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Leveraging Relationship Marketing Strategies for Better Performance: A Meta-analysis

Robert W. Palmatier, Rajiv P. Dant, Dhruv Grewal, and Kenneth R. Evans

How can marketers leverage relationship marketing strategies for better performance? This meta-analysis suggests that there are many avenues for improving RM productivity. Overall, the "strength" of the customer relationship has the strongest impact on business performance.

Report Summary

Relationship marketing (RM) has emerged as one of the dominant new mantras in business strategy circles, even though empirical investigations of RM have often yielded mixed results.

To help managers and researchers improve the effectiveness of their RM efforts, the authors conduct a meta-analysis of empirical research on relationship marketing to determine (1) which RM strategies most effectively build strong relationships, (2) under what conditions RM strategies most reliably produce positive performance outcomes, and (3) how various relational mediators, such as trust, commitment, and relationship quality, are linked to both antecedents and outcomes of RM.

Although the fundamental premise that RM has a positive effect on performance is well supported, the pattern of findings suggests many avenues for increasing the productivity of RM and for building more comprehensive models of how RM influences performance. Analyses suggest that RM strategies vary widely in efficacy and may build customer loyalty more effectively for service versus product offerings, channel versus direct exchanges, business versus consumer markets, and interpersonal versus interorganizational relationships.

The results support a multidimensional, multifaceted approach to RM: no single relational mediator captures the full essence or depth of a customer-seller relationship although the researchers note that relationship quality (a composite measure of relationship strength) is the mediator that has the most influence on companies' objective performance, followed by trust and commitment.

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Introduction

Relationship marketing (RM) has undergone "explosive growth" over the past decade (Sheth and Parvatiyar 2000, p. xi), both in business practice and as a focus of academic research. A search of the ABI Inform database for the term "relationship marketing" in scholarly marketing publications confirms the high level of interest, with over 400 articles published on the topic since 1990—around 30 per year. Most research and practice assumes that RM efforts generate stronger customer relationships that result in superior performance (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Morgan and Hunt 1994), but in some cases, business executives are disappointed in the results of their RM efforts (Colgate and Danaher 2000). For example, Reinartz and Kumar's (2000) empirical study found that short-term, transactional customers can be as profitable as longer-term, more relational customers.

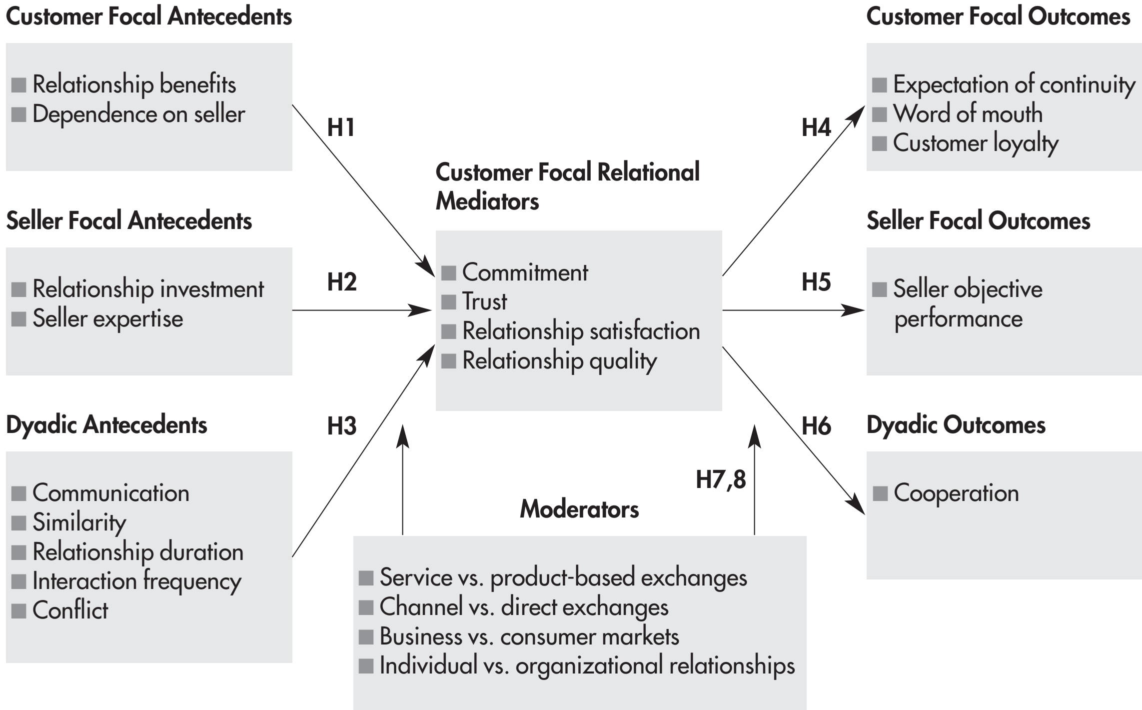
Researchers have suggested that in certain situations RM may even have a negative impact on performance (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Dowling and Uncles 1997; Hibbard et al. 2001). Overall, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of RM efforts may vary depending on the context in which they take place (Morgan and Hunt 1994). RM's inconsistent effects on performance suggest the need for a meta-analysis to determine under what conditions RM is most effective at generating positive seller outcomes and which RM strategies are most effective at building strong relationships. (Appendix A provides a brief introduction to meta-analysis.) Understanding the primary drivers of RM effectiveness has the potential to dramatically increase the return on firms' RM investments and to provide researchers with the insight to build more comprehensive models of the influence of RM on performance (Hibbard et al. 2001; Reinartz and Kumar 2003).

With Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh's (1987) seminal paper on relationships, Crosby, Evans, and Cowles' (1990) introduction of relationship quality, and Morgan and Hunt's (1994) key mediating-variable theory of relationship marketing, most RM research conceptualizes the effects of RM on outcomes as mediated by one or more of the relational constructs of trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality. The existing literature offers a wide range of antecedents for these relational mediators. That is, it suggests a wide range of customer focal antecedents (such as dependence on seller), seller focal antecedents (such as seller expertise), or dyadic antecedents (such as communication or interaction frequency) that foster increases in trust, commitment, and so on. Researchers disagree over which relational mediator has the greatest relevance for performance. For example, Morgan and Hunt propose that trust and commitment are both key to predicting the success of exchange performance, while others suggest that trust (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002) or commitment (e.g., Anderson and Weitz 1992; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000; Jap and Ganesan 2000) alone is the critical relational construct.

Others believe that the global construct of relationship quality, which combines commitment, trust, and relationship satisfaction, offers the best assessment of relationship strength and may provide the most insight into exchange performance (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995a). Because these different relational mediators are empirically linked to many antecedents and outcomes, researchers want to know which relational mediator or composite of relational mediators captures the aspect of a relationship that has the greatest influence on performance not only because of that knowledge's theoretical and measurement ramifications, but because of the managerial ramifications: if these relational mediators have different effects, RM strategies should target the most effective drivers of performance.

In this paper, we systematically review and analyze the literature on relational mediators in

Figure 1
Relational Mediator Meta-analytic Framework



a meta-analytic framework to help answer three research questions. First, which RM strategies (antecedents) are most effective at building customer relationships? Second, under what conditions are RM strategies most effective at positively influencing performance outcomes? Third, how do the empirical links between both the antecedents to and consequences of relational mediators vary across different relational mediators? In our relational mediator meta-analytic framework (see Figure 1), we group antecedents and outcomes into three categories based on whether they relate to the customer, to the seller, or to both (dyadic).

Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

Previous research defines relationship marketing as "all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 22). Successful RM efforts are shown to improve customer loyalty and the firm's performance (e.g., in terms of sales, share, and profits) by creating stronger relational bonds between the customer and the firm (e.g., De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002; Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002). The literature offers a number of perspectives on what relational constructs mediate the effects of RM on outcomes.

Commitment and trust are the relational mediators most often studied, where commitment is defined as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992, p. 316) and trust is defined as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 23). Some researchers offer commitment and trust individually as the key mediators to predict performance (i.e., Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002), while others suggest these constructs influence different outcomes (Morgan and Hunt 1994) or are merely components of a global relational mediator: relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001).

Relationship quality is defined as "an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship" and is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct capturing the many different but related facets of an exchange relationship (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001, p. 36). As with service quality, the structure and underlying dimensions vary across empirical studies, but central to the conceptualization of relationship quality is the belief that no single dimension or relational construct can fully define the "overall depth or climate" of an exchange relationship (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Johnson 1999, p. 6). This multidimensional global assessment of the relationship as the mediator suggests that it is the commonality among the specific relational mediators (trust, commitment, etc.) that most drives the outcomes of interest in a business context.

In addition to trust and commitment, relationship satisfaction is often treated as a component of relationship quality (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001) or as a stand-alone mediator (Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Relationship satisfaction is defined as a customer's feelings regarding the relationship. It is typically evaluated cumulatively over the history of the exchange (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Smith and Barclay 1997). Less frequently, fairness or equity-related constructs are also included as indicators of relationship quality (Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000; Gassenheimer, Davis, and Dahlstrom 1998). Table 1 summarizes the construct definitions, common aliases, and representative papers for each construct included in the model (pp. 112-3).

Thus, while the literature consistently conceptualizes a mediated model for the effects of RM on performance, which relational mediator(s) are chosen seems to be driven mainly by researcher discretion, as empirical guidance comparing the differential effects of these relational mediators is noticeably absent. Among those who choose trust as the critical relational mediator are Doney and Cannon (1997), who observe that "trust has assumed a central role in the developing of marketing theory" (p. 35); in services, Berry (1996) offers "trust as perhaps the single most powerful relationship marketing tool available to a company" (p. 42); Spekman (1988) suggests that trust is the "cornerstone" of long-term relationships (p. 79). Alternatively, Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer (1995) propose commitment as the "essential ingredient for successful long-term relationships" (p. 78), and after reviewing multiple literatures, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest "commitment among exchange partners as key to achieving valuable outcomes" (p. 23). More recently, De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) report, "we prefer the abstract relationship quality construct over its more specific dimensions because, even though these various forms of attitude may be conceptually distinct, consumers have difficulty making fine distinctions between them and tend to lump them together" (p. 36). Few empirical studies provide insight into how various RM strategies affect the various relational mediators or what role these mediators play in achieving different outcomes.

Antecedents to relational mediators

Although a relationship is by its very nature two-sided, or dyadic, and both parties typically benefit from a strong relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994), for clarity we use terminology throughout the paper that implies a one-sided RM perspective, in which one exchange partner's (the customer's) view of the relationship leads to enhanced outcomes for the other exchange partner (the seller). Thus, in our framework, when we say *seller*, we mean the party implementing the RM effort in hopes of achieving some desired outcome, and when we say *relational mediator*, we are referring to aspects (trust, commitment, etc.) of the customer's relationship with the seller. To improve clarity and maintain consistency, we use the terms *customer* and *seller* even when the two parties are not engaged in a typical exchange transaction (e.g., strategic alliance).

Antecedents are classified as customer focal when they evaluate the customer-seller relationship from the perspective of the customer and seller focal when they evaluate the relationship from the perspective of the seller. For example, benefits to the customer and the customer's dependence on the seller are customer focal antecedents because they look at the relationship from the customer's point of view, whereas the seller's investment in the relationship is a seller focal antecedent because it looks at the relationship from the seller's point of view.

In reviewing the literature to determine which constructs to include in the meta-analytic framework, we identified many constructs with similar definitions operating under different aliases and constructs with similar names but different operationalizations (see Table 1). When coding the existing research, we used a single definition for the most common RM constructs (in excess of 25) and employed scale items and definitions rather than names or labels. We included constructs only if at least 10 effects were identified to support empirical analysis. Eighteen constructs met the criteria and were included in the model. Thus, the framework in Figure 1 is presented as a summary of the most commonly studied RM constructs, not as an exhaustive list or even necessarily as the most important constructs.

Customer Focal Antecedents. A number of antecedents may influence the customer's evaluation of a relational exchange. Customers may receive many different *relationship benefits* from an exchange partner, including time saving, convenience, companionship, and improved decision-making. Customers receiving these benefits should be more open to sellers' relationship-building efforts and willing to invest their own time to develop strong relational bonds as they perceive some underlying value in the relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Relationship benefits are shown to positively affect relationship quality (Smith 1998), relationship satisfaction (Reynolds and Beatty 1999), and commitment (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Dependence on seller is the customer's evaluation of the value of seller-provided resources for which few alternatives are available from other sellers (Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern 2001). The literature is mixed on the effect that a customer's dependence or relative dependence (in which the customer's dependence is reduced by the seller's dependence on the customer) has on relational mediators. Heide and John (1988) surmise that exchange partners will reduce their dependence by "engaging in bonding behavior" (p. 24) as a dependence-balancing action, suggesting that customer dependence will positively affect relational mediators. Relative dependence on a partner was found to positively influence commitment to that partner (Kim and Oh 2002). Researchers have found mixed support for the argument that dependent channel members feel dissatisfied and hostile because their more powerful partners may use their power to extract unfair advantage, which results in lower levels of trust (Handfield and Bechtel 2002) and relationship quality (Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern 2001). Contrary to their hypotheses, Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern (2001) found relative dependence had a positive impact on relationship quality. Consistent with the empirical evidence and with the view that dependent partners will attempt to balance their dependence through stronger relationships with the more powerful partner, we propose that the customer's dependence on the seller positively affects relational mediators. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H1: The customer's (a) relationship benefit and (b) dependence on the seller positively affect relational mediators.

Seller Focal Antecedents. Researchers investigate a number of antecedents to relational

Table 1
Review of Construct Definitions, Aliases, and Representative Studies

Constructs	Definitions
Relational Mediators	
Commitment	an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship
Trust	confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity
Relationship satisfaction	customer's feelings regarding the relationship, typically evaluated cumulatively over the history of the exchange
Relationship quality	an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship
Customer Focal Antecedents	
Customer's relationship benefits	benefits the customer receives, including time saving, convenience, companionship, and improved decision making
Dependence on seller	customer's evaluation of the value of seller-provided resources for which few alternatives are available
Seller Focal Antecedents	
Relationship investment	seller's investment of time, effort, and financial and other resources with the goal of building a stronger relationship
Seller expertise	seller's knowledge, experience, and overall competency
Dyadic Antecedents	
Communication	amount, frequency, and quality of information sharing between exchange partners
Similarity	commonality in appearance, lifestyle, and status between individual boundary spanners, or similar cultures, values, and goals between buying and selling organizations
Relationship duration	length of time that the relationship between the exchange partners has existed
Interaction frequency	number of interactions or number of interactions per unit time between exchange partners
Conflict	overall level of disagreement between exchange partners
Customer Focal Outcomes	
Expectation of continuity	customer's intention to maintain the relationship in the future, likelihood of continued purchases from the seller
Word of mouth	likelihood that the customer will speak positively about the seller to another potential customer
Customer loyalty	composite or multidimensional construct combining different groupings of intentions, attitudes, and seller performance indicators to capture multiple aspects of behavioral change
Seller Focal Outcomes	
Objective seller performance	actual improvement in seller performance in areas of sales, share of wallet, ROI, profit performance, etc.
Dyadic Outcomes	
Cooperation	coordinated and complementary actions between exchange partners to achieve mutual goals

Common Aliases	Representative Papers
affective, behavioral, obligation, or normative commitment	Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Anderson and Weitz 1992; Jap and Ganesan 2000
trustworthiness, credibility and benevolence, honesty	Doney and Cannon 1997; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002; Hibbard et al. 2001
satisfaction with relationship	Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Reynolds and Beatty 1999
relationship closeness or strength	Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Smith and Barclay 1997
functional and social benefits, rewards	Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Reynolds and Beatty 1999
relative dependence, buyer dependence, imbalance of power, asymmetric dependence	Handfield and Bechtel 2002; Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern 2001; Kim and Oh 2002
support, gifts, resources, investments, loyalty programs	De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Ganesan 1994; Smith 1998; Smith and Barclay 1997
competence, skill, knowledge, ability	Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Lagace, Dahlstrom, and Gassenheimer 1991
bilateral or collaborative communication, information exchange, information sharing	Anderson and Weitz 1992; Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996; Morgan and Hunt 1994
salesperson similarity, similarity of businesses, shared values, cultural capability or similarity	Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi 2001
relationship age or length, continuity, duration with firm or salesperson	Anderson and Weitz 1989; Doney and Cannon 1997; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995
frequency of business contact, interaction intensity	Doney and Cannon 1997; Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi 2001; Schultz and Evans 2002
manifest conflict, level of conflict, perceived conflict, but not functional conflict	Anderson and Weitz 1992; Kim and Frazier 1997; MacKenzie and Hardy 1996
purchase intentions, likelihood to leave (reverse), and relationship continuity	Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Hewett, Money, and Subhash 2002; Macintosh and Lockshin 1997
referrals, customer referrals	Barksdale, Johnson, and Suh 1997; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Reichheld 2003; Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002
behavioral loyalty, loyalty	De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002
sales, share, ROI, sales effectiveness, profit, sales performance	Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000; Reynolds and Beatty 1999; Siguaw, Simpson, and Baker 1998; Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002
coordination and joint actions	Anderson and Narus 1990; Bettencourt 1997; Hewett and Bearden 2002; Morgan and Hunt 1994

mediators that sellers can use in RM strategies independent of customer characteristics or participation. These include relationship investment and improvements in seller expertise. *Relationship investment* comprises the time, effort, expenditures, and resources sellers invest in building a stronger relationship. These investments can include gifts, direct mailings, preferential treatment, and loyalty programs. Such investment of often irrecoverable resources generates psychological bonds with customers and fosters in customers a sense of obligation to reciprocate that help strengthen and maintain the relationship (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Smith and Barclay 1997). Relationship investments are shown to positively influence relationship quality (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Smith 1998), trust (Ganesan 1994), and commitment (Goodman and Dion 2001).

Seller expertise reflects the knowledge, experience, and overall competence of the seller. The more the customer perceives the seller to be knowledgeable or credible, the more highly the customer evaluates the reliability, value, and persuasiveness of the information the seller provides (Dholakia and Sternthal 1977). Because the customer receives increased value from interacting with a more competent seller, the exchange relationship becomes more important, and the customer invests more effort in strengthening and maintaining it (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Lagace, Dahlstrom, and Gassenheimer 1991). Researchers have found that seller expertise and competence positively influence relationship quality (Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990) and trust in the seller (Liu and Leach 2001). Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: The seller's (a) relationship investment and (b) expertise positively affect relational mediators.

Dyadic Antecedents. A number of antecedents are characterized by active involvement of both exchange partners and are equally meaningful from either perspective. For example, true communication between exchange partners requires both parties to exchange information. *Communication* is the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared between exchange partners (Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996). While communication attempts to capture the bilateral exchange of information, a unilateral exchange of information is feasible and is often termed *disclosure* or *openness*. (We did not include disclosure, or one-way information exchange, in our meta-analysis owing to the limited number of empirical studies available.) Communication builds stronger relationships in an exchange by helping to resolve disputes, aligning goals and expectations, and uncovering new value-creating opportunities (Anderson and Narus 1990; Mohr and Nevin 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Keeping exchange partners informed and clarifying expectations improve relationship trust by giving both parties confidence that promises will be met. Moreover, when a partner identifies new value-creating opportunities through effective communication, it increases the partner's desire to maintain the relationship (commitment). The positive impact of communication on trust (Anderson and Weitz 1989; Morgan and Hunt 1994) and commitment (Anderson and Weitz 1992; Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996) is well supported empirically.

Similarity is defined as commonality in appearance, lifestyle, and status between the customer and individual boundary spanners, or similar cultures, values, and goals between buying and selling organizations (Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi 2001). When people or organizations are similar, then each exchange partner believes that the other will facilitate the achievement of important goals, and that belief strengthens the exchange relationship and the desire to be associated with the other party (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Johnson and Johnson 1972). When exchange partners are similar, they should feel less uncertainty regarding one another's future actions because they can expect to share common perspectives on unresolved issues or questions. Similarity at both the interpersonal and interorganizational levels has been shown to positively affect trust, commitment, and relationship quality (Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000; Doney and Cannon 1997; Nicholson, Compeau, and Sethi 2001).

Relationship duration is the length of time that the relationship between the exchange partners has existed. *Interaction frequency* is the number of interactions or number of interactions per unit time between exchange partners. Both relationship duration and interaction frequency provide trading partners with more behavioral information across varied situations, allowing better predictions, which should increase the confidence or trust in one another's reliability and integrity (Doney and Cannon 1997; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987). Empirical support is found for the positive influence of relationship duration and interaction frequency on trust (Anderson and Weitz 1989; Doney and Cannon 1997; Schultz and Evans 2002). Only a few studies have hypothesized a positive influence of relationship duration on relationship quality or commitment; most recognize that customer inertia or high switching costs can result in long-term relationships and frequent transactions, even between exchange partners with a weak relationship (Goodman and Dion 2001; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995a). Empirical support for an influence of relationship duration or interaction frequency on relational mediators besides trust is scarce, possibly owing to weak effect size and relatively small sample sizes. Consistent with the literature, we hypothesize a positive influence of relationship duration and interaction frequency across all relational mediators.

Conflict is the overall level of disagreement between exchange partners, often termed *perceived* or *manifest conflict* (Gaski 1984). As conflict increases, the customer is less likely to have confidence in the long-term orientation of the seller and to invest in building or maintaining a relationship; thus, conflict should negatively influence the customer's trust in and commitment to the seller (Anderson and Weitz 1992; MacKenzie and Hardy 1996). *Functional conflict*, or the amicable resolution of disagreements, is a positive outcome of trust (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and should be clearly distinguished from conflict. Exchange partners with strong relationships who face disagreements are able to cooperate and find a mutually acceptable solution (functional conflict), whereas unresolved disagreements or conflict can fester and undermine a relationship. (Owing to the limited number of empirical studies, this meta-analysis does not include functional conflict.) Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H3: Exchange partners' (a) communication, (b) similarity, (c) relationship duration, and (d) interaction frequency positively affect relational mediators, while (e) conflict negatively affects relational mediators.

Consequences of relational mediators

Consequences are grouped in a similar fashion to antecedents: customer and seller focal outcomes are viewed from a single perspective, while dyadic outcomes are valid from both perspectives. For example, customer loyalty, while important to the seller, is a customer focal outcome because it considers the exchange from the customer's perspective.

Customer Focal Outcomes. Increased customer loyalty is one of the outcomes most hoped for from RM efforts. Loyalty is defined and operationalized in many different ways (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978; Oliver 1999). While some studies focus solely on behavioral intentions, many researchers suggest that composite measures capturing attitudes, behavioral intentions, and performance best reflect customers' loyalty (Dick and Basu 1994; Oliver 1999). The most commonly used measures of loyalty-indicative behavioral intentions are expectation of continuity and word of mouth.

Expectation of continuity is the customer's intention to maintain the relationship in the future and captures the likelihood of continued purchases from the seller. Researchers criticize this measure of loyalty (repurchase intentions, expectation of continuity, or reverse-coded likelihood to leave) as devoid of theoretical meaning and unduly influenced by situational factors (Dick and Basu 1994; Jacoby and Chestnut 1978). Customers with weak relational bonds and little ultimate loyalty toward the seller may report high expectation of continuity owing to high switching cost, lack of time to evaluate alternatives, or plain laziness (Oliver 1999). Even customers with strong relational bonds may not have total control over purchases or may need to end a relationship prematurely because of unforeseen conditions; thus, in some situations, expectation of continuity may have limited influence on the seller's actual financial outcomes. Customers' commitment to and trust in the seller, as well as their perception that overall the relationship quality is good, have a positive influence on expectation of continuity because customers perceive less risk in dealing with trusted partners, act on the sense of belonging that comes from an established relationship, and minimize acquisition costs by buying from existing valued sellers (Doney and Cannon 1997; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Hewett, Money, and Subhash 2002; Macintosh and Lockshin 1997).

Word of mouth (WOM) captures the likelihood that a customer will speak favorably about a seller to another potential customer. WOM behaviors and behavioral intentions are argued to be better indicators of customer loyalty than expectation of continuity because they are not masked by high switching costs and lack of time or motivation to search for an alternative. Thus, WOM often indicates the attitudinal as well as the behavioral dimension of loyalty (Dick and Basu 1994; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Only customers with strong and trusting relationships should be willing to risk their reputations by advocating a seller to another party. Trust and commitment have been shown to positively affect a customer's WOM behavior (Barksdale, Johnson, and Suh 1997; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002).

Some studies (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001) operationalize *customer loyalty* as a composite or multidimensional construct combining different groupings of intentions, attitudes, and seller performance indicators (share, sales, etc.) to capture multiple aspects of behavioral change. Relational mediators are shown to positively influence global measures of customer loyalty in a fashion similar to the individual components of loyalty (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002). Hence, we advance the following hypothesis:

H4: Relational mediators positively affect customers' (a) expectation of continuity, (b) word of mouth, and (c) loyalty.

Seller Focal Outcomes. Sellers ultimately engage in RM efforts to improve overall financial performance, with the expectation that their RM expenditures will generate an acceptable return. Possibly the most important outcome of RM efforts is *objective seller performance*, which captures actual seller performance enhancements in sales, share of wallet, profit, and so forth. Researchers have empirically tested the fundamental premise of RM—that stronger customer relationships positively influence seller outcomes, including sales revenue (Boles, Johnson, and Barksdale 2000), share of sales (Macintosh and Lockshin 1997; Reynolds and Beatty 1999), profit (Siguaw, Simpson, and Baker 1998), return on investment (Brown, Lusch, and Nicholson 1995), and cross-selling (Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra 2002). While the empirical support is compelling, a number of published studies have failed to find significant effects for the influence of relational mediators on seller outcomes, suggesting that building strong customer relationships is not a guaranteed strategy for improved performance (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000). Researchers have suggested that RM may even have a negative impact on performance in certain situations (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Dowling and Uncles 1997). In summary, strong relationships with customers positively affect a wide range of objective performance outcomes, but further work is needed to identify how boundary conditions and contexts may influence the effectiveness of RM. We offer the following hypothesis:

H5: Relational mediators positively affect objective measures of the seller's performance.

Dyadic Outcomes. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify nine types of interactions besides the typical customer-seller exchange in which RM may be appropriate. In many cases, these RM efforts have other goals besides customer loyalty or improved sales, share, or retention: for example, RM efforts focused on the engineering and marketing departments within the same organization to improve new product development. For these internal or lateral partnerships, the desired outcome is often improved levels of cooperation. *Cooperation* is defined as coordinated and complementary actions between exchange partners to achieve mutual goals. Cooperation is dyadic, equally beneficial from either perspective, and may provide the best "context-independent" measure of RM effectiveness. Exchange partners' cooperation promotes value creation beyond what would be possible separately, but because one party often receives its portion of the value earlier, the other party must have enough trust in the relationship to wait for future reciprocation (Anderson and Narus 1990). This will be especially true when the party is at significant risk while waiting for reciprocation, as in prisoner's dilemma experiments. In the absence of trust, we expect the range of cooperative behaviors to be limited to those in which both parties receive their benefits simultaneously. Committed customers by definition desire to maintain valued relationships; thus, they may cooperate with sellers in the absence of a quid pro quo benefit just as a means to strengthen and maintain an important customer-seller bond (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Some researchers have shown that trust between exchange partners is critical for cooperation (Anderson and Narus 1990; Hewett and Bearden 2001), others have demonstrated that commitment positively affects cooperation (Bettencourt 1997), and Morgan and Hunt (1994) found that both trust and commitment positively influence cooperation. Hence, we forward the following hypothesis:

H6: Relational mediators positively affect cooperation.

Moderators of relational mediators' influence on outcomes

The RM model (RM antecedent → relational mediator → outcome) conceptualized in this paper is applied in many different contexts in which other business strategies are known to have varying effects. Findings from one context are often extended to other situations with little empirical support or acknowledgement. One objective of the meta-analysis is to identify and empirically test the influence of potential moderators on the linkages in the RM model (see Figure 1). While insight may be gained by evaluating the moderation of all paths, only moderators of relationships with theoretical justification are hypothesized.

RM is based on the premise that building strong relationships positively influences exchange outcomes. Researchers (Anderson and Narus 1991; Heide and John 1992) have recognized that exchanges can be characterized along a spectrum from transactional (in which relationships are relatively unimportant) to relational (in which relationships are critical to the success of the exchange). We expect that relational mediators will have a larger impact on outcomes for those exchanges in which relationships are important than for those in which they are not important, since in the former instance relational mediators will be better able to create value, prevent opportunism, and generally improve the exchange. Alternatively, in highly transactional exchanges (e.g., blind auction on the Web), relationships between buyers and sellers may have little impact on outcomes. De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) provide support for this premise; they found that customer involvement positively moderated the impact that sellers' investment in the relationship (as perceived by buyers) had on relationship quality. Extant literature identifies a number of situations in which relationships are especially important for the success of an exchange, including the provision of services, channel transactions, and business-to-business transactions.

Provision of Services. Services are argued to be less tangible, less consistent, and more perishable than products, and the relationship between buyers and sellers is closer in the context of service provision than in the context of product sales (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1985). This closer interaction between buyers and sellers may make the relationship between them more critical than it would be for product transactions. The intangibility of the offering may make the benefits of trust more critical (as evaluation of the offering is more ambiguous).

Channel Transactions. Channel researchers have often distinguished exchanges between channel partners from direct transactions between a seller and a customer (Anderson and Weitz 1989; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995b). Exchanges between channel partners are characterized by a high level of interdependence; they require coordinated action that is harmed by opportunistic behavior (Anderson and Weitz 1989). Thus, strong relationships, which facilitate coordinated actions and limit opportunistic behavior, should be more important for exchanges between channel partners than for exchanges between sellers and non-channel (i.e., direct) customers.

Business-to-Business Transactions. Anderson and Narus (2004) differentiate consumer and business markets based on the importance of relationships, maintaining that a "firm's success in business markets depends directly on its working relationships" (p. 21). If a working relationship is more critical in business markets than in consumer markets, then relationships should have a larger impact on exchange outcomes in business than in consumer markets. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H7: The positive effect of relational mediators on outcomes will be larger for (a) service- than product-based exchanges, (b) channel than direct exchanges, and (c) business than consumer markets.

Individual versus Organizational Relationships. Customers may form a relationship with an individual in the selling organization, but they may also form a relationship with the selling organization as a whole. Researchers in marketing have noted differences in the underlying mechanism and its effect on outcomes depending on whether the relationship is targeted toward an individual or an organization. Doney and Cannon (1997) report that "the process by which trust develops appears to differ when the target is an organization . . . as opposed to an individual salesperson" (p. 45). Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) found that "[i]ndividual-to-firm relationships were also typically short-term and less intense in comparison to individual-level dyads" (p. 69). Thus, RM effectiveness may vary depending on whether relational mediators are targeted towards individuals or organizations.

Insight into these differences may be informed by research in social psychology that suggests that we use different decision-making processes to evaluate individuals and groups (Hamilton and Sherman 1996). Because we expect an individual to exhibit attitudinal and behavioral coherence, we form a metaphorical "online" model based on available information. When judging an individual on the basis of an attribute or characteristic, we access the online model and make strong, confident judgments (Hamilton and Sherman 1996). In contrast, because we do not expect a group to behave consistently, we do not invest the cognitive bandwidth to form an online model; rather, we simply use a recall model (that is, a model stored in our memory) and form a judgment based on the recent past. Experimental research shows that people make stronger, quicker, more confident judgments when evaluating an individual than they do when evaluating a group, and that those judgments are more strongly related to outcomes such as predictions of behavior (Hamilton and Sherman 1996; O'Laughlin and Malle 2002). Accordingly, we expect customers' exchange-related judgments about an individual at the selling firm to be stronger and more confident than exchange-related judgments about the selling firm as a whole. Thus, we hypothesize that relational mediators targeted toward an individual will more strongly affect outcomes than relational mediators targeted toward an organization, and we offer the following hypothesis:

H8: The positive effect of relational mediators on outcomes will be larger when the relational mediators are targeted toward an individual than when they are targeted toward an organization.

Review Procedures

Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh's seminal 1987 paper on relationships initiated the focus in marketing on the relational mediators of trust and commitment. Crosby, Evans, and Cowles introduced relationship quality in 1990; and the pace of academic research on these constructs accelerated after Morgan and Hunt's 1994 paper on the commitment-trust theory of RM. Thus, we searched the literature for empirical research on the mediators of interest in the period 1987 to 2004 (17 years). Our search included (1) database search of ABI/Inform, PsycINFO, and Business Source Premier on such keywords as *trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, relationship quality,* and *relationship marketing*; (2) search in Social Sciences Citation Index for the seminal papers for these constructs; (3) manual shelf search of journals containing research on relational mediators; (4) e-mails sent to researchers in this domain asking for published and unpublished works; and (5) review of reference lists of articles found by other means. Journals consulted in this effort included the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Marketing Science, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Service Research, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Marketing Letters, Strategic Management Journal, Organizational Science, Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* and *Journal of Business Research.*

The search generated more than 100 published and unpublished papers. Each paper was evaluated for measures of the relationship among antecedents or outcomes and the four relational mediators. Correlations were the most common metric included in these studies (> 95%); authors were e-mailed a request for the correlation matrix for studies for which it was not provided. Two independent people not familiar with the hypotheses utilized the definitions from Table 1 to code the studies, and any differences (< 95% agreement) were resolved (Szymanski and Henard 2001). When more than one effect size estimate was provided within a single study, an average was calculated if they were for the same relationship. In cases where multiple effect size estimates from the same study were independent, they were included as separate effect size estimates. This procedure prevents bias arising from multiple counting of dependent effect size estimates and allows effective coding of moderators that vary across subsets of a sample in a single study (e.g., Brown and Peterson 1993; Henard and Szymanski 2001). Ultimately, 601 correlations, drawn from 97 different empirical investigations with 110 independent samples yielding a combined N of 38,077, were used for calculating effect size estimates.

We began our analysis by first adjusting our basic input measure, product-moment correlations (r) between antecedents or outcomes and relational mediators, for corrections necessitated by measurement error (scale reliability differences) and sampling error (sample size differences), using the classical approach recommended by Hunter and Schmidt (1990). Assuming that, all things being equal, correlations from larger samples (central limit theorem) and estimates from more reliable data produce a mean correlation closer to the population mean, we used the sample-weighted, reliability-corrected average correlations as the focal index throughout this meta-analysis (see Appendix A for additional technical details). Variance-stabilizing Fisher's z scores were also calculated since r's become more skewed as the absolute value of r becomes larger (Rosenthal 1994; Shadish and Haddock 1994). This sample weighted reliability-adjusted average z score provides an unbiased estimate of relationship strength between antecedents or outcomes and relational mediators (Hunter and Schmidt 1990; Rosenthal 1994). Thus, while results will focus on the more intuitive sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted average correlations, any discrepancy with sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted average z scores will be noted.

Analysis and Results

One objective of this meta-analysis is to determine which RM strategies (that is, RM strategies based on which antecedents) most effectively build strong relationships and ultimately have the greatest positive influence on outcomes: in essence, to create a synthesis of previous research on the mediated RM model (RM antecedent → relational mediator → RM outcome). We accomplished this by calculating the simple average correlation estimate (r), the average r adjusted for reliability, the sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted average r, the sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted average z score, the χ^2 test (df = 1) for association, the 95% confidence interval, the file drawer N (Rosenthal 1979), and the χ^2 test for homogeneity. These analyses were performed for the influence of each antecedent on the four relational mediators (providing four effects for each antecedent), allowing us to compare the influence of each antecedent on each mediator. To facilitate the comparison of relative effects among the *different antecedents* on the mediators, we duplicate these analyses for effects of each antecedent on all four mediators as a group. Although the mediators measure different aspects of a relationship, researchers have argued that they are highly related and difficult to distinguish, and should be combined into a global or composite construct (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Smith 1998). Thus, to aid in the comparison of the relative effects, we provide a summary analysis for each antecedent and outcome.

A second objective of this research is to identify how the mediated RM model varies across different situations (as represented by the moderators). For moderator analyses, the effects were sub-grouped, and two-sample t-tests were conducted comparing mean effects related to different levels of moderators. Owing to the limited number of raw effects for the paths from antecedents to relationship satisfaction and relationship quality, those two mediators were not evaluated separately but were combined with commitment and trust when computing a correlation for the linkage between a specific antecedent and all four mediators as a group. Thus, for those correlations, moderator analysis was duplicated for each antecedent and outcome, with the effects for all four mediators as a group combined to provide a summary for each antecedent and outcome.

Influence of antecedents on relational mediators

Table 2 (pp. 122-3) clearly shows that not all antecedents have an equal effect on the relational mediators of trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality. The average sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted correlations among antecedents and relational mediators is .332, ranging from .123 for relationship duration to the largest absolute effect of −.615 for conflict. Hypothesized paths H1, H2, and H3 from antecedents to relational mediators were supported (χ^2 test for association at df = 1; $p < .001$), except for the path from interaction frequency to relationship satisfaction, which was not significant with a χ^2 value of 1.47. This means that 24 of 25 paths tested were significant. Most of these findings appear to be robust with regard to the number of null studies needed to render the observed effects to zero (see Rosenthal's 1979 paper on the "file drawer" problem). Only three linkages appear susceptible to a file drawer problem: interaction frequency → relationship satisfaction (N = 2), relationship duration → relationship satisfaction (N = 18), and relationship duration → relationship quality (N = 25). All other linkages would require over 300 null studies to generate a zero effect, with the mean file drawer N of Table 2 being 5,860. Turning to the test for homogeneity, with one solitary exception (seller expertise → relationship satisfaction linkage was accompanied by a non-significant χ^2 value of 1.17), all the χ^2 tests for homogeneity are significant, showing statistical heterogeneity.

A number of insights can be drawn from evaluating the relative impact of different RM strategies on building strong customer relationships. Conflict (r = –.615) had the largest impact on relational mediators of all antecedents and appears to be equally destructive of customers' commitment and of their trust. This finding is somewhat surprising considering how little attention this construct receives (only 3 of the 9 antecedents had fewer measured raw effects), but it reinforces the importance of resolving problems and disagreements to prevent potentially corrosive and relationship-damaging conflicts. That the largest effect is negative extends into the RM domain the finding that individuals pay more attention to negatives than to positives (Fiske 1980; Shiv, Edell, and Payne 1997) and warrants further investigation.

Seller expertise (r = .555) and communication (r = .512) are the antecedents that had the most *positive* influence on relational mediators. Seller expertise had the largest positive impact of all relational mediators, yet it received even less attention than conflict (only 1 of 9 antecedents had fewer measured raw effects). This finding reinforces the importance of training and the potential detrimental impact of staffing call centers with inexperienced or unskilled employees. Seller expertise appears to have influence across all four relational mediators even though trust was the most often measured relational mediator (63%), suggesting its importance to many other aspects of a relationship. This finding supports Vargo and Lusch's (2004) premise that "skills and knowledge are the fundamental unit of exchange" (p. 3) where sellers' skill and knowledge are the most important value-creating attributes, and that seller expertise best captures these critical characteristics. The large positive effect of effective bilateral communication on all four mediators as a group is consistent with its being the most often measured antecedent. The importance of RM strategies that focus on communication can be understood from communication's role in both uncovering value-creating opportunities and resolving conflict.

Relationship investment (r = .431), similarity (r = .404), and relationship benefits (r = .394) are the next most influential antecedents after conflict, seller expertise, and communication. We deal with relationship investment and benefits together as they are logically related. Sellers' relationship investments normally generate relationship benefits for the customer, but in some cases, an investment may not be desired or may fail to generate any actual customer benefit. Although both relationship investment and relationship benefits are often studied as antecedents to relational mediators, and while they influence all relational mediators, their effects are different. Relationship investment had less impact on customer's commitment (r = .325) to the seller than it did on any other relational mediators (mean of other relational mediators, r = .487), with no overlap in confidence intervals (CI). Thus, although the seller is strengthening the overall relationship through investments, the relative impact on customers' commitment or desire to maintain a valued relationship is limited. Customer relationship benefits, by contrast, had more impact on customers' commitment to the seller (r = .453) than on any other relational mediator and were

Table 2

Results: Descriptive Statistics and Influence of Antecedents on Relational Mediators

Hypothesized Relationships	Hypothesis	Number of Raw Effects	Total N	Simple Average r	Range of Raw Effects (r) Lower Bound	Range of Raw Effects (r) Upper Bound
Customer Focal Antecedents						
relationship benefits → commitment	H1a	11	3,162	0.373	0.090	0.717
relationship benefits → trust		13	3,633	0.309	0.100	0.530
relationship benefits → relationship satisfaction		7	2,057	0.406	0.220	0.590
relationship benefits → relationship quality		8	2,091	0.330	0.160	0.550
relationship benefits → all mediators		**39**	**10,943**	**0.349**	**0.090**	**0.717**
dependence on seller → commitment	H1b	16	4,670	0.333	−0.212	0.630
dependence on seller → trust		26	5,935	0.140	−0.220	0.490
dependence on seller → relationship satisfaction		3	1,076	0.127	−0.060	0.320
dependence on seller → relationship quality		2	1,604	0.070	0.040	0.100
dependence on seller → all mediators		**47**	**13,285**	**0.202**	**−0.220**	**0.630**
Seller Focal Antecedents						
relationship investment → commitment	H2a	15	6,544	0.364	0.050	0.550
relationship investment → trust		17	4,601	0.379	0.157	0.560
relationship investment → relationship satisfaction		10	2,691	0.417	0.167	0.720
relationship investment → relationship quality		9	2,635	0.486	0.163	0.680
relationship investments → all mediators		**51**	**16,471**	**0.401**	**0.050**	**0.720**
seller expertise → commitment	H2b	1	177	0.782	0.782	0.782
seller expertise → trust		12	3,464	0.489	0.150	0.680
seller expertise → relationship satisfaction		5	1,049	0.493	0.409	0.550
seller expertise → relationship quality		1	1,009	0.900	0.900	0.900
seller expertise → all mediators		**19**	**5,699**	**0.527**	**0.150**	**0.900**
Dyadic Antecedents						
communication → commitment	H3a	25	5,840	0.447	0.133	0.659
communication → trust		29	7,948	0.435	0.150	0.770
communication → relationship satisfaction		6	1,727	0.458	0.335	0.595
communication → relationship quality		7	1,907	0.347	−0.040	0.550
communication → all mediators		**67**	**17,422**	**0.432**	**−0.040**	**0.770**
similarity → commitment	H3b	3	386	0.542	0.435	0.610
similarity → trust		10	2,562	0.502	0.050	0.759
similarity → relationship satisfaction		1	151	0.303	0.303	0.303
similarity → relationship quality		1	1,009	0.220	0.220	0.220
similarity → all mediators		**15**	**4,108**	**0.478**	**0.050**	**0.759**
relationship duration → commitment	H3c	13	6,638	0.119	−0.131	0.560
relationship duration → trust		20	8,201	0.116	−0.055	0.270
relationship duration → relationship satisfaction		5	1,542	0.090	−0.020	0.242
relationship duration → relationship quality		5	1,830	0.105	−0.040	0.258
relationship duration → all mediators		**43**	**18,211**	**0.112**	**−0.131**	**0.560**
interaction frequency → commitment	H3d	2	724	−0.026	−0.043	−0.009
interaction frequency → trust		10	2,198	0.298	−0.200	0.677
interaction frequency → relationship satisfaction		4	965	0.105	−0.074	0.360
interaction frequency → relationship quality		3	1,124	−0.030	−0.050	−0.010
interaction frequency → all mediators		**19**	**5,011**	**0.171**	**−0.200**	**0.677**
conflict → commitment	H3e	10	4,339	−0.408	−0.710	−0.190
conflict → trust		9	2,906	−0.540	−0.755	−0.310
conflict → relationship satisfaction		1	95	−0.270	−0.270	−0.270
conflict → relationship quality		0	NA	NA	NA	NA
conflict → all mediators		**20**	**7,340**	**−0.460**	**−0.755**	**−0.190**

				95% Confidence Interval				
Average r Adjusted for Reliability	Sample-Weighted, Reliability-Adjusted Average r	Sample-Weighted, Reliability-Adjusted Average Z_r	χ^2 for Association (df = 1)	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	File Drawer N (Using 2-tailed test	χ^2 for Homogeneity (df)	
0.449	0.453	0.562	987.50	0.527	0.597	2,670	514.43	(10)
0.343	0.324	0.342	420.99	0.310	0.375	1,433	65.52	(12)
0.457	0.446	0.491	490.59	0.447	0.534	916	52.11	(6)
0.392	0.382	0.414	353.47	0.370	0.457	749	58.53	(7)
0.403	**0.394**	**0.445**	**2,148.31**	**0.427**	**0.464**	**21,781**	777.84	**(38)**
0.400	0.340	0.389	700.04	0.360	0.418	3,206	534.76	(15)
0.165	0.186	0.211	261.01	0.185	0.237	1,354	443.98	(25)
0.133	0.265	0.278	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.078	0.082	0.082	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.239	**0.239**	**0.270**	**961.69**	**0.253**	**0.288**	**10,272**	**1,148.19**	**(45)**
0.433	0.325	0.356	821.86	0.331	0.380	4,200	384.71	(14)
0.451	0.435	0.481	1,053.73	0.452	0.510	4,455	162.96	(16)
0.473	0.483	0.576	882.85	0.538	0.614	2,217	273.47	(9)
0.567	0.543	0.657	1,125.80	0.619	0.695	2,750	242.13	(8)
0.470	**0.431**	**0.494**	**3,980.39**	**0.479**	**0.509**	**53,547**	**1,341.69**	**(50)**
0.898	0.898	1.462	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.589	0.489	0.572	1,121.22	0.538	0.605	3,988	280.65	(11)
0.563	0.559	0.632	413.64	0.572	0.693	473	1.17	(4)
0.979	0.979	2.268	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.619	**0.555**	**0.724**	**2,956.78**	**0.698**	**0.750**	**17,348**	**2,707.07**	**(18)**
0.525	0.533	0.624	2,244.96	0.598	0.650	13,712	328.71	(24)
0.512	0.519	0.633	3,146.74	0.611	0.655	21,962	927.03	(28)
0.513	0.504	0.565	546.15	0.518	0.613	870	35.06	(5)
0.402	0.421	0.465	407.26	0.420	0.510	709	82.61	(6)
0.505	**0.512**	**0.606**	**6,321.51**	**0.591**	**0.621**	**103,520**	**1,422.94**	**(66)**
0.655	0.612	0.740	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.562	0.365	0.433	475.20	0.394	0.472	1,884	347.96	(9)
0.336	0.336	0.349	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.241	0.241	0.245	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.544	**0.404**	**0.477**	**922.58**	**0.446**	**0.507**	**3,938**	**703.12**	**(14)**
0.129	0.104	0.112	82.43	0.088	0.136	312	246.27	(12)
0.125	0.139	0.141	162.63	0.120	0.163	674	80.68	(19)
0.094	0.124	0.126	24.15	0.076	0.176	18	11.31	(4)
0.110	0.110	0.112	22.95	0.066	0.158	25	25.59	(4)
0.121	**0.123**	**0.127**	**292.69**	**0.113**	**0.142**	**2,945**	**367.46**	**(42)**
–0.027	–0.027	–0.027	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.332	0.265	0.312	210.97	0.270	0.354	680	291.46	(9)
0.112	0.037	0.039	1.47	–0.024	0.103	2	27.81	(3)
–0.032	–0.032	–0.032	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.191	**0.139**	**0.165**	**134.18**	**0.137**	**0.192**	**718**	**488.96**	**(18)**
–0.494	–0.633	–0.879	3,331.03	–0.909	–0.849	5,496	1,168.85	(9)
–0.632	–0.629	–0.784	1,769.52	–0.821	–0.747	4,033	212.97	(8)
–0.311	–0.311	–0.321	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
–0.547	**–0.615**	**–0.808**	**4,758.29**	**–0.831**	**–0.785**	**19,406**	**1,607.43**	**(19)**

weakest on trust in the seller ($r = .324$). This suggests that customers value these benefits and desire to maintain them (indicating commitment). Relationship investment may have a relatively small effect on commitment, compared with the effect that relationship benefits have, because many relationship investments do not actually generate value for the customer and hence do not lead to customer commitment. Investments that do not generate customer value may nevertheless strengthen the customer-seller relationship by generating a sense of obligation on the part of the customer (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001), but they may fail to generate an enduring desire to maintain a *valued* relationship (commitment).

Similarity between buyers and sellers in appearance, lifestyle, and status at the interpersonal level and in culture, values, and/or goals at the interorganizational level indicates some level of commonality that may be a necessary foundation for relationships to develop. Without some backdrop of common reference points to anchor their interactions, exchange partners may find it very difficult to move the exchange from a purely economic or transactional basis to a relational basis. While similarity is most often hypothesized to influence trust by reducing uncertainty and serving as a cue for goal facilitation (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997), it is interesting to note that similarity actually had a larger impact on commitment ($r = .612$) than on trust ($r = .365$). The larger impact on commitment may be explained by research on stereotype behaviors, which suggests that people desire to strengthen and maintain relationships with "in-group" members: if customers perceive the seller as similar to themselves, then they believe that the seller is a good fit with their in-group (Devine 1995).

The last three antecedents—dependence on seller ($r = .239$), interaction frequency ($r = .139$), and relationship duration ($r = .123$)—have notably smaller effects on relational mediators. The relative low correlations between dependence and relational mediators and the negative sign for the lower bound of the range across most mediators (mean of lower bound $r = -.220$) suggest that a strategy of locking in customers, increasing switching costs, and using other methods to try to increase customer dependence may not be the most effective way to build relationships, and in some situations may even hurt customer relationships. As may be expected, dependence had a greater positive effect on commitment ($r = .340$) than it did on any of the other mediators (mean of other relational mediators, $r = .177$, no overlap in CIs), reflecting customers' desire to maintain a relationship with a seller on whom they are dependent. It is important to ask what other customer attitudes or actions this dependence generates. The large difference in the influence dependence has on mediators may provide some insight. Increasing a customer's dependence may increase customers' commitment ($r = .340$) while having relatively limited effect on customers' trust in the seller ($r = .186$) as customers become concerned that the seller might take advantage of their dependence.

Neither relationship duration nor interaction frequency appears to be a good indicator of strong customer relationships, as reflected in their low correlations and the negative sign for the lower bound of the range for all four mediators as a group (mean of lower bound $r = -.166$). The correlations between relationship duration and all the mediators are similar and may merely represent a survival bias without any causal influence. These findings support Reinartz and Kumar's (2000) finding of similar outcomes for short-term and long-term customers. More insight is gained into the influence of interaction frequency on relational mediators by evaluating the impact of interaction frequency on individual mediators. There we see that interaction frequency has a higher influence on trust ($r = .265$, $p < .001$) than it does on the three other mediators (mean of other relational mediators, $r = -.007$; not significant, no overlap in CIs). It appears that as customers interact more frequently with sellers, they gain more information about the sellers, which reduces the customers' uncertainty regarding the seller's future behavior and improves trust. Frequency of interaction does not, however, have an effect on customers' desire to maintain the relationship, their relationship satisfaction, or their sense of relationship quality. Knowing this, a viable RM strategy for an exchange with high commitment but low trust (new salesperson or recent trust-destroying event) might be to increase the frequency of interaction through increased sales calls, personalized follow-up from telemarketing groups, or customized mailings.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that RM strategies arising from different antecedents have a wide range of effectiveness. Strategies that focus on minimizing conflicts and on improving seller expertise, bilateral communication, relationship investments, and relationship benefits, as well as those that attempt to match both individual-level and organizational-level characteristics on the seller's side with characteristics of targeted customers, are probably the most effective. Given that minimizing conflict and increasing seller expertise are two of the most effective RM strategies, with the largest effect sizes, it is surprising that the relevant antecedents (conflict and seller expertise) are two of the least studied. Generating customer relationship benefits and investing in customer relationships are also effective strategies and strengthen different aspects of the relationship. The least effective RM strategies appear to be increasing customer dependence and interaction frequency or just maintaining a customer relationship over time.

Another interesting finding is the targeted influence of some antecedents on certain aspects of the relationship. For example, the two dyadic antecedents of conflict and communication have similar effects on all relational mediators, while similarity, relationship benefits, and customer dependence were more effective than other antecedents at improving commitment; and interacting more frequently was more effective at increasing customer trust. These findings argue for taking a multidimensional view of customer-seller relationships when evaluating the effectiveness of RM strategies because results can vary widely based on the choice of the relational mediator.

Influence of relational mediators on outcomes

Table 3 shows that the relational mediators trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality do not equally influence all outcomes. The average correlations among relational mediators and outcomes is .511, ranging from a low of .300 for objective seller performance to a high of .645 for cooperation. Hypothesized paths H4, H5, and H6 from relational mediators to outcomes (where four or more studies were available to allow significance testing) are supported (χ^2 test for association at df = 1; $p < .001$). These results, combined with the support for the antecedents, provide evidence of face and content validity for our model. None of these results appears to be susceptible to a file drawer problem, as all paths would require over 375 null studies to generate a zero effect, with the mean file drawer *N* of Table 3 being 4,746. All the χ^2 tests for homogeneity are significant, showing statistical heterogeneity and supporting moderator analysis.

Relational mediators had the largest combined influence on the dyadic outcome of cooperation ($r = .645$), followed by word of mouth ($r = .598$). Cooperation was strongly affected by all relational mediators, with trust ($r = .706$) being the most critical of the mediators affecting it (mean of other relational mediators, $r = .573$, no overlap of CIs). This finding supports the theory that trust plays a vital role in successfully coordinating actions among exchange partners to create value and achieve mutual outcomes. As mentioned earlier, trust that an exchange partner will reciprocate is critical, owing to the uneven timing of cooperative investments and rewards (Anderson and Narus 1990).

Relationship quality was nearly as effective as trust at positively influencing WOM, and all relational mediators taken together had an

Table 3
Results: Descriptive Statistics and Influence of Relational Mediators on Outcomes

Hypothesized Relationships	Hypothesis	Number of Raw Effects	Total N	Simple Average r	Range of Raw Effects (r) Lower Bound	Range of Raw Effects (r) Upper Bound
Customer Focal Outcomes						
commitment → expectation of continuity	H4a	16	4,215	0.448	–0.090	0.680
trust → expectation of continuity		24	6,632	0.472	0.287	0.630
relationship satisfaction → expectation of continuity		5	1,879	0.500	0.400	0.600
relationship quality → expectation of continuity		3	1,733	0.499	0.450	0.525
all mediators → expectation of continuity		**48**	**14,459**	**0.469**	**–0.090**	**0.680**
commitment → word of mouth	H4b	6	3,674	0.519	0.356	0.680
trust → word of mouth		5	3,507	0.480	0.330	0.597
relationship satisfaction → word of mouth		3	1,054	0.475	0.260	0.583
relationship quality → word of mouth		3	1,733	0.583	0.563	0.607
all mediators → word of mouth		17	**9,968**	**0.511**	**0.260**	**0.680**
commitment → customer loyalty		12	4,588	0.455	0.260	0.580
trust → customer loyalty	H4c	20	6,328	0.443	0.110	0.680
relationship satisfaction → customer loyalty		9	2,781	0.351	0.110	0.578
relationship quality → customer loyalty		9	2,851	0.404	0.220	0.581
all mediators → customer loyalty		**50**	**16,548**	**0.422**	**0.110**	**0.680**
Seller Outcomes						
commitment → objective seller performance	H5	20	7,342	0.299	–0.003	0.626
trust → objective seller performance		32	10,306	0.286	–0.290	0.690
relationship satisfaction → objective seller performance		7	1,605	0.321	0.162	0.565
relationship quality → objective seller performance		6	3,517	0.280	0.140	0.890
all mediators → objective seller performance		**65**	**22,770**	**0.293**	**–0.290**	**0.890**
Dyadic Outcomes						
commitment → cooperation	H6	16	4,436	0.407	–0.080	0.745
trust → cooperation		24	6,192	0.564	–0.090	0.733
relationship satisfaction → cooperation		5	931	0.454	0.248	0.560
relationship quality → cooperation		0	NA	NA	NA	NA
all mediators → cooperation		**45**	**11,559**	**0.496**	**–0.090**	**0.745**

effect similar to that of relationship quality on WOM. The fact that combined relational mediators have a larger impact on WOM than on expectation of continuity (r =.546) or customer loyalty (r = .499) supports Reichheld's (2003) premise that WOM is the best indicator of "intense loyalty" (p. 48). Only customers who have strong relationships with sellers are willing to risk their reputation by giving them a referral. Compared to the nine antecedents, the five outcomes all had a large number of raw effects, reflecting their inclusion in a larger proportion of the studies, but WOM had fewer raw effects than any of the other outcome variables with 17 raw effects as compared to the next lowest (cooperation with 45 raw effects). The fact that there are relatively few studies measuring WOM suggests that researchers are not capturing this potentially critical variable, especially outside the "services" context.

The fact that combined relational mediators had less effect on customer loyalty than they had on the other two customer focal outcomes may be due to the inclusion of financial performance indicators (sales, share, etc.) in customer loyalty, which reduced the overall effect size. Of all the individual relational mediators, commitment (r = .567) had the largest influence on customer loyalty (mean of all other relational mediators,

				95% Confidence Interval				
Average r Adjusted for Reliability	Sample-Weighted, Reliability-Adjusted Average r	Sample-Weighted, Reliability-Adjusted Average Z_r	χ^2 for Association (df = 1)	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	File Drawer N (Using 2-tailed test)	χ^2 for Homogeneity (df)	
0.535	0.513	0.589	1,447.81	0.559	0.620	5,895	207.04	(15)
0.553	0.565	0.664	2,889.95	0.640	0.688	15,456	271.39	(23)
0.576	0.565	0.646	778.08	0.601	0.691	949	19.65	(4)
0.553	0.537	0.601	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.549	**0.546**	**0.633**	**5,739.63**	**0.617**	**0.650**	**64,483**	**520.22**	**(47)**
0.608	0.627	0.760	2,111.52	0.728	0.792	2,707	151.43	(5)
0.560	0.613	0.725	1,833.48	0.691	0.758	1,804	61.26	(4)
0.504	0.511	0.586	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.610	0.604	0.701	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.576	**0.598**	**0.708**	**4,975.82**	**0.689**	**0.728**	**18,589**	**297.27**	**(16)**
0.538	0.567	0.662	1,996.01	0.633	0.691	5,447	156.26	(11)
0.506	0.519	0.599	2,248.51	0.574	0.624	10,572	302.11	(19)
0.387	0.394	0.436	522.61	0.398	0.473	1,188	132.40	(8)
0.461	0.467	0.516	750.86	0.479	0.553	1,722	53.95	(8)
0.484	**0.499**	**0.570**	**5,322.61**	**0.554**	**0.585**	**63,969**	**750.07**	**(49)**
0.352	0.253	0.275	549.90	0.252	0.298	3,489	408.49	(19)
0.333	0.310	0.361	1,333.28	0.342	0.381	10,108	900.53	(31)
0.368	0.302	0.330	172.58	0.281	0.379	376	84.69	(6)
0.311	0.402	0.743	1,930.18	0.710	0.776	1,986	2,809.68	(5)
0.340	**0.300**	**0.367**	**3,033.36**	**0.354**	**0.380**	**50,167**	**4,756.07**	**(63)**
0.499	0.577	0.756	2,509.07	0.727	0.786	7,385	366.91	(15)
0.674	0.706	0.934	5,340.80	0.909	0.959	28,898	486.38	(23)
0.551	0.569	0.830	630.30	0.765	0.894	468	45.06	(4)
NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
0.598	**0.645**	**0.859**	**8,434.60**	**0.841**	**0.878**	**77,153**	**1,060.46**	**(44)**

r = .460, no overlap of CIs), as could be expected given that both the constructs of commitment and customer loyalty capture customers' positive attitudes and desires to remain linked to a seller.

Combined relational mediators had less influence on objective seller performance (*r* = .300) than they did on any other outcome. Thus, while customer relationships positively influence performance outcomes, supporting the effort put into RM strategies, the actual effect on performance is lower than the effect on the other four outcomes typically included in RM studies. This is not surprising, as relational mediators are more closely related to loyalty and cooperation than they are to objective performance, which often depends on many other, nonrelational factors (e.g., economy, competitive responses). Most interesting is that relationship quality is the relational mediator that has the largest influence on objective seller performance (*r* = .402), followed by trust (*r* = .310), relationship satisfaction (*r* = .302), and commitment (*r* = .253), where the confidence intervals of relationship quality, trust, and commitment do not overlap. These findings suggest that researchers in RM may need to take a multiple mediator or composite view when measuring customer relationship if they are to best capture its impact on objective seller performance.

Table 4
Influence of Moderators on Relational Mediators' Effects on Outcomes [1,2]

Moderated Relationships	Total Number of Raw Effects	Services vs. Products			Channel
		services	products	1-tailed p-value	channel
Customer Focal Outcomes					
commitment → expectation of continuity	16	0.626 (6)	0.463 (8)	0.103	0.538 (4)
trust → expectation of continuity	24	0.514 (6)	0.558 (15)	0.259	0.572 (7)
relationship satisfaction → expectation of continuity	5	–	–	–	–
relationship quality → expectation of continuity	3	–	–	–	–
all mediators → expectation of continuity	**48**	**0.556 (15)**	**0.533 (24)**	**0.351**	**0.538 (26)**
commitment → customer loyalty	12	0.704 (2)	0.489 (8)	0.029	0.629 (1)
trust → customer loyalty	20	0.534 (5)	0.473 (12)	0.286	0.675 (1)
relationship satisfaction → customer loyalty	9	–	–	–	–
relationship quality → customer loyalty	9	0.538 (1)	0.403 (6)	0.093	–
all mediators → customer loyalty	**50**	**0.577 (8)**	**0.433 (33)**	**0.016**	**0.652 (2)**
Seller Outcomes					
commitment → objective seller performance	20	0.261 (6)	0.401 (10)	0.116	0.371 (7)
trust → objective seller performance	32	0.266 (4)	0.343 (24)	0.280	0.314 (7)
relationship satisfaction → objective seller performance	7	–	–	–	–
relationship quality → objective seller performance	6	–	–	–	–
all mediators → objective seller performance	**65**	**0.322 (12)**	**0.359 (41)**	**0.322**	**0.597 (19)**
Dyadic Outcomes					
commitment → cooperation	16	0.632 (3)	0.466 (11)	0.195	0.492 (7)
trust → cooperation	24	0.727 (3)	0.666 (21)	0.325	0.696 (10)
relationship satisfaction → cooperation	5	–	–	–	–
relationship quality → cooperation	0	–	–	–	–
all mediators → cooperation	**45**	**0.672 (7)**	**0.590 (36)**	**0.070**	**0.597 (21)**

[1] The cell entries show the average effects encountered under each moderator level, with the total number of effects shown in parenthesis (), subjected to *t*-test comparisons. Our initial coding categorized each moderator into three subgroups (channel, direct, and both) based on the study characteristics. However, due to a paucity of effects in the "both" category, we dropped those effects from comparisons. Therefore, the total number of raw effects will not always equal the sum of the effects for each moderator level. Also, the limited number of effects suggested dropping WOM from the analysis.

While researchers have argued that trust plays a critical role in building commitment (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994), perhaps trust has other direct effects necessary for superior performance in addition to its effect on commitment. It may be that different dimensions of a relationship are synergistic, and superior performance is possible only when the relationship is sufficiently strong on all critical fronts. The notion of a holistic relationship perspective fits in with the work of researchers who have argued for a composite measure of relationship strength on the grounds that no single dimension can capture the full depth of the relationship (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Johnson 1999), although the actual dimensions and structure remain to be determined.

Just as certain RM antecedents are stronger than others in their effects on certain relational mediators, certain relational mediators are stronger than others in their effects on different outcomes. Commitment, for instance, had the largest effect of all the relational mediators on customer loyalty and WOM, while trust had the largest effect of all the relational mediators on cooperation. For its part, relationship quality surpasses the other relational mediators in its effect on improved seller performance—arguably the most important outcome—and, surprisingly, commitment had the least effect of all the relational mediators on performance.

vs. Direct Products		Business vs. Consumer Markets			Individual vs. Organizational Relationships		
direct	1-tailed p-value	business	consumer	1-tailed p-value	individual	organizational	1-tailed p-value
0.530 (10)	0.481	0.456 (11)	0.709 (5)	0.012	0.541 (4)	0.533 (12)	0.476
0.553 (13)	0.396	0.540 (15)	0.574 (9)	0.280	0.501 (4)	0.546 (17)	0.261
–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
0.574 (12)	**0.284**	**0.522 (33)**	**0.610 (15)**	**0.035**	**0.523 (13)**	0.550 **(32)**	**0.304**
0.521 (9)	0.260	0.588 (3)	0.521 (9)	0.137	0.624 (2)	0.520 (10)	0.042
0.488 (17)	0.178	0.490 (4)	0.511 (16)	0.424	0.510 (5)	0.496 (14)	0.443
–	–	0.602 (2)	0.325 (7)	0.025	0.594 (2)	0.327 (7)	0.031
		0.599 (2)	0.422 (7)	0.017	0.612 (1)	0.443 (8)	0.081
0.455 (40)	**0.001**	**0.557 (11)**	**0.464 (39)**	**0.042**	**0.560 (10)**	0.461 **(39)**	**0.045**
0.371 (11)	0.499	0.387 (16)	0.209 (4)	0.027	0.281 (2)	0.359 (18)	0.318
0.303 (16)	0.459	0.348 (26)	0.264 (6)	0.228	0.376 (13)	0.305 (17)	0.227
–	–	0.400 (5)	0.288 (2)	0.213	0.437 (5)	0.194 (2)	0.120
		–	–	–	0.590 (2)	0.171 (4)	0.075
0.344 (31)	**0.438**	**0.361 (53)**	**0.250 (12)**	**0.013**	**0.401 (22)**	0.310 **(41)**	**0.078**
0.505 (9)	0.462	0.496 (15)	0.542 (1)	0.437	0.793 (2)	0.457 (14)	0.046
0.657 (14)	0.333	0.674 (23)	0.664 (1)	0.482	0.702 (9)	0.643 (14)	0.268
–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
0.599 (24)	**0.487**	**0.597 (42)**	**0.612 (3)**	**0.459**	**0.677 (14)**	**0.553 (30)**	**0.053**

[2] Operationally, we only carried out comparisons if the total number of raw effects was 6 or higher, thereby ensuring the a priori probability of finding at least 3 effects at each level of moderator. Where this cutoff was not met or the number of effects for one level of moderator was less than 1, we inserted a dash (_) to indicate that that particular moderator analysis was not performed.

Influence of moderators on relational mediators' effects on outcomes

Table 4 shows the influence of moderators on the linkage between relational mediators and outcomes, identifying situations in which strong customer relationships are more effective at generating positive outcomes, one of the three objectives of the study. The premise that customer relationships have a larger impact on exchange outcomes when relationships are more critical to the success of the exchange was supported for the impact of all four mediators as a group on customer loyalty for services, channels, and business customers. The correlation of the combined mediators on customer loyalty was $r = .577$ for service exchanges versus $r = .433$ for product-based exchanges ($p < .05$), .652 for channel interactions versus .455 for direct interactions ($p < .01$), and .557 for business versus .464 for consumer markets ($p < .05$). The close interaction required for co-producing services, the intangibility of many services offerings as compared to products (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1985), and the high level of interdependence among channel members and in business-to-business exchanges (Anderson and Weitz 1989) appear to make customer-seller relationships more critical to the exchange, enhancing the impact of relationships on customer loyalty. A similar effect was found in business markets for the impact of relationships on improved seller performance: the impact of the combined mediators on improved seller performance was $r = .361$ in business markets versus $r = .250$ in consumer markets ($p < .05$).

Relational mediators had an increased effect on customer loyalty for service-based exchanges, channel exchanges, and in business markets, and relational mediators had an increased effect on objective seller performance in business markets, providing partial support for H7. Contrary to expectations, relational mediators' influence on expectation of continuity was larger in consumer than in business markets ($r = .522$ in business markets versus $r = .610$ in consumer markets, $p < .05$). Evaluations of the effects across different relational mediators show that the results are largely driven by commitment's influence on expectation of continuity ($r = .456$ in business markets versus $r = .709$ in consumer markets, $p < .05$), while other mediators have consistent but smaller effects. Commitment is defined as a customer's enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship, while expectation of continuity is defined as a customer's intention to maintain a relationship, and it may be that individual consumers are better able to move from a desire to an intention than are business customers because individual consumers have a higher degree of control over their decisions and actions. Consistent with the theory of planned behavior, the linkage between an attitude and an intention should be stronger as control increases (cf. Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Thus, the stronger impact of commitment on expectation of continuity (owing to higher levels of control) in consumer than in business markets may offset the typically greater importance of relationships in business markets. Further research is required to isolate these two potentially opposing effects and to integrate customer control into future RM models.

As hypothesized, relational mediators had a larger impact on customer loyalty when the target of the relationship was an individual than when it was an organization ($r = .560$ as opposed to $r = .461$; $p < .05$). Similarly, commitment had a larger impact on cooperation in interpersonal relationships, when the customer's commitment was directed toward an individual in the selling organization, than in relationships in which the customer's commitment was directed toward the selling organization as a whole ($r = .793$ versus $r = .457$; $p < .05$). These findings provide partial support for H8. Additional support (as shown in Table 4) is provided by the fact that of the 16 moderation tests, 81% are in the expected direction, and the impact of the combined mediators on both improved seller performance and cooperation are significant at the $p < .10$ level. These findings support experimental research that has shown that people make judgments that are stronger and more closely related to outcomes when evaluating an individual than when evaluating a group (O'Laughlin and Malle 2002).

An overall summary of results, organized by hypotheses, is presented in Table 5.

Influence of moderators on antecedents' effects on relational mediators

Because of the large number of antecedents and a lack of consistent theoretical guidance, we did not offer formal hypotheses for the influence of moderators on antecedents' effects on relational mediators. For completeness, and in the spirit of synthesizing the previous literature, we performed moderation tests for all antecedents and report the results in Appendix B. Surprisingly, we found that relationship investment, communication, and seller expertise built commitment more effectively in product than in service contexts. The antecedents also had very different effects in channel exchanges than they did in direct exchanges. Dependence had a larger effect on all four mediators as a group in direct buyer-seller relationships than it did in channel-seller relationships, supporting the position that powerful channel partners often weaken relationships by taking advantage of their channel partners' dependence to extract an unfair portion of created value (Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern 2001). Communication and interaction frequency built relationships more effectively in channel exchanges than in direct exchanges. On the other hand, the opposite was true for relationship duration.

Table 5
Summary of Evidence on the Hypotheses

	Hypotheses	Total Number of Comparisons Involved	For Details See Results Table	Nature of Evidence
H1	The customer's (a) relationship benefit and (b) dependence on seller positively affect relational mediators.	8	Table 2	All 5 comparisons support H1a. All 3 comparisons support H1b.
H2	The seller's (a) relationship investment and (b) expertise positively affect relational mediators.	8	Table 2	All 5 comparisons support H2a. All 3 comparisons support H2b.
H3	Exchange partners' (a) communication, (b) similarity, (c) relationship duration, and (d) interaction frequency positively affect relational mediators, while (e) conflict negatively affects relational mediators.	18	Table 2	All 5 comparisons support H3a. Both comparisons support H3b. All 5 comparisons support H3c. Two of 3 comparisons support H3d. All 3 comparisons support H3e.
H4	Relational mediators positively affect customers' (a) expectation of continuity, (b) word of mouth, and (c) loyalty.	12	Table 3	All 4 comparisons support H4a. All 3 comparisons support H4b. All 5 comparisons support H4c.
H5	Relational mediators positively affect objective measures of the seller's performance.	5	Table 3	All 5 comparisons support H5.
H6	Relational mediators positively affect cooperation.	4	Table 3	All 4 comparisons support H6.
H7	The positive effect of relational mediators on outcomes will be larger for (a) service- than product-based exchanges, (b) channel than direct exchanges, and (c) business than consumer markets.	40	Table 4	Two of 13 comparisons support H7a. One of 12 comparisons supports H7b. Five of 15 comparisons support H7c.
H8	The positive effect of relational mediators on outcomes will be larger when the relational mediators are targeted toward an individual than when they are targeted toward an organization.	16	Table 4	Five of 16 comparisons support H8.

Communication and seller expertise were more effective at building relationships in business markets than in consumer markets. Relationship benefits had a larger impact on all four mediators as a group when the relationships were with individuals than when they were with organizations. Relationship investment and conflict had opposite effects, with relationship investment strengthening relationships more effectively when those relationships were focused on organizations than when they were focused on individuals, whereas conflict between organizations was more damaging to relationships than conflict at the interpersonal level. This finding is consistent with theory and research suggesting that people's judgments about individuals are more resilient to disconfirming events than their judgments about groups (Hamilton and Sherman 1996). Overall, these findings suggest many opportunities for further research.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Management

We provide evidence that the intervening role of relational mediators between RM antecedents and exchange outcomes is more complex than suggested by extant research, but the fundamental premise that RM and strong relationships positively affect performance is well supported across all linkages tested. Different RM antecedents affected different relational mediators to differing degrees, with differing effects on outcomes. Hence, the usefulness of RM research that focuses on a single relational mediator will be very dependent on the mediator chosen and may generate potentially misleading findings, especially with regard to evaluations of the effectiveness of RM. For example, promoting customer dependence is a more effective strategy for building customer commitment than it is for instilling trust, whereas the opposite is true for a strategy focused on relationship investment. Therefore, if a study were to compare the relative effectiveness of promoting dependence and investing in the relationship, focusing on commitment alone would lead to results that favored dependence to the detriment of relationship investment, while focusing on trust would have opposite effect. Findings may also be misleading about the impact of relational mediators on outcomes, given that, for example, commitment's impact on loyalty is greater than those of the other relational mediators, whereas its impact on objective seller performance is less than those of the others. Objective seller performance, it turns out, is affected more by relationship quality than by either trust or commitment.

These results support a multidimensional perspective on relationships in which it is recognized that no single relational mediator can capture the full essence or depth of a customer-seller relationship (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Johnson 1999). Previous research (Berry 1996; Doney and Cannon 1997; Spekman 1988) offering either commitment or trust as the most important relational mediator may be focusing too narrowly; a relationship will be truly effective only when most or all of its key aspects are strong.

The finding that objective performance is influenced most by relationship quality, followed by trust, and least of all by commitment (although commitment had the largest effect on customer loyalty) has a number of implications. Possibly, the scope of RM research should be expanded beyond the commitment-loyalty paradigm to investigate potential interactions among relational mediators in order to identify relational synergies and take a more holistic view of exchange relationships. Further research is needed to determine which aspects or dimensions should be included in a multifaceted view of relational mediators: While commitment and trust clearly play a critical role, other candidates might include relationship satisfaction, equity, and reciprocity. It seems especially important to develop a measure of reciprocity between exchange partners given that reciprocity has been identified as "the core of marketing relationships" (Bagozzi 1995, p. 275) and may help explain the pattern of effects for the impact of relationship investments and benefits on relational mediators. Future research in RM should integrate reciprocity into the relational-mediating framework to account for positive outcomes attributable to individuals' desire to repay "debts," independent of levels of trust or commitment.

Relational mediators had more impact on cooperation than they did on any other outcome, but how cooperation converts into financial performance is unclear. Better understanding of how cooperation helps improve financial performance and of the drivers of cooperation is especially critical as more RM is focused internally or toward nontraditional buyer-seller interactions (e.g., alliances and interdepartmental groups), since in these situations cooperation may be the most desired outcome.

The finding that RM strategies operate through different mediators, which affect outcomes differentially, suggests that a targeted approach may improve RM efficiency. For example, a manager who desires cooperation between two groups after a merger and recognizes that trust is the relational mediator with the largest influence on cooperation could select the context-appropriate RM strategies shown to best influence trust (e.g., communication and interaction frequency). After nearly two decades of RM research, it is time to move from significant testing alone to identifying what strategies, under what conditions, generate the highest return on investment. Our synthesis of the extant literature on RM identifies a complex pattern of effects and many potential avenues requiring further investigation. The heterogeneity across nearly all linkages, even after accounting for moderators included in this study, calls for research to determine other moderators influencing the effectiveness of RM (e.g., relationship age or stage, customer involvement, and relationship orientation). Many studies may fail to specify high-impact antecedents or important outcomes because some of the constructs with relatively strong and homogenous correlations (e.g., conflict, seller expertise, and WOM) are infrequently studied.

Customer-seller relationships had a greater influence on customer loyalty when relationships were critical to the success of the exchange, suggesting RM may be a more effective strategy for building customer loyalty for service offerings than for product offerings, for channel exchanges than for direct exchanges, and in business markets than in consumer markets. In addition, customer relationships led to greater improvements in objective performance in business markets than in consumer markets. These situational moderators capture, somewhat coarsely, the customer's need or desire to have a strong relationship in order to successfully conduct an exchange. As a customer's need or desire for a relationship increases, RM strategies become more effective. Future research should develop a measure of relationship orientation at the individual customer level to support the segmentation of RM efforts. Marketers could target their RM expenditures toward customer segments with the highest susceptibility for RM, leading to more productive campaigns.

The results suggest customer relationships have stronger effects on exchange outcomes when their target is an individual rather than a selling firm. Thus, RM strategies focused on building interpersonal relationships between customers and individuals in the selling organization (e.g., making use of a dedicated salesperson, social entertaining) may be more effective than those focused on building customer-to-firm relationships (e.g., team selling, frequency-driven loyalty programs). Social psychology's individual and group judgment theory (Hamilton and Sherman 1996), which posits "differences in the outcomes of impressions formed of individual and group targets, even when those impressions are based on the very same behavioral information" (p. 336), has a number of implications for the marketing domain and may provide a parsimonious explanation for the findings of previous marketing research (Doney and Cannon 1997; Iacobucci and Ostrom 1996). The finding that conflict has a more negative impact when customers' relationships are with the firm as a whole than when the relationships are with individuals in the firm is consistent with theory, which states that judgments about individuals are more resilient to disconfirming events than judgments about groups (Hamilton and Sherman 1996). Thus, managers may want to use specialized individuals (e.g., boundary spanners or salespeople) rather then centralized service centers to resolve conflicts because customers' relationships with salespeople may withstand conflict better than their relationships with selling firms.

Comparing the effects of customer, seller, and dyadic constructs provides additional insight. Most promising is the finding that the two seller focal RM antecedents have a relatively high impact (2 and 4 of 9 tested), which reinforces a proactive relationship-building role for sellers. That the five highest-impact antecedents are either seller focal or dyadic antecedents provides additional support for the seller's role. The relatively smaller correlations between customer focal antecedents and relational mediators are surprising because relational mediators are taken from the customer's perspective. This finding may be due to misspecification in which some critical customer focal antecedents are omitted from the model, suggesting researchers should investigate other customer focal antecedents (e.g., reciprocity debts, exchange efficiency, perceived investments, and liking). On the other hand, the outcomes most affected by relational mediators are customer focal or dyadic, paralleling the similarity in their perspectives. A review of the results for the moderation of relational mediators' influence on outcomes shows that the majority of the significant results (11 of 13) were for customer focal outcomes. This may be because the moderators tested affect how the customer views the exchange. Identifying moderators that affect how the seller views the exchange or that affect both the customer's and the seller's perspective may be worthwhile (e.g., environmental, industry, and product characteristics).

Business executives interested in building strong customer relationships should note that the selection and training of customer-facing individuals is critical, and strategies that focus the RM antecedents of expertise, communication, and similarity to customers have the greatest impact. Focusing on relationship benefits and investing in the relationship are also effective RM strategies. All these efforts can be wasted if customer conflict is left unresolved, as the negative influence of conflict on customer relationships outweighs the beneficial effects of strategies based on all other antecedents. Some firms may generate higher returns by reallocating RM investment toward conflict resolution. Service recovery research needs to be extended into the RM domain to develop strategies for relationship recovery. Developing strong relationships may prove especially difficult for firms moving customers from dedicated salespeople to offshore call centers owing to a convergence of factors. Lack of seller expertise, dissimilarity between call center staff and customers, ineffective communication, and the shift from an interpersonal to person-to-firm relationship that the move to an offshore call center signifies may all negatively affect the customer-seller relationship.

In summary, this paper provides insight into what antecedents companies should focus on for the most effective RM strategies, some conditions moderating the effectiveness of RM strategies, and how the links between both antecedents and consequences of relational mediators depend on the mediator investigated. These insights provide managers with opportunities to improve the return on RM investments and researchers with suggestions for how to build more robust models to examine the influence of RM on outcomes. ■

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Appendix A

Brief Introduction to Meta-analysis

Meta-analysis falls under a broader classification of literature reviews known as systematic reviews. In general, there are two types of systematic reviews: (1) qualitative and (2) quantitative (meta-analysis). The primary example of the qualitative review is the traditional narrative review, which, while valuable, is usually subjective in nature and does not yield a metric measure of the overall effects uncovered by the literature for any *A leads to B* causal relationship. The quantitative systematic review, or meta-analysis, numerically combines the statistical results of different studies to provide the reviewer with just such an overall metric measurement for any *A leads to B* causal relationship. It is especially helpful in synthesizing disparate results into useful data. The interested reader is referred to Hunter and Schmidt (1990), and Rosenthal (1994) for more introductory materials on the methodology of meta-analysis in social sciences.

Technical Details of Meta-analysis

We employed Pearson's product-moment correlation, the most common metric included in the reviewed studies, as the basic measure of effect size. We adjusted these correlations for measurement error arising from scale unreliability and sampling error arising from sample size differences using the classical approach recommended by Hunter and Schmidt (1990).

However, prior to applying the sample weights, the reliability-adjusted *r*'s were first converted to variance stabilizing Fisher's *z* scores employing the following transformation (Rosenthal 1994; Shadish and Haddock 1994):

(1) $z_i = .5\ \{ln\ [(1 + r_i) / (1 - r_i)]\}$

where ln is the natural (base *e*) logarithm, r_i is the focal correlation being converted, and z_i is the resultant Fisher's *z* score. The sample-weighted average *z* is computed by applying the weights of *wi (given by* $\Sigma(n_i - 3) / (N - 3)$*)* to each individual Fisher's *z* score and summing the result, where n_i is the sample size of the individual constituent study and $(N - 3)$ represents the summation of all $(n_i - 3)$ used in estimating a particular relationship:

(2) $Average\ Weighted\ Z_r = \Sigma w_i z_i$.

The confidence interval around the weighted average *z* score gives the range within which the domain-wide effect size may be found to occur in the population of studies from which the integrated studies are expected to have come. This is calculated as (Grewal et al. 1997):

(3) $Average\ Weighted\ z_r\ +/- 1.96 * standard\ error\ (z_r)$

where standard error (z_r) is 1 divided by the square root of $N - 3$, where again $N - 3$ represents the summation of all $(n_i - 3)$ used in estimating a particular relationship.

The χ^2 with (df = 1) for association is computed as:

(4) $\chi^2_{(df-1)} = (Average\ Weighted\ z_r)^2\ [\Sigma(N - 3)]$.

To estimate the publication bias associated with published studies, we employ Rosenthal's well-known file drawer method. The formula for calculating the file drawer, *N* (i.e., the number of unpublished studies with an average observed effect of zero that there would need to be in order for the overall *z* score no longer to be significant), is given as:

(5) $(\Sigma z_i)^2 / (z_1 - \alpha / 2)^2 - k$

where *k* is the current number of studies employed and the term $z_1 - \alpha / 2$ usually refers to a *z* value of 1.645, representing a two-tail probability of .05.

Finally, the χ^2 test for homogeneity of effects distributed with (df = $k - 1$), where *k* is the current number of effects being integrated, is computed as (Fleiss 1981; cf. Rao and Monroe 1989):

(6) $\chi^2_{(df = k-1)} = \Sigma\, w_i\, (z_i - mean\ z)^2$

where z_i is the Fisher's *z* transform of individual study effect, and w_i is the weight assigned to each result being integrated in accordance with the sample size of the individual effect minus 3 $(N_i - 3)$.

Appendix B

Influence of Moderators on Antecedents' Effects on Relational Mediators[1,2]

		Services vs. Products			Channel
Moderated Relationships	**Total Number of Raw Effects**	**services**	**products**	**1-tailed p-value**	**channel**
Customer Focal Outcomes					
relationship benefits → commitment	11	0.577 (2)	0.421 (9)	0.212	0.484 (2)
relationship benefits → trust	13	0.393 (3)	0.328 (10)	0.107	0.512 (2)
relationship benefits → all mediators	**39**	**0.467 (5)**	**0.394 (34)**	**0.194**	**0.502 (5)**
dependence on seller → commitment	16	0.284 (4)	0.439 (12)	0.173	0.410 (10)
dependence on seller → trust	26	0.385 (2)	0.147 (24)	0.038	0.107 (17)
dependence on seller → all mediators	**47**	**0.321 (7)**	**0.225 (40)**	**0.194**	**0.198 (34)**
Seller Focal Antecedents					
relationship investment → commitment	15	0.063 (1)	0.504 (10)	0.011	0.468 (4)
relationship investment → trust	17	–	–	–	0.489 (6)
relationship investment → all mediators	**51**	**0.063 (1)**	**0.530 (40)**	**0.003**	**0.464 (13)**
seller expertise → commitment	1	–	–	–	–
seller expertise → trust	12	0.460 (4)	0.674 (7)	0.046	0.729 (3)
seller expertise → all mediators	**19**	**0.562 (7)**	**0.665 (11)**	**0.141**	**0.658 (5)**
Dyadic Antecedents					
communication → commitment	25	0.366 (4)	0.559 (20)	0.018	0.639 (11)
communication → trust	29	0.437 (2)	0.506 (25)	0.332	0.557 (9)
communication → all mediators	**67**	**0.389 (6)**	**0.513 (58)**	**0.066**	**0.602 (20)**
similarity → commitment	3	–	–	–	–
similarity → trust	10	0.470 (3)	0.601 (7)	0.249	0.578 **(5)**
relationship duration → commitment	13	0.079 (1)	0.124 (10)	0.427	0.025 (8)
relationship duration → trust	20	0.158 (3)	0.114 (15)	0.264	0.069 (8)
relationship duration → all mediators	**43**	**0.150 (6)**	**0.103 (29)**	**0.236**	**0.038 (19)**
interaction frequency → commitment	2	–	–	–	–
interaction frequency → trust	10	0.339 (1)	0.429 (7)	0.411	0.679 (2)
interaction frequency → all mediators	**19**	**0.231 (3)**	**0.396 (8)**	**0.233**	**0.679 (2)**
conflict → commitment	10	–	–	–	–0.539 (8)
conflict → trust	9	–	–	–	–0.729 (4)
conflict → all mediators	**20**	–	–	–	**–0.580 (13)**

[1] The cell entries show the average effects encountered under each moderator level, with the total number of effects shown in parenthesis (), subjected to *t*-test comparisons. Our initial coding categorized each moderator into three subgroups (channel, direct, and both) based on the study characteristics. However, due to a paucity of effects in the "both" category, we dropped those effects from comparisons. Therefore, the total number of raw effects will not always equal the sum of the effects for each moderator level. Also, the limited number of effects suggested dropping WOM from the analysis.

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vs. Direct Products		Business vs. Consumer Markets			Individual vs. Organizational Relationships		
direct	1-tailed p-value	business	consumer	1-tailed p-value	individual	organizational	1-tailed p-value
0.442 (9)		(3)	(8)		(2)	(9)	
0.304 (9)		(5)	(8)		(3)	(10)	
0.391 (32)		**(10)**	**(29)**		**(6)**	**(33)**	
0.383 (6)	0.427	0.421 (13)	0.311 (3)	0.276	0.284 (4)	0.439 (12)	0.173
0.359 (7)	0.008	0.154 (25)	0.448 (1)	0.116	0.141 (8)	0.196 (17)	0.295
0.368 (14)	**0.023**	**0.230 (43)**	**0.345 (4)**	**0.206**	**0.200 (13)**	**0.267 (33)**	**0.221**
0.465 (9)		(8)	(7)		(1)	(14)	
0.478 (9)		(11)	(6)		(5)	(11)	
0.540 (30)		**(26)**	**(25)**		**(10)**	**(40)**	
_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_
0.546 (3)	0.098	0.610 (10)	0.482 (2)	0.209	0.594 (10)	0.544 (1)	0.415
0.612 (13)	**0.333**	**0.646 (15)**	**0.519 (4)**	**0.044**	**0.608 (16)**	**0.721 (2)**	**0.230**
0.436 (14)		(17)	(8)		(1)	(24)	
0.475 (16)		(23)	(6)		(7)	(20)	
0.456 (43)		**(41)**	**(26)**		**(8)**	**(57)**	
_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_
0.470 (3)	**0.324**	**0.573 (9)**	**0.456 (1)**	**0.347**	**0.581 (5)**	**0.663 (4)**	**0.290**
0.374 (3)		(12)	(1)		(1)	(12)	
0.180 (8)		(18)	(1)		(9)	(10)	
0.211 (14)			**(5)**		**(14)**	**(28)**	
_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_
0.155 (4)	0.029	0.332 (9)	0.339 (1)	0.493	0.360 (7)	0.268 (3)	0.361
0.163 (7)	**0.009**	**0.183 (16)**	**0.231 (1)**	**0.406**	**0.241 (12)**	**0.104 (7)**	**0.178**
–0.311 (2)							
–0.555 (5)					(2)	(7)	
–0.485 (7)					**(2)**	**(18)**	

[2] Operationally, we only carried out comparisons if the total number of raw effects was 6 or higher, thereby ensuring the a priori probability of finding at least 3 effects at each level of moderator. Where this cutoff was not met or the number of effects for one level of moderator was less than 1, we inserted a dash (_) to indicate that that particular moderator analysis was not performed.

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