Archives of Business Research – Vol. 11, No. 1
Publication Date: January 25, 2023
DOI:10.14738/abr.111.13804.
Guidi, A. C., & Pizzinatto, N. K. (2023). Relationship Marketing Strategies in the Dimension Stone Sector. Archives of Business Research – Vol. 11(1). 103-119.

Relationship Marketing Strategies in the Dimension Stone Sector

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the most effective relationship marketing (RM) strategies in the US dimension stone sector (DSS) market: the overall objective of this research was to investigate which RM strategies are the most suitable, in order to improve the international dimension stone market. Methodologically, qualitative research was implemented, focusing on grounded theory. We interviewed three Brazilian distributors established in the USA, and fifteen national distributors who export dimension stones. Data analysis indicated that the RM strategies which best suited the sector in the American market were: prospecting for new customers, international partnerships, and customer loyalty. Thus, we identified the profile which best suited American consumer potential.

Keywords: relationship marketing strategies; dimension stone sector; prospecting for new customers; loyalty; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers present specific peculiarities in business today: more demands, individualism, involvement with the origin of the product, independence, information, and greater criticism [1-2]. A factor which explains this transformation is the increase in people's purchasing power, and their consequent search for sophistication [3].

Previous marketing studies have examined the specific characteristics of organizations questioned the implication of promotions and merchandising as a marketing tool [4], and presented the need for creating long-term customer relationships, indicating the emergence of relationship marketing (RM). This is an effort to construct long-term, mutually satisfactory relationships between parties [5]; in other words, relationships based on empathy, mutual benefits, and cooperation [6-7].

Consequently, the exchange of endogenous and exogenous forces between stakeholders is demonstrated in an approach called relationship marketing, identified by the abbreviation RM in this paper [3; 7-10].

When reflecting on the dynamic of addressing management of the commercial relationship between companies, and the encouragement required for customer loyalty in the dimension stone sector, the following research problem emerged: how may RM strategies contribute to national dimension stone companies in the international market?

Thus, the overall objective of this research was to describe which RM strategies are more suitable, with a view towards improving the international dimension stone market.

This work is justified on account of the distinction that this market has achieved in the economy. In 2018, production in Espírito Santo was responsible for 8% of the state GDP, equivalent to 80% of Brazilian exports, and 50% of national production, and more than 20,000 direct and 100,000 indirect jobs in approximately 1,650 companies [11]. The relevance of the sector can be highlighted by the growth in US imports between 2012 and 2015[12], since Brazil is second in the ranking, with 26% of exports, behind China with 27%. Dolley [13] highlights the statistics of US dimension stone import rankings for the period 2014 to 2017 in gross percentages*:* 1st Brazil with 25%; 2nd China with 25%; followed by Italy with 22%; Turkey with 14%; and other exporters forming 14%.

In this research, the advance proposed is the expanded reach of marketing management theory in a specific market. The results of this research may produce a competitive advantage for the local Brazilian market, since there is little relevant conceptual knowledge in the DSS. Thus, for Whetten [14], "it is preferable to investigate qualitative changes in the boundaries of a theory" in a context which presents qualitative distinctions and "the need for feedback loops."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of relationship marketing (RM) was initially introduced by Berry, Shostack and Upah [15], and developed in studies by various researchers, including Coviello and Brodie [16], Grönroos [17], and Mattsson [18]. According to Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne [19], it emerged in the areas of services and industrial marketing. Gummesson [19], [7], and [3] and, similarly, Lindgreen, Palmer and Vanhamme [20], suggest that the basic objectives are to identify, establish, maintain, improve and, when necessary, end relationships with clients, in order to meet both the company's and their customers' objectives.

Grönroos [21] expanded the concept by demonstrating that RM aims to establish, maintain, and improve relationships with customers and other partners, with a view towards profit, while meeting the objectives that the parties involved are seeking. For Berry, Shostack and Upah [15], Berry and Mirabito [8] and Berry, Mirabito and Baun [22], RM was considered a strategy to attract, maintain, and improve customer relationships. Gummesson [3] defined it as a management strategy in which interactions, relations, and relationship networks, were a fundamental issue.

Šonková and Grabowska [23], have distinct viewpoints on the representativeness of RM: the main disagreement is centered on the point of relational convergence.

A number of authors believe that these relational convergences are strictly orientated towards external organizational relationships, while others are synchronized in three aspects:

a) providing engagement activities through relationship life cycle stages;
b) designating individual customers, groups of customers, other companies and/or employees as the targets of relationship marketing activities;
c) generating benefits for both parties involved.

RM emerged as one of the dominant marketing paradigms in the 1980s [3].

A widely accepted RM approach, presented by Peppers and Rogers (2001[24]), is centered on focusing on individual relations in customer relationships; in other words, one-to-one marketing, which involves four common steps: a) identify the customers; b) customer differentiation; c) customer interaction; and d) customize behavioral aspects of the company, in order to better assist customers.

Exercising these steps in distinct ways – identify, differentiate, interact, and customize – may be implemented as a practical checklist to apply in any area of a company. The most relevant point for RM is centered on reconstructing basic philosophies on how to conduct business: it means the business vision from the customer's perspective [24 - 25].

From Grönroos [21] and Gummesson's [3] definition, it may be concluded that RM is marketing focused on constructing strong, long-lasting relationships.

According to Grönroos [21], the value for the customer from the perspective of RM is constructed during the customer relationship, in interactions between them and the supplier, or service provider. Thus, the focus is not on the products, but the process of creating value for customers, since the product value emerges for them. To summarize: the dominant logic is centered on the fact that the value is defined and co-created with the consumer, instead of only being incorporated in the product [26 - 27].

For Payne and Frow [10], Roos and Gustafsson [28], with increased RM research, different topics and focuses have emerged, which developed into three RM approaches. Two of these are the Anglo-Australian and Nordic School [10; 29], which have many common elements. However, the North American approach [9 - 10] placed greater emphasis on the dyad of the relationships between the supplier and consumer, in the context of the organizational environment.

Šonková and Grabowska [23], Grundey [30], Grundey and Daugelaite [31], define RM as the combination of customer service, quality, and marketing: focusing on the proximity of these three fields, and the relations created, should be constructed based on the concern for customer well-being, which requires trust, commitment, excellent service, empathy, responsibility, and quality of the service provided [23].

Prior definitions suggest that the focus of RM is the external customer, but this reach was extended by Morgan and Hunt [32], who identified ten discreet forms of RM presence. Gummesson [7] presented a list containing thirty-two (32) possible relationships.

Prospecting for new customers and internal marketing – IM - (endo marketing) [33] were cited as RM strategies. Berry [34] and Berry, Shostack and Upah [15] defined IM as the visualization of "employees as internal customers," visualizing their work as internal products which meet their needs and desires, while also fulfilling the organization's objectives. Joseph [35], referred to IM as the sale of the company's products and services to their direct staff, and the process of attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining qualified staff through jobs that fulfil their needs.

Rafiq and Ahmed [33] and Ahmed and Rafiq [36] identified the five essential elements of

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14738/abr.111.13804

Endo marketing: motivating and satisfying staff; customer orientation and customer satisfaction; interfunctional coordination and integration; marketing approach for coordination and interfunctional integration; and implementing corporate policies or functional strategies.

Another RM strategy is international partnerships, which have emerged in various studies, including international research: joint ventures 37], the selection and characteristics of partners [38], and the effects of the performance of the control of ownership in these partnerships [39]. The underlying premises in these studies are selection of the appropriate partner, the alignment of partner companies' economic strategies and incentives, the use of control of ownership, and mitigating the risk of opportunistic behavior inherent to an interorganizational relationship.

These relationships of exchange are increasingly relevant in the field of marketing, in a perspective which tends to concentrate on the attributes of exchange in a successful relationship including, according to Morgan and Hunt [32], Hunt, Lambe and Wittmann [40]: a) cooperation; b) a committed relationship; c) shared values; d) keeping promises; e) the absence of opportunistic behavior; and f) trust.

Another strategy pertinent to RM is customer loyalty: in the words of Ansari and Riasi [36], initially focused on product orientation and brand loyalty, RM studies led the focus to concentrate on customer satisfaction and loyalty, and company profitability was not broadly studied in the B2B context. Thus, three strands of the main customer loyalty research are presented: a) behavioral loyalty (e.g., Jensen & Markland, 1996[42]); b) attitudinal loyalty [41]; and c) compound loyalty [43].

Loyalty includes psychological processes in which the decision-maker analyzes the options of products and services, based on different criteria, before taking a purchasing decision, highlighting that satisfaction, trust, commitment, and perceived value, are the most relevant factors which affect customer loyalty. This is affirmed by Ansari and Riasi [36], who list eight main factors which affect customer loyalty, as follows: satisfaction; changing boundaries; trust; commitment; perceived value and quality; intuitive image; and empathy.

Transactional and relationship marketing strategies have been used since the first businesses entered into operation. As postulated by Sonková and Grabowska [23], although recent studies affirmed that there was a change in the assumption of transactional marketing (which dominated in the late 20th century) to relationship marketing, the main global companies still continue to use transactional marketing strategies.

To summarize, the most suitable RM strategies for the DSS, in the process of conquering the international American market, can be summarized as: prospecting for new customers; interorganizational partnerships; customer loyalty; and internal marketing.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was implemented, favoring the focus of data analysis in grounded theory. The study is classified as descriptive for the objectives of the research.

Sample

The research subjects were 18 employees directly involved in the DSS, and classified as professionals who perform activities at export organizations: stone workers and retailers: men aged between 31 and 60: three Brazilian distributors established in the USA, and fifteen national distributors who export dimension stones.

Selection of the interviewees was for convenience, and organized by using the snowballing technique: the participants were attained through personal contacts, friends, and acquaintances [44 - 45].

Data Collection

Data collection was performed following a semi-structured interview script, which allowed greater freedom to pose related questions which had not previously been considered or included originally [46]. The interviews were recorded following the interviewees' agreement to this procedure, with the guarantee of confidentiality of their names, and transcriptions of the contents by qualified professionals [47]. They all received an identification code; in line with the signed protocol, they were advised that their responses would not be considered right or wrong, and the evaluation of their competencies was not the object of this research [48].

Data Analysis Technique

In accordance with Merriam [49], "selection of the most appropriate time to perform data analysis and to integrate this analysis with other tasks distinguishes a qualitative project from traditional positivist research." The data was analyzed in accordance with the categorization method put forward by Flores [50], which comprises separating textual data into content units, clustered together according to categories, defined a priori from the theoretical framework. The data reduction process, e.g., segmenting expressions by categorized units took place in a simultaneous process, defined a priori from the interview data and theoretical framework.

The following was applied as a code to identify the interviewees; national dimension stone distributors established in the USA: DistA#01 to DistA03; and, equally, applied as a code to identify the national exporters established in Brazil which export dimension stones: DistN#04 to DistN#21. Twenty-one (21) interviews were held which lasted between ten (10) hours and 14 minutes, resulting in 352 transcribed pages. The research results were analyzed using NVivo 12 software.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data was separated by RM strategy type, and the results presented as follows:

International Partnerships

The interviewees' search for partnerships was on a small scale (DistN#04 to DistN#18), since they feared being interpreted by their current customers as competitors, and not suppliers. Interviewee (DistN#08) reported that he "had never adopted this type of approach."

When questioned on forming partnerships with groups of national companies as a way of facilitating their entry into the US market, through the installation of warehouses, he justified: Any company which tries to implement this type approach in the market is excluded from the

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distribution market. It puts its foot in the United States, opens a warehouse, does something which goes directly into the market, and is immediately out of the distribution market. The distributors effectively boycott it, and do not purchase (from them) any more. (DistN#11)

He reiterated that "the distributor does not accept any type of presence within the market. You are an industry within the Brazilian market which should sell to the distributor;" in other words, in their perception, a partnership in the USA is seen as a market betrayal:

Because he sees you as a competitor, when you make any type of movement of this kind; you are competing with your customer, and your customer does not want any competition. So, from the moment when you, as an industry, try to enter the market to compete with the American industries, the American distributor boycotts you, and the entire market boycotts you. (DistN#08)

For DistN#08, the option of entering the market with a warehouse in the US demonstrates that a joint venture "is a (viable) strategy" for small companies, but not for his undertaking, which is a national company with a higher volume of national sales of slabs to the US, arguing: "You have to shoulder the burden of effectively going to the American market and doing all of the work which the distributor does there." He reiterated that various large national companies who had adopted this strategic position "went bust [...] you will have a relation, but it does not bear fruit" in the long term.

This position was reinforced by interviewee DistN#05, highlighting that "some companies set up warehouses in the United States for this. We saw the example of company SSY doing this some time ago. It lost a lot of local customers, as it set up a warehouse in Dallas, and lost a lot of customers." Complementing: "you also end up losing your customers, which you had as distributors in the region."

Interviewee DistN#09 does not use this strategy, and mentioned that the way "which we currently do business is a partnership with some distributors," supplying material in consignment sales; in other words, they had not opted for the installation of distribution abroad for their company. Thus, international partnerships are formed by providing support to the distributors cited, and he responded, "in precisely this way, initially bearing some of the costs, and setting a reduced price, in order to launch the product."

Interviewee DistN#04 opted for this strategy, in order to enter the American market in the city of Tampa, in the gulf of the American state of Florida, and was successful, as follows:

I was one of the partners of a stone business in the United States. Actually, it started as a showroom. And then we took on kitchen projects in the United States, [...] they were sent there in AutoCAD, and we took care of producing these projects here; everything was taken boxed up to the United States, and we had a team there which did the installations. (DistN#04)

He reports that:
We had various samples, [...] pre-fabricated counter tops. At the time it was to show the line of [...], just the granite we had. Then, as time passed, the volume increased and the waiting period of arriving here, cutting, purchasing, shipping, arriving in the United States, was really lengthy,

so the customers did not like this long period, despite the price, so we had to open a stone business there, and the entire operation was then conducted in the United States. (DistN#04)

In accordance with the options presented by Payne and Frow [9], we can affirm that not forming partnerships is a strategic position. The specific sub-strategies proposed for the RM international partner strategy more suitable for DSS management in the process of conquering the international American market is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1- Summary of specific sub-strategies proposed for RM strategy

RM strategy	
International partnerships	**Description of the Activity**
Strategic alliances	[...] some customers start wanting to repeat the purchase, and then we went and spoke to two Brazilian companies which started to send materials there for consignment sales and, in the meantime, we started to try and form a closer relationship with two or three manufacturers in the United States, and this combination has sustained and developed the warehouse until now. So, the partnerships which we developed were both here in relation to the supplier, and also with some customers in the United States, and we ended up making some adjustments in terms of price and benefits, so that they could close a volume. [...] being aware that we would need more, and that we cannot work with one or two companies supplying us [...]. In the near future, we have to study the possibility of increasing the partnership [...] with other suppliers in Brazil – DistA#01. [...] What we are doing now is forging a partnership with distributors [...]. Initially bearing some of the costs, at a more reduced price, in order to launch the products – DistN#09.
Relationship involving suppliers, research and PR agencies	[...] social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook work better, and then there is the issue of person to person within associations – DistA#01. [...] you need folders; have to have agendas, a tape measure; need to call the customer, retaining customers, mainly; sometimes via WhatsApp, which helps us a lot, and emailing, [...] – DistN#18.
Joint venture	I started about 18 years ago, [...] working directly with American consumers. [...] Actually, it started as a showroom. Then later on, we took on kitchen projects in the United States; brought them here in AutoCAD, and I took care of the production of these projects here; everything was boxed up and taken to the United States, and there was a team there which did the installation – DistN#04.
Exchange between companies and end customers	[...] the finished product. We had various samples, and pre-fabricated counter tops. It was to show the line we had at the time, [...]. Then, with the passing of time, the volume increased, and the waiting period of arriving here, cutting, purchasing, shipping, arriving in the United States, in Florida, was really lengthy, so, the customers no longer liked this long period, despite the price, so we had to open a stone business there, and the entire operation started to be conducted in the United States. That is when I started working – DistN#04.

Source: Prepared by the author.

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14738/abr.111.13804

Prospecting for New Customers

For Kotler and Keller [6] prospecting for new customers is concentrated on six main stages: generation and evaluation of leadership; development of a plan for each leader; making contact with potential customers; preparation and presentation of the proposal; closing the sale, and follow-up.

Interviewee DistN#09 highlighted that "the way of prospecting for customers has changed so much. Previously our way of customer prospection was the old way of 10 to 15 years ago, taking part at fairs [...]," and specified the path taken at the beginning; in other words, "here and abroad. The Verona Fair, a fair in the United States [...], and then you are taking business cards, and yellow pages, etc." He also made a brief comment that "we have a presentation; it can be done by email, WhatsApp, or an in loco visit, to present the product and its colors."

He also cited the evolution of this prospection process over time:

The other way that we also had [...] we used the Brazilian embassies, and the promotion of foreign trade; so we took a list of importers [...], and through all of this there was also contact, travelling. So this has really changed. Now it is much easier for people who are entering the market, because you take a database; today people, here, the companies are importing stones here in Brazil; a company which is starting today can achieve a relationship, and we had to go out looking for it, searching for customers, going there to visit, and so forth, so it has really changed. So, today, social networks are the most important tools that you have, to be able to look for customers. You have an intelligence network within the company today, evaluating and browsing, doing searches, and so forth, one can attain a very long list of customers. (DistN#09)

Interviewee DistN#08 indicated prospection as a market entrance strategy, with trips to the US being the main element: at a time when "you did not have any type of technological tool to support you; we went on a lot of trips."

Interviewee DistN#08 reinforced that the main approach to prospect for new customers "has been continuous, from the start, taking constant trips. We are always with the customer," and that:

In order to achieve this, and expand, what we did for a while was start with one salesperson, then we put two or three. Today, for example, we have seven, and we have, and should have eight, nine, ten; the number of salespeople required, so that we can expand our customer base. (DistN#08)

My salesperson travels six times per year as a minimum; in other words, my customers are visited every two months. There is someone there talking to them every two months, and understanding what they have. (DistN#08)

Another relevant point cited by interviewee DistN#05 was each employee's personal capacity: "there is also a customer service limit; it comes to a point at which it is too much for the salesperson. So, I have a maximum number of customers that the salesperson can assist," to provide the best level of customer service.

Along this line of thinking, interviewee DistN#05 reinforces the tactic of trips, in order to bring the company closer to future customers:

I travel a lot. I worked at a company, and I started this job four years ago, and that is how I started; I travelled to the United States six times, and now I have a new challenge at a new company, where, obviously, I will have to make these trips again, to show a different angle, so, prospection is knocking on doors and follow-up. (DistN#05)

He reinforced personal contact, highlighting that "taking part at fairs is really good, but I believe that your contact with the customer; going out to dinner; going out to visit, is more productive than taking part at a fair."

He highlighted the need to constantly study market trends: Me, as the director, and my partner as the person responsible for the commercial area, we are always on the move, to see the trends; to see if the customer is being looked after, and the type of relation s/he could create. So, in fact, marketing is really done at the top, effectively, from the personal relationship with warehouse owners. (DistN#08)

In relation to specific strategies observed by staff in the sector, interviewee DistN#12 highlighted that there are a wide range: "sometimes one [...] suggests a friend who is also a customer. With some, we made offers sending emails; we got the contact through the internet and called, [...] we offered, talked to people, sent emails, photos, and materials."

He gave the following example:
I will give you a very simple example: here in Brazil, there are a lot of companies that take, and put, salespeople by areas and regions. And contracts, you will take the southeast region, etc. And there are times that they put it like this; you will only sell to São Paulo; you will only sell to Rio Grande do Sul, you [...] for example. So, what do people do? I am giving the example of Brazil, but it is the same abroad. The person goes onto the internet, starts digging around there, at that pile of stone businesses and distributors, and s/he starts to send emails, to take the telephone and call the person, [...]. I am saying this because I have done this, because my boss told me to do it. (DistN#12)

It was a localization strategy. The same way that some external salespeople who sell abroad also do. The United States, this warehouse and another one, sending emails, calling, talking to people; trying to find out who the selector and inspector are – of slabs or blocks – this person here in Brazil, so s/he starts to get in touch through the inspector here in the country. (DistN#07)

Interviewee DistN#11 highlighted personal in loco visits as a relevant tactic of a new customer prospection strategy: "it is visiting, trips to meet these [...] future new customers." He also highlighted that this service had a great impact on conquering future customers, so that "they suggest friends, so that they come and buy [...]"

In accordance with the options presented by Payne and Frow (2004), use of this strategic approach is aligned with the environmental and national characteristics noted in that country.

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To summarize, the specific sub-strategies proposed to prospect for new customers most suitable to DSS management, in the process of conquering the international American market, is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 - Summary of the specific sub-strategies proposed for the RM strategy

RM strategy	
Prospecting for new customers	**Description of the Activity**
Employee training	Today, for example, we have seven, and we have and should have eight, nine, ten; the number of salespeople required, so that we can expand our customer base. And also, there is a limit to our customer service; it comes to a point when it is too much for the salesperson. So, I have a maximum number of customers which the salesperson can assist [...] DistN#08.
Constant searches and making contact with potential customers	[...] our previous way of prospecting for customers was the old way, [...] 10, 15 years ago, taking part at fairs, [...] Here and abroad. Verona Fair and fairs in the United States and [...], and then you take business cards, yellow pages [...] presentations can be done by email, WhatsApp, and in loco visits [...]. The other way that we also had was using the Brazilian embassies; the promotion of foreign trade; so we acquired a list of importers, and so on, and through all of this [...] also contacts and trips. Then this changed a lot. Today it is extremely easy for people who are entering (the market), because they get a database; today [...] a company which is starting up, acquires a list, and we had to go out looking for, and searching for customers, going there to visit and so on; so it has really changed. So, today, social networks are the most important tools that you have, to be able to search for customers. You, an intelligence network within the company today, evaluating and searching [...] making searches and so on; one is able to acquire an extensive list of customers – DistN#09
Development of a specific plan	[...] take a stone, a simple stone, work on it with a jet of water, make designs on it, […], for use as an office partition, [...] and any business; business going through your head; how am I going to do it [...], so, there is a way to do it [...], do you see? [...] a bath; there is a guy there who made a bath with an incredible green quartz; a bath of seamless stone (sculpted), and all crafted on the wall, with material, so that people came, and said "I want to have that in my house," so this is the new way of working. [...] We have to work closely with the architects, encouraging the architects [...] to be able to drive demand – DistN#09. Studying the market is something called a relationship. [...] when I strengthen a relationship with you by email, by phone, it is very cold and distant; it is not face-to-face. I am not showing you my product in person. I am not taking you a sample. But if I am able to create a relationship, where I go to your company; I will show you, my product; I will invite you to come to my company; I will pay for your ticket to come to my company, and then you will get to know about my product; sometimes I don't gain a single customer, I gain an entire market of customers – DistN#07.

Preparation, presentation, and closing sales - following-up the sales process	[...] because I am now on my customer's page; s/he closes an invoice; closes the packing list, and I print it out straight away; I deliver to them; s/he signs and returns it to me. But this is development, this is technology. This is a heavy investment in software and management tools, which are very good but it is not what the market usually does for two reasons: one because it is very expensive and, secondly, because it requires a more qualified labor force, [...]. So the success of the business today, allied with technology, is always focused on: better equipment, better people, and better processes [...] – DistN#08.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is supported by the four foundations of RM, which are trust, commitment, communication, and dealing with conflicts.

Interviewee DistN#14 highlighted that "today, the customer buys from you [...]. When you are able to make the customer trust you, [...] s/he gives preference to you."

Interviewee DistN#15 reinforces aspects such as the main reason which leads customers to purchase again; "the main characteristic for why my customers buy from me is due to the quality of the material, the service, and transparency which we always employ," emphasizing that looking for companies and professionals which "they can trust, and be their eyes when selecting the product."

Another interviewee, DistN#17 emphasizes "that the main (reason) is quality, and trusting an excellent service; knowing that this customer and supplier relationship is the main factor for a company to be a successful company." He reinforced that he focuses "on quality and the commitment of honoring everything that had been agreed."

Interviewee DistN#12 confirms that he has worked in the sector, in large export companies, for approximately 23 years, and:

That is only with time. For (the customer) to trust you, it is time. And trust is everything; s/he comes and buys once, buys twice, buys three times, and you form a bond; you create a bond between you; s/he starts to trust you. But it is something you achieve during a period of time, and for you to lose this also takes just a second. (DistN#12)

He reinforces that: The key factor is the relationship; you form a relationship with the customer. The product, if they want the product, they come here; let's give the example of Branco Moura [...] "I want Branco Moura stone;" it doesn't matter; s/he will go after this; s/he will go to the supplier and the quarry. If s/he wants Branco Moura, s/he will come. So s/he will start to negotiate with you [...], so that will be another relationship. So, you will see the quality that s/he wants; the type that s/he wants, and s/he will start creating that bond with you, and trust will be formed, but not immediately [...] (DistN#12)

So [...] you go for the trust. The guy starts to trust you, receiving [...] the materials according to

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what s/he wants, the form of payment, way of negotiating; sometimes you give a little bonus to the customer, and then s/he starts to have a better bond with you. (DistN#12)

Interviewee DistN#05 highlights that, first and foremost, knowledge of the product and market is essential:

You need to have good material, of a good quality, and a good finish. [...] you need to have a material that the customer turns over in their region. There is also no point of having a top-quality material, which your customer does not turn over, which your customer does not buy; so, for that, I always keep up to date on the issue of market fashions (trends), because granite is a fad. (DistN#05)

Interviewee DistN#04 values quality, so that purchases are repeated: (It is) the most important (factor) for you to build customer loyalty, since you go through all of this, and are able to convince them that you will deliver material of an extremely high quality. If you slip up on the first delivery, you won't get a second chance. You may even, on the third or fourth (delivery), possibly slip up a little with something minor with the standard of the material, but if you do this the first or second time, you will never be able to sell to this customer again. (DistN04)

Therefore, the customer loyalty strategy for the sector can be understood as a guarantee of delivery on the correct date, and with the quality specified by the international standard. This attitude leads to being able to retain your customers, and being recommended to others; on this point, interviewee DistN#04 sees that, overall, post-sales in Brazil falls short of the international standard.

A point often highlighted was that national companies need to work on improving their image, since "the salesperson only calls when s/he needs to sell," explains DistN#06, highlighting that a stronger relational bond between the parties is required for a national company to be successful.

Interviewee DistN#18 emphasized the importance of building customer loyalty, highlighting that "a loyal customer stays with us due to product quality, and the wide variety that we offer [...] we currently work with more than 40 items [...] and the quality of the stone and polish. This means that we can leverage the customer." When questioned with regards to why customer loyalty is an important strategy, he confirmed that: It is important because you can plan your sales; for example, you can buy the materials which this customer uses because you know that you will be able to sell them [...]. That is the most important point in customer loyalty. (DistN#18)

Interviewee DistN#11 highlighted the importance of post-sales, specifying: So, for my post-sales, the customer comes and buys; then s/he takes the material, and then one week later, usually between eight and ten days, I call to see how it went; if the material arrived; if they are satisfied with the purchase [...]. And I ask questions, [...], if s/he would recommend me to another friend. I do all of that. It is a similar procedure in the external market, but the time to receive the product is a little longer. (DistN#11)

To summarize, the specific sub-strategies proposed for customer loyalty which are more suitable for DSS management, in the process of conquering the international American market, are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 - Summary of specific sub-strategies proposed for a RM strategy

Customer loyalty	Description of the Activity
Satisfaction	[...] the main issue of Brazilian stone – and I am mainly talking about more unusual stones, because we truly have an immense variety – is exclusivity; it is the status the stone gives. I have an exclusive stone which is a wonderful material that I have bought, [...] which is material from Brazil. So, the exclusivity, the status which this awards; the end customer purchases this value [...] – DistN#08.
Trust	Americans really like to buy straight from the source, and this was an advantage. As an advantage and strategic issue that we had, was the issue of mastering extraction here; so, we created this routine of them buying straight from the source, and not from someone who was only reselling; we controlled the process - DistA#01. The most important (factor) to gain customer loyalty, as you have gone through all of this and were able to convince them, is you delivering material of an extremely high quality. If you slip up on the first delivery, you won't have a second chance. You may even on the third or fourth (delivery), possibly slip up with something minor with the standard of the material, but if you do this the first or second time, you will never be able to sell to this customer again – DistN#04.
High level of commitment	I think so, I think so. A main point; it is a strong point. If my customer, if I have a good relationship with them, they trust me, and I am more interested in assisting them, and they continue to consume the product that I sell – DistN#10.
Communication	The difference is the way that this is disseminated; you have companies in China and the United States which invest heavily in this dissemination, and the granite sector, mainly in Brazil, is very disconnected in relation to advertising and foreign trade strategies – DistA#01. A person has to focus and add value to the product. The type of argument that s/he will have to not work with you is only the price because of the strategy to strengthen the company brand, fairs, and ads in magazines – DistN#04.
Keeping promises	The first (time), you have to be extremely thorough; you have to look at every detail and every slab, according to the negotiated product; you have to be sure that there are no problems. If you promised to deliver a product without any problems, [...] if there is a slight problem, it is better not to ship that slab, that bundle that you "are going to test, and see if it passes." If you do this with an American customer, it is unlikely that you will ship for a second time – DistN#04
Addressing conflicts	[...] it is a group of factors. An accumulation that is to be decided. There are many variables, and one of these is the price. Another is the assistance required, and another is the capacity to position yourself when problems emerge, because problems will appear; there is no way to avoid them [...]. There is no way to hide, so I think that all of this has an influence, and I will say again [...]. I put myself in their position, myself as the customer. I prefer a supplier who does this - DistN#21

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14738/abr.111.13804

Lack of opportunistic behavior	[...] I won't criticize my competitors' products. There is no point in me saying anything. I am not their customer, so I cannot say that their product is good or bad [...]. I can't hide it if a product is good; I can't say: "That is no good;" I say that their product is good, [...] but I would prefer it if you buy from me. Now, what can we do for you to buy from me? Or at least buy something from them, and mine too." I try to do that. We also [...] deal with the suppliers; sometimes I put myself in the customer's position because I am also a customer. So, with my suppliers, I try to do it in a way that, in fact [...] I need to do both, both as a customer and supplier. So, from experience, we know that the customer wants a good service, let's say that [...]. Good service does not necessarily mean that s/he has the best price; the price has an influence but does not make the decision [...] – distN#10.
Customer retention	For our current customers, the main characteristic that I can highlight here is the issue of loyalty. It is very difficult for an American to change; a good customer in the United States rarely changes their supplier, but once they change and you earn their trust, they are loyal [...]. Americans are very loyal to their suppliers - DistA#01. Customer loyalty is important for us because you can plan your sales. For example, you can buy material which the customer uses, because you know that they will sell it [...] - DistN#18.

Source: Prepared by the author.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From the results of this research, RM and its strategies were seen as extremely viable for application in the DSS sector of the American market.

In relation to new customer prospection strategy, we noted a high concentration of concern for training employees on product characteristics, and an interest in cultural knowledge of the person one intends to negotiate with.

The customer loyalty strategy demonstrated the unmistakable impact of the four fundamentals of RM; in other words, trust, commitment, communication, and the way of engaging with customers (i.e. treatment).

Reliability, was the most accentuated item, indicating the importance of a quality standard, proximity of the customer relationship, diversification of the number of products on offer, and the post-sales service.

The international partnership strategy study demonstrated that the American market favors expansion via national borders, due to the ease of entry into this market, reduced risks, and business costs. It showed that selection of the appropriate partner is an activity inherent to interorganizational relationships.

Equally, future studies could focus on a conceptualization of the national product from the importer's perspective, and present studies that detail the factors which influence architects and interior designers to opt for replacement products, rather than natural stones.

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