The measurement of customers' value perceptions (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001), loyalty (Bloemer, deRuyter and Wetzels 1999), and trust (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton 2007) have been explored within the marketing literature. However, these constructs have not often been examined in a co-operative enterprise context. Consequently, the present paper examines their potential use and raises a series of questions that need to be addressed before undertaking such research.

The Nature of Co-operative Enterprise

Co-ops differ from conventional “investor owned firms” (IOF) in five important ways. First, the customers of the co-op are also its owners. Second, the price of the co-op’s share capital is generally fixed by its articles of incorporation, and the shares are not traded on an open market. Third, co-ops can offer members deferred patronage refunds; essentially returning to them the cost of their transactions with the co-op. Fourth, co-ops can enjoy tax exemptions and may operate with a single tax on income. Finally, the co-op exists for the sole purpose of delivering value to its members as customers (Van Sickle and Ladd 1983).

Unlike their IOF counterparts, co-ops are recognised as having a dual function, or what Fairbairn (1994) has referred to as a ‘symbiosis’, in which the co-op plays the role of a union or alliance, and a business simultaneously. Levi and Davis (2008) describe the co-op as the “*enfants terribles of economics*”, because they do not fit neatly into the existing three sectors, namely: government (first sector); private (second sector) or third sector comprising the non-profit and social enterprises. In essence they comprise a ‘fourth sector’ lying between the private and third sectors (Sabeti 2009). While the IOF is designed to maximise shareholder returns through profit taking, the co-op is designed for ongoing patronage with benefits to its members who retain control (Mooney et. al. 1996). The co-op offers a unique alternative to the conventional choices of private versus public, or public versus non-profit (Pestoff 1991).

The traditional co-op business model faces a number of generic challenges in relation to raising, retaining and investing capital, which originate from the lack of transferability, liquidity, and appreciation of member’s investment in their co-operative (Cook 1995). Horizon and portfolio issues also arise as the members’ commonly have a shorter investment horizon than the organization and do not always see a personal benefit from organizational decisions aiming at increasing the business’ competitive position in the market (Cook and Iliopoulos 1999). Managing a co-operative is therefore a complex task, as it commonly requires balancing member and organizational needs.

Addressing these ‘generic’ problems is one of the key challenges facing a co-op’s managers. In addition to running a sustainable business and delivering benefits to members, the co-op is also expected to make a significant contribution to its local community (Skurnik 2002). Concern for the community is one of the seven principles that underlie the foundations of co-operative enterprise (ICA 2010). It has also propelled many co-ops into the forefront of the social entrepreneurship movement (Novkovic 2008; Defourny and Nyssens 2010). Compared with IOF, co-ops face increased difficulties in dealing with their members who are essentially ‘owner-customers’ or ‘supplier-owners’. In many cases they are ‘supplier-owner-customers’. Common ownership means that a new member has almost immediate access to all the benefits that earlier generations of members have accumulated. The perceived value that members derive from their co-op membership is therefore essential to their willingness to sacrifice the opportunities that they might have otherwise derived from an IOF form of business (Nilsson 2001).

Member Value Creation and Recognition in Co-operatives

Because co-ops don’t openly trade their share capital or issue dividends, it is more difficult to directly measure the value they deliver to members (Nembhard 2002). Due to their dual role and the status of members as owner-customers, co-ops require a different set of lenses when

seeking to examine member value creation and recognition. While an IOF seeks to extract the maximum return from its suppliers and customers, a co-op will aim to optimise the returns to both its members and its own operations (Bontems and Fulton 2009). Hansmann (1996) suggests that the formation of a co-operative enterprise is justified where the cost of contracting with a firm's suppliers or customers exceeds the costs of these suppliers and customers owning the firm (Bontems and Fulton 2009). It is also important that there be a high level of heterogeneity amongst the members of the co-op, because the cost of ownership, including agency costs and those of collective decision making, rise as the goal congruency falls among members (Hart and Moore 1996).

Krivokapic-Skoko's (2002) literature review into the benefits received by members of agricultural co-ops identified at least five. First, co-ops provide their members with market access and reduce the level of market risk by serving as a key customer. Second, the co-op offers members financial benefits from enhanced pricing. Third, membership of a co-op offers enhanced levels of productivity through the pooling of marketing resources and from bulk purchasing. Fourth, the co-op is an access point for enhanced information and support. Finally, co-op membership provides greater opportunities for local community development and self-help. This social enterprise function of the co-op has endeared it to economists in search of mechanisms for community self-development (Holford et al 2008). The ability of the co-op to retain its cohesion and engender member loyalty is contingent on its ability to demonstrate the value of membership (Torgerson 1977). This can be particularly important in grower co-ops, or those dealing with members who are businesses rather than individuals. Such members are more likely to take greater interest in the co-op's governance and financial management (Ozdemir 2005).

Nilsson (2001) suggests that where the co-op members see their roles as patrons (suppliers and customers) and investors (owners) being of equal importance the outcome will be an 'entrepreneurial' co-op. In the United States this has become known as a "New Generation Co-op" and allows ownership rights in the form of tradable and appreciable delivery rights limited to member-patrons (Cook and Iliopoulos 1999; Cook and Chaddad 2004). This creation of an internal market for share capital amongst members has also been identified as offering benefits to retail consumer co-ops (Mikami 2010). If a co-op's members only value their patronage rights the structure will be a traditional co-op. Yet if members see more value in their investment than their patronage the co-op will most likely demutualise and convert to an IOF. Where members see little value in both their ownership and patronage rights the co-op will degenerate (Nilsson 2001).

Member commitment and loyalty are contingent on members trusting their co-op (Fulton 1999; Hansen et al 2002). Of importance in developing this trust is the ability of members to identify with the co-op as collective organisation (Ole Borgen 2001). Members must identify with the co-op's mission and the co-op must develop a reputation for effectively acting in its members' best interests (Fulton and Giannakas 2001). Member identification with the co-op's mission can enhance trust and commitment, but care must be taken to ensure that member independence is recognised or this can risk breaching trust and eroding commitment (McClintock-Stoel and Sternquist 2004). Managers of co-ops must foster "a sense of family, good feelings and *camaraderie*" in order to engender trust and achieve member satisfaction, loyalty and commitment (Morrow et al 2004). However, James and Sykuta (2005) link trust with property rights and organisational configuration within co-ops. They suggest that a fine balance must be struck between the member's self-interest over their rights as shareholder, and their desire to receive maximum benefits from patronage. While a co-op can engender

trust and loyalty from members if it meets their expectations, it is unlikely to be the only source of goods and services available to members (Rickenbach 2009).

Applying Marketing Theory to Member Value Perception in Co-operatives

Customer loyalty results from a consumer's attitude towards a product or service provider and their repeat patronage behaviour, while social norms and situational factors may serve as mediators to these relationships (Dick and Basu, 1994). According to Oliver (1999), customer loyalty is related to customer satisfaction that is frequent or cumulative. Consumer loyalty moves through phases: cognitive, affective, conative and action. It is a complex issue and early research into the existence of a direct relationship between loyalty and something like service quality was supported by some (e.g. Zeithaml et al 1996), but not supported by others (e.g. Cronin and Taylor 1992). Much of this was due to measurement issues, and it is evident that there are numerous mediating factors such as the nature of the service or product, perceived risk, confidence and reliability (Zeithaml 1988; Dick and Basu 1994).

The relationships between service quality and loyalty to service providers have also been examined, building on earlier service quality research (see Parasuraman et al 1985; 1988; 1994). Differences have also been identified between industries (Bloemer et al 1999). Researchers have also suggested perceived value, which is a related but separate construct to satisfaction, is an important element in developing customer loyalty. Perceived value has been measured as a multidimensional construct that is determined by factors such as quality, price, emotional rewards and social acceptance (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). Customer value perception is essentially an assessment of the trade-off between the benefits received for the sacrifices (e.g. money or opportunity cost) made (Zeithaml et al 1990). Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo (2009) propose a model of perceived value leading to customer satisfaction that involves the construct of 'economic value' that is in-turn the outcome of 'efficiency' (price-time trade-off), and 'excellence' (service quality). However, there is question as to whether such measures are appropriate for co-ops, where customers are also owners and, in some cases, are also suppliers.

As some co-ops operate as part of a business-to-business (B2B) supply-chain, there is also a need to understand how perceived value is generated in such markets. Evans and Berman (2001) point to the need for attention to be given to the "total delivered product" in analysing the business value chain. Initially identified by Kotler (2000), this represents the difference between the total customer value and total customer costs. They propose a check list for guiding B2B marketing strategy within supply-chains. Of importance is the need to fully understand the value perceptions of customers and match these against competitors counter offers. Where superior value is identified it should be communicated to all key stakeholders including customers, suppliers and employees across the value chain to build trust and loyalty (Evans and Berman 2001). It is also evident that within B2B markets there are added layers of complexity when compared to consumer or B2C markets (Ulaga and Chacour 2001).

Hansen et al (2008) suggest that customer perceived value in B2B markets is influenced by information sharing (e.g. keeping customers well informed of changes); flexibility (e.g. to customer needs); and corporate reputation, which has the greatest impact. Perceived value then results in positive word of mouth by customers. One antecedent that they originally tested but removed from their model was 'distributive fairness', which is a measure of the customer's perception as to whether gains and losses within the relationship are fairly

distributed. It would be interesting to see if such a measure was found to be of more importance within a co-op supply-chain relationship.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

In this paper we overviewed the unique nature of the co-op and suggested a need to develop better mechanisms for measuring and understanding member value creation. Due to the member's status as 'supplier-owner-customer' they co-create the value in the co-op. This is of prime importance as co-ops move to value add products and develop a market orientation (Beverland 2007). The value generated within a co-op through member-supplier participation should be adequately recognised to ensure ongoing loyalty (Ole Borgen, 2011). Indeed, co-ops have long recognised the need to keep their members well informed (Bloomquist, 1983) and to find equitable mechanisms for the distribution of member benefits (Buccola and Subaei, 1985). New forms of co-ops have emerged in response to the need to better balance the competing needs of ownership and patronage and the social and economic objectives of the enterprise (Cook and Chaddad, 2004; Downing et al., 2005). However, marketing has had little input into this debate.

This is surprising as marketing can contribute significantly to our understanding of members' perceived value and its relationship with their trust and loyalty. The concepts and tools to do this are well-established, although they may need to be adapted if they are to be sensibly used in a co-op context. A key research question that needs to be answered is how co-ops can measure and communicate the true value of membership. In addressing this question attention needs to be given to a number of additional questions, including:

1. How well are different member value propositions seen and understood by the various stakeholders within a co-op (e.g. members, co-op managers and the board)?
2. What is a co-op's role in capturing value in an integrated or vertical value chain?
3. What is the most appropriate way of communicating value to a co-op's members and stakeholders?
4. What are the causes of free-riding by members and can value recognition and communication be used to minimise such behaviour?

Answers to these questions will provide important information to co-op managers and to the member Boards that oversee their activities and, as noted earlier, marketers have the tools available to provide this type of information. Marketing researchers have a real opportunity to play a major role in increasing our understanding of this very significant sector.

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