Relationship Building As A Marketing Strategy: A Conceptual Guide For African Exporters

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INTRODUCTION

Exporting has been one of the fastest growing economic activities around the world during the past two decades **(Ural, 2009)** and has been fuelled by the world market liberalization and global competition. In fact, exporting is considered to be an important factor contributing to the maintenance of economic growth and prosperity **(Leonidou, 2003, Racela et al, 2006)**. Specifically, from a macro perspective, exporting creates jobs, contributes to a balance of trade, increases national productivity, helps raise the standards of living or quality of life of a country's population and provides currency stability **(Piercy et al, 1998 and Ural, 2009)**. From a micro perspective, **Leonidou (2003)** proposed benefits that include generating business funds for company reinvestment and growth, diversifying company business across different markets, enhancing product innovation due to different foreign market needs, improving utilization of production capacity where the domestic market could not possibly absorb a firm's full production capacity, developing superior management capabilities as the management deals with different needs and enhancing both - the firm's sales and financial performance.

Hence, the importance of formulating an effective export marketing strategy has received increased attention from scholars and policy makers alike. As part of the export strategy, overseas distributors have become an important fact of life for many exporters **(Axinn et al. 1994)**. This is more likely so with the small-medium sized firms who do not have the necessary resources and/or lack international experience **(Wang, and Kess, 2006)**. The relationship between the exporter and his foreign distributor is very important for the success of the internationalization process. It emphasizes on the crucial role of closeness between the two parties on the overall business atmosphere. The relationship concept focuses on relations of reciprocal nature and in which the parties involved can acquire stability by working together for long periods through formal contracts. The contracts stipulate specific conditions of exchange and termination by partners. At times, the implicit understanding of each other's goal without any formal contract or a verbal agreement can suffice for such relationships. Long-term relationships, in contrast to discrete transactions, are made up of well-established sets of expectations about the behaviour of the parties involved **(Frazier, 1983)**.

Overall, both parties are viewed as proactive, interdependent entities during the interaction **(Leonidou, 2003)**. The foreign distributors offer some immediate capability in regards to promoting and selling the exporter's products. They take the responsibility of marketing an exporter's product and provide other services where there is need. They also offer knowledge of and contacts in the market in question. Therefore, the export-distributor relationship has become critically important for creation of competitive advantage and success in the export markets. While countries in the West responded to the challenges of building collaborative relationships with customers and suppliers, is not clear if that can be said about companies in Africa **(Darley and Blankson, 2008)**. According to **Darley and Blankson**, the business to business literature often lacks consideration of the African content.

This paper reviews extant literature of exporter-distributor relationships to identify the benefits and challenges associated with such relationships in an attempt to provide African exporters with the necessary insights on how they could also benefit from tying up with their overseas distributors. The paper emphasizes that exporter-distributor relationships can help improve export performance in Africa, where most countries are still grappling trade deficits and lack export diversity. Africa's share in global markets is quite small, accounting for 2.1 percent in 2002 compared to 4.1 percent in 1980 **(Elhiraika and Nkurunziza, 2006)**. According to **Elhiraika and Nkurunziza**, primary commodities continue to dominate African exports, where many of the countries are heavily dependent on resource rich sectors such as agriculture, oils and minerals, hence failing to diversify. Building relationships in the foreign markets can assist diversification of the African exports. The emphasis is also founded upon the fact that businesses in Africa are mainly small and medium scale businesses (SMEs) and are often associated with lack of resources. As a

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result, they could benefit by using distributors in their exporting activities. The paper is organized into four sections. These include **(i)** The evolution of business relationship theory in Marketing. **(ii)** Exporter/distributor relationship **(iii)** Benefits of exporter/distributor relationship. **(iv)** Challenges encountered in the development of exporter/distributor relationship. **(v) C**onclusions and implications.

EVOLUTION OF BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP THEORY IN MARKETING

Marketing scholars and practitioners have long-recognized the need and importance of developing and nurturing relationships. Particular attention has been paid to distribution channel relationships with suppliers and customers **(Samiee and Walters, 2003)**. The actual grounding of relationship theory in marketing can be traced back to discussions of symbiotic marketing by **Adler (1966)**. **Adler** defined symbiotic marketing as an alliance of resources or programs between two or more independent organizations designed to increase the market potential of each. He predicted that symbiotic marketing will be necessary in the future because of changes in the business environment. He referred to changes in technology, diminishing distinctions between markets, increasing sophistications of consumer, information explosion, financial burden of research and development costs, internationalization of businesses and pressure from competition. With all the foregoing business environmental changes, accompanied by deregulation of markets, new challenges and new sources of competition are continuously created.

The idea of *Relationship Theory In Marketing* was further popularized by the introduction of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group, whose work has been mainly based on the interaction approach **(IMP Group, 1990)**. In 1982, IMP studied 1,300 exporter-importer relationships in the industrial markets of five European countries and proposed that understanding relationships requires one to distinguish between discrete and relational transactions. According to IMP, discrete transactions are where an active marketer assembles a mix of marketing variables that are launched towards passive consumers, who may or may not respond to the offering. The discrete transaction sees every transaction as a single isolated exchange, with no assumed connection with the previous transactions. Each has a distinct beginning, a short duration and a sharp ending. It ignores the growth of proactive customers, in this case, the distributor who may come with different product designs more than the manufacturer/exporter. On the other hand, the relational transaction traces previous agreements and is longer in duration reflecting that it is an on-going process. The exporter and distributors have to interact to the extent of a personal level.

Since the pioneering studies, a lot of research has been done that serves to highlight the importance of developing business relationships for effective marketing **(Leonidou, 2003, Johanson et al. 1990, Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Lee and Jang, 1998, Dwyer et al., 1987, and Anderson and Narus, 1990)**. For example, **Leonidou (2003)** argues that business does not only involve economic transactions as expressed through the exchange of goods for money, but there are also some numerous behavioural interactions between parties that can help with information, social and other intangible exchanges. **Johanson et al. (1990)** take a relationship-oriented approach to exporting, where a firm begins exporting by forming relationships with their foreign distributors. Such relationships are geared towards delivering experiential knowledge about the target markets. The distributor is local and knows the market very well. **Morgan and Hunt (1994)** emphasized on the importance of relationship marketing and defined it as all the marketing activities directed at establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges. Overall, research dealing with relationships tends to concentrate of marketing channels, buyer-seller relationships, strategic alliances and other related fields outside marketing and management **(Matear et al., 2000)**.

EXPORTER-DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Exporting is a major aspect in all countries because of the economic benefits it brings to countries and businesses. Exporting is considered as a strategy that helps businesses further their market development and diversification. It is a process with a number of sub-strategies. These are mainly the marketing mix, its major components of product, pricing, promotion and distribution and their various implementation tactics **(Axinn et al. 1994)**. However, distribution channel is the most crucial export issue and has been considered the *"nut and bolts"* of export operation **(Young et al, 1989: p79)**. **Axinn et al. (1994)** concurs with Young et al. and notes that distribution choice is a key factor in any marketing strategy, but particularly so in export marketing.

The status of distributors has been rising continuously since the past few decades as they increase their domination over the sales channel in overseas markets **(Ghosh, et, al. 2004, Jiun-Cheng and Ching-Rung, 2008)**. The reason advanced for the outstanding priority given to distribution is that it interacts and thus affects other dimensions of the marketing mix. Distribution stands between the exporter and his customers. Overall, the distribution channel management is a strategic asset of the exporter since the decisions about delivery of goods and services to targeted markets are critical and affecting other marketing decisions. Distributors are increasingly maintaining interpersonal links with manufacturers, customers and other third parties that achieve a high quality-cost ratio in various functions, hence creating value for the manufacturers. As a result, researchers have intensified the research on exporter-distribution relationship.

Some examples of earlier export-distribution relationships studies that have been conducted are briefly highlighted. **Styles and Ambler (1994)** studied some British exporters to find out what factors contributed to their export success. The findings revealed that successful exporters paid a lot of attention to their channel relations. Personal contacts, continuous communication and maintenance of positive relations with distributors were found to be critical. Regular visits by the exporters to their export markets enabled access to collection of rich information from distribution network members. **Styles and Ambler (1994)** were of the view that the relationship concept was a valid approach to investigate and explain superior export-marketing performance.

Piercy et al. (1998) also conducted a study among British SMEs exporting companies to identify the sources of competitive advantage for high export performers. Competitive advantage was gauged using several factors, among them - costs per unit of production, costs of goods sold, selling price to the end-user, product quality packaging, design/style and other factors. It emerged that the hallmarks in the highly performing exporters were most linked to information skills building and maintenance of customer relationships. Informational skills composed of the ability to identify prospective export customers and getting the critical market information from them. Monitoring competitive products was also important.

Both **Styles and Ambler (1994) and Piercy et al. (1998)** suggested a push towards building relationships. Exporters rely heavily on information gathered through interactions with network members, yet most research in export performance still took the view that firms are rational optimizers that highly value acquisition and analysis of objective market data, for example, prices in the export market.

BENEFITS OF EXPORTER-DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Successful businesses understand that business relationships can be a powerful means for adaptation in a turbulent environment **(Wang and Kess, 2006)**. Various authors have written on the benefits of exporter and distributor relationships from studies conducted across the world, but mostly from developed countries. These studies include **Dwyer et al. 1987, Styles and Ambler, 1994, IMP group 1990, Wang and Kess, 2006 and Leonidou, 2003** just to mention a few. It is worth noting that all the benefits point to and emphasize on two factors, mainly the development of competitive advantage and export success. In other words, all the benefits accruing to exporter-distributor relationships come in many different forms, but all add to the competitiveness and ultimate export success for the business. Some of these benefits are discussed below:

☸ **Information Gathering For Reduced Uncertainty:** The international marketing environment is mostly characterized by uncertainty due to diverse sources of influence that can affect customer requirements **(Keegan and Warren, 2005)**. Examples include economic, political, legal and cultural situations. Businesses often engage in export marketing ventures in complex, unfamiliar international markets that are different from home. Hence, the acquisition of the right information is crucial for successful export market entry and performance and sound decision-making. Most of the management of exporting businesses know less about their external target markets. This often results in problems of determining what information is important or should be considered **(Walters, 1983)**. **Liesch et al. (1999)**, contends that internationalization cannot proceed until a business has acquired relevant knowledge through the process of information internalization and translation. The amount and quality of requisite information may vary from business to business, but surely, its acquisition is necessary for internationalization. Relationship oriented businesses should exploit organizational learning as a route through which to acquire the knowledge required to survive the highly competitive and turbulent markets of today. The presence of a distributor in the foreign market functions as an exporter's marketing arm by transferring knowledge of customer needs and market trends back to the manufacturer

(Jiun-Sheng and Ching-Rung, 2008, Keegan and Green, 2005). The distributors offer their experiential knowledge of the market, thus enhancing the exporter's informational skills. In what they call collaborative communication, **Farrelly and Quester (2003)**, note that parties share interests and common goals, hence generating volitional compliance between them, thus bolstering the relationship. For example, consider the studies conducted by **Styles et al. (1994) and Piercy et al. (1998)** already discussed above. The overall perspective of the above is that relationships with foreign distributors can afford the exporter the personal interactions with their local market, hence, better market knowledge.

☸ **Joint Marketing Decisions And Actions:** Export performance for most firms often suffers because of separate ownership and profit claims that result from exporter and his distributor trading at arms-length arrangements **(Bello and Gilland, 1997)**. The exporter and his distributor act as mere buyers and sellers under a discrete exchange, engaging in minimal communication and tend to inefficiently do the tasks needed to export successfully. Where this happens, pricing becomes the governing mechanism for exchange. This often results in bargains that lead to operational inefficiencies, slow information flow and poorly coordinated business functions **(Bello and Gilland, 1997)**. However, within the relationship marketing, after deciding to export and having identified which markets to enter, exporters need to choose local representatives in these markets. This allows the marketing plan to be developed with the help of local insights from the distributor **(Styles and Ambler, 1994)**. The issue of local insight is supported by **Matear et al. (2000),** who argues that foreign intermediary involvement in formulating the marketing plan generally leads to improved profits. The relationship marketing views exporters and distributors as proactive, interdependent entities that interact over long periods of time. This interaction reverses the traditional marketing or discrete approach where the marketing-mix is a sole responsibility of the exporter. Relational partners are committed to each other, thus can effectively coordinate export activities. The exporter can refine his marketing mix and position his products for added growth and stability in the turbulent markets, depending on views from experienced foreign distributors.

☸ **Financial Considerations/Cost Reduction:** Firms need to use their resources optimally. Due to the complex nature of international markets, exporters need to form relationships with distributors. One key attraction to a good relationship is profit making **(Matear et al. 2000)**. Entrance into a relationship often focuses on other issues, where costs reduction is an important factor, and where operational cost -cutting is expected and profits are increased **(Ghosh et al. 2004)**. Costs are specifically incurred for instance, in business negotiation, management of the necessary logistics, monitoring accounts receivables, drawing up contracts and so on. Where there are long term relations, exporters deal with small number of partners and are expected to weed out distributors who have incongruent goals. Small numbers reduce administration and monitoring costs that are normally associated with discrete exchanges **(Barringer, 1997)**.

☸ **Pace Of Innovation And Market Diffusion:** The rate of change in technology is rapid and as a consequence, product life cycles are often very short **(Keegan and Green, 2005)**. This means that new products must be exploited quickly by effective diffusion into markets. Relationships between exporters and distributors become valuable in such instances where distributors can provide effective promotion and efficient physical distribution because of their knowledge and physical presence in the foreign market. The main distributor may also be involved in a distribution network, thus facilitating more product distribution.

CHALLENGES FOR ESTABLISHING EXPORTER-DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Strong relationships can improve the business performance. However, the relationship development is not without challenges. The business environment poses a dilemma for both exporters and distributors. Its opaque nature is often conducive to the occurrence of opportunistic behaviours **(Heide and John, 1990, Anderson and Narus, 1990)**. Thus, parties in the relationship often have difficulties in totally depending on each other. **Morgan et al. (1994)** argue that many factors may contribute to relationship success or failure, but trust and commitment are central to success. Other authors in business relationships have also identified trust and commitment as the most challenging factors in relationship development **(Bianchi and Saleh, 2009, Farrelly and Quester, 2003, Samiee and Walters, 2003 and Tuang and Stringer, 2008)**. These two factors are discussed in turn.

☸ **Trust:** Trust has assumed a central position in the development of business relationships **(Anderson and Narus, 1990, Samiee and Walters, 2003, Tuang and Stringer, 2008, Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987)**. In marketing literature, trust is seen as a fundamental cornerstone of co-operation and conceptualized as quality in a relationship **(Mouzas, et al. 2007, Moorman et al. 1992)**. **Moorman et al. (1992)** define trust as willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Trust also exists when one party has confidence in the reliability and integrity of their exchange partner. Much of the studies on trust in relationship marketing subject area have been done in the context of distribution channels **(Doney et al. 1997)**, buyer-seller relationships **(Heide and John, 1990)** and relationship marketing **(Morgan and Hunt, 1994)** and many of these found that trust improves business performance. Elsewhere, trust has been considered to be a salient factor in effectiveness of many relationships, and a necessary factor in the continuance of such relationships **(Zand, 1972)**.

Zand et al. (1972) and Doney et al. (1997) note that conditions of trust are only necessary where the other party's behaviour is beyond the second party's control that is, the trusting party must be vulnerable to some extent, if trust is to become operational. **Anderson et al. (1990)** emphasizes that the trusted partner is not expected to take any actions that will result in negative outcomes for the trusting firm. Trust is influenced by the attitudes towards major components of the service experience and grows when two parties share a variety of experiences which improve their ability to predict each other's behaviour **(Doney et al. 1997)**. Some researchers contend that communication is an antecedent to trust **(Anderson et al. 1990, Doney et al. 1997)**, whilst there is a counter argument that it is trust that leads to communication **(Samiee et al. 2003)**. According to **Samiee et al.(2003),** trust that results from relationship continuity should lead to more information exchange as well as to a problem solving posture, even in the absence of interdependence between parties. Continuity of the relationship results in exporter's knowledge of the market and customer needs. Frequent contacts do invoke prediction processes where the parties can accurately assess each other's behaviour, thereby developing trust for each other **(Doney et al. 1997)**. Therefore, this increases the ability to recognize and accept good ideas rather than being critical and defensive most of the time. **Butler Jr. (1991)** observes that trust is an important aspect of relationships, in that it is essential to the development of managerial careers and in a specific person, can be more relevant in terms of predicting outcomes. According to this author, there are ten conditions of trust. Included are: **(i) Availability :**Which refers to physical presence when needed **(ii) Competence :**Being knowledgeable and offering skills related to a given job **(iii) Consistency :** Being predictable or reliable **(iv) Discreetness :** Being able to maintain other party's confidence **(v) Fairness (vi) Integrity :** Being honest and keeping a moral character **(vii) Loyalty :** Free of any harm to the other party **(viii)Openness :** Sharing or giving ideas freely **(ix) Promise fulfillment :** sticking to ones' word **(x) Receptivity :** Openly welcoming ideas.

As marketers continuously seek information on their markets, information provided by the trusted party presents the former with greater value **(Moorman et al, 1992)**. Trust facilitates interpersonal acceptance and openness of expression. Information or views provided by persons not trusted and any suggestions they make as to how goals could be reached is suspiciously viewed **(Zand, 1972)**. In their study, **Piercy et al. (1998)**, point out at the striking conclusion in which they found that distributors selected exporters by considering soft factors, for example fairness, trustworthiness and ability to keep promises rather than hard factors like product and price.

Where trust does not prevail, the exchange of information between the parties is easily put in jeopardy. This increases the chances of misunderstandings or misinterpretations, as parties do not concentrate on the information content. As a result, underlying problems may not be easily identified. This cycle may continue if nothing is done to bring the parties to trust each other. On the other hand, where trust is a norm in the relationship, comprehensive, relevant and timely information is provided and easily accepted with confidence. This will contribute to the achievement of goals.

☸ **Commitment:** Commitment has its roots in relationships **(Bianchi and Saleh, 2010, Greenhalgh, 2001)** and has been defined as an exchange partner's belief that an ongoing relationship with another is so important that it warrants maximum efforts to maintain it **(Morgan et al. 1994, Moorman et al. 1982, Dwyer et al. 1987)**. Commitment is considered another challenge in the development of exporter-distributor relationships. One needs to feel a sense of inclusion and commonwealth if they are to be committed to a course of action **(Greenhalgh, 2001)**. Inclusion gives a sense of belonging as an insider than an outsider, while commonwealth involves a sense of having a common fate. Inclusion and commonwealth are the building blocks of collaborative relationships that are a source of competitive advantage. They bring success into the organization now-a-days. Inclusion generates enthusiasm and ingenuity that can overpower obstacles that arise during implementation of a course of action.

Dwyer et al. (1987), measured commitment in inter-organizational relationships using three criteria. The **first** criterion looked at the inputs factor, where partners are called upon to exchange economic resources and maintain continuous communication with each other as a sign of commitment. **Secondly,** they used consistency and that is when the level of inputs to the relationship does not vary. When inputs from one partner vary, it is believed such a partner is not committed, which results in loss confidence from the other party. Lastly, commitment is shown by durability, which is concerned with preserving the relationship in anticipation of even better exchanges in future. In fact, durability has received wide discussion than the inputs and consistency factors **(Williamson, 1991, Heide and John, 1990, Bianchi and Saleh, 2010)**, hence warrants some further elaboration here.

Durability is shown through investments made by parties to the relationship to encourage its continuation. Partners invest on what are called transaction-specific assets **(Williamson, 1991, Lee and Jang, 1998)**. These investments, which can be in the form of physical or human-specific investments, are made to reduce operating costs and achieve a great marketing impact **(Lee and Jang, 1998)**. These assets are defined as those that are devoted to a particular relationship and are not easily deployable once the relationship is terminated **(Heide and John, 1990 and Bianchi and Saleh, 2010)**. Examples include such factors as specialized equipment, furnishings, time spent on training employees, basic business procedures and time spent on developing the relationship. **Williamson (1991)** calls such investments *"hostages"* as they have little value outside the relationship. The partners are kept hanging onto each other by the fact that leaving the relationship may create high switching costs **(Dwyer et al. 1987)**. Thus by being together, the partners may develop more interest in maintaining a quality relationship.

Businesses would avoid such investments if there are no signs of commitment and relationship continuity from the other partner **(Heide and John, 1990)**. To avoid any loss in investments due to relationship termination, vertical integration is an option, which by virtue creates employment of the other partner **(Bonaccorsi, 1993, Heide and John, 1990)**. In vertical integration, the investing partner, as a result, will have control over all the decisions. Unfortunately, unlike their large counterparts, small businesses lack the resources or capabilities to vertically integrate. **Bonaccorsi (1993)** analyzed a dozen of studies carried among Italian small firms and found vertical integration was very limited as a foreign entry method. Thus the small firm's available resources can only be invested up-front to gain commitment from the other partner, but not for integration.

Dwyer et al. (1987) notes commitment as the most advanced stage in a relationship that precludes other exchange partners who are able to provide similar benefits, hence partners concentrating efforts on each other. Trust is a major determinant of commitment **(Moorman et al.1982)**. Mistrust serves to decrease commitment in the relationship and shifts transactions to one of more direct short-term exchanges. The cumulative commitment that builds through trust contributes to the decrease of uncertainty in a relationship. This implicitly creates a linkage between commitment and competitive advantage and export performance.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The growing significance of international trade pushes businesses to analyze their international market entry strategies. Today's international markets are very competitive because of trade liberalization, regional trade agreements and globalization. Developing countries, and in particular African countries, are not an exception to this competition. Therefore, this paper has been concerned with how African exporters can improve on their export performance through the building and maintaining of relationships with foreign distributors. Literature analysis on studies done elsewhere around the world is used here to reveal the experiences of various exporters involved in such business relationships. This can ,therefore, be used to enlighten African exporters on the essence of relationship development. The literature reviewed indicates that relationship building has benefits that include information sharing, pace of innovation diffusion, reduction in costs and effective joint marketing decisions and actions. As a contribution to the export theory, an export success model can ,therefore, be designed around these benefits to guide the exporters in Africa. In general, for these exporters to be able to perform and compete successfully with the rest of the world, they need a close view of their foreign market, which can be easily accessed through the foreign distributor, who is forever present in that market. However, these benefits may be hindered by lack of trust and commitment between partners.

☸ **Implications For Policy Makers:** Policy makers in respective African countries need to pay particular attention to encouraging and assisting exporting companies participate in relationship development and management with partners in foreign countries. Encouraging relationship development means governments spend less money in subsidizing companies to enable them to access external markets, particularly the resource-starved SMEs. Some resources can be easily obtained through partnerships, for instance, the distributors can easy do market research for the exporter using their own resources. African nations need to be aware that the world trade liberalization is eliminating trade barriers including government subsidies and as a result, every exporter would have to face real world competition without government assistance.

☸ **Implications For Exporting Firms:** The management of exporting firms need to be aware of the positive implications of exporter-distributor relationship on their export performance. With the intensified competition, African exporters must not only try to maximize their production efforts, but must also cope with the growing importance of distributors for effective foreign market entry and distribution. Being able to maintain not only functioning but productive export-distributor relationships under such competitive pressure offers potential great economic benefit for the company when the economic climate improves. This is particularly important in new markets that have never been explored. By participating in relationships with foreign distributors, the exporters will have access to previously inaccessible international markets, improve their export diversity, performance and firm growth. Overall, this will lead to economic development and growth among the African economies.

☸ **Implications For Future Research:** An extension of this paper will be to undertake empirical investigations in several African countries to find out the extent to which they understand the business relationship concept, particularly, the interaction of the exporter-distributor in their cross-border trade. Such investigations will serve as eye openers for policy makers, exporters and researchers as to what can be done to facilitate more benefits. Hindrances in cross-border relationship development may also be revealed and measures to correct these can be found.

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