Customer Relationship Management (CRM): Cases in Chinese Service-Sector Industry

by

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Abstract

China's accession into the WTO (World Trade Organization) has brought about significant shifts in Chinese business philosophy and environment. Focus on products alone is not perceived as a determinant for success. Customer-oriented approach to business that consistently innovates and creates high-quality service and achieves long-term customer relationship development is seen as key competitive strategy. Hence, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) concept and approach relation to the management of technology, process, information resource, as well as human resource to create an environment which allows enterprises to take a 360-degree view of its customers is becoming important in China. Despite the explosion of CRM adoption and applications globally, China's development is still in the infant stage with scanty successful empirical studies to allude to. The purpose of this work is to shed light on CRM in China by discussing strategic advantages and implementation issues of CRM through the use multiple-case study and critical analysis. Findings of this research show that Chinese service-sector enterprises studied have benefited or are expected to benefit from adopting CRM. However, care needs to be exercised when making cross-industry generalisation.

Keywords: CRM, Information System, Implementation Issues, Life-Cycle

1. Introduction

Since its accession to WTO in 2001, China is becoming increasingly competitive economically. Thus, organisations have been implementing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems with the view to improve customer satisfaction, revenue growth and employee productivity gains. China's CRM system adoption growth rate increased 30% compared to 4-9% in all other Asian Pacific countries (Global CRM, 2011). Although fast growing, the market is still in the developmental phase. Two main drivers appear to account for the market expansion, namely rapid growth of small and medium sized businesses and increased CRM system implementation, especially in the banking, manufacturing and telecommunication industry sectors (CRM Market, 2009).

In China, success of CRM implementation expressed in terms of palpable performance measures seems hard to capture and explain. Isolated cases of CRM implementation cited include those of LeGrande (2011), Fujian Coland Group (2011), and Rui An (Ho, 2011).

It is noteworthy that interest in CRM systems' research in China is relatively low. Although, CRM developer-user-vendor seminars and fora have started in China, CRM literature is very scanty. Expensive company-commissioned CRM reports .are restricted to the corporate domain - they are not easily accessible to the public (LeGrande, 2011).

This paper seeks to explain CRM adoption in three service-sector companies using the CRM Life-cycle framework. Specific issue topics that deserved attention in this study such as managerial and technical aspects of pre- and post-implementation processes were considered.

2. Review of Literature

Customer Relationship Management concept originated from Relationship Marketing. It evolved from product-centric (in the 1970s and 80s) approach to customer-centric approach (in 1990s) then to relationship-centric approach in the 21st Century (Figure 1). CRM concerns 'exchange partners build a long-term association, characterised by purposeful cooperation and mutual dependence on the development of social as well as structural bonds' (Pulde, 1999).
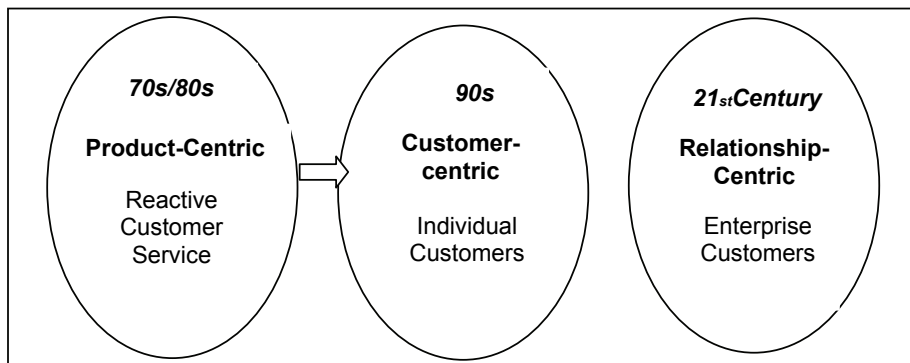
Source: Abridged: Khera (2010)

A CRM system can be briefly defined as an information system technology or an Enterprise Systems that includes ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) and SCM (Supply Chain Management) systems. A CRM system can enable an organisation to realise a customer focus (Bull, 2003; Bibiano & Pastor, 2006) and improve 'customer retention' (Light, 2003).

CRM system is an enterprise information system comprising all business processes such as sales, marketing, and after-sale service related to the customer. Specifically, CRM integrates marketing, sales, customer service, and supply-chain functions of an organisation to achieve greater efficiencies and effectiveness in delivering customer value (Bibiano & Pastor, 2006). Davenport et al. (2001) see it as 'all the tools, technologies and procedures to manage, improve or facilitate sales, support and related interactions with customers, prospects, and business partners throughout the enterprise'. CRM uses 'customer-related information or knowledge to deliver relevant products or services to the company's customers' (Levine, 2000).

Parvatiyar and Sheth (2002) view CRM system as 'a comprehensive strategy and process of acquiring, retaining, and partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the company and the customer (Bibiano & Pastor, 2006).

A wide range of research covers specific areas of CRM systems such as Electronic CRM (Pan & Lee, 2003), implementation risks (Romano Jr. & Fjermestad, 2002), and CRM and Relationship Marketing (Corner & Hinton, 2002; Ryals & Knox, 2001). Bibiano and Pastor (2006) give insightful CRM literature review based on real company case studies conducted using the CRM Systems Life-cycle framework.

CRM projects involve a complex combination of many business and technological factors. This situation calls for the formulation of adequate strategies for the adoption and implementation of CRM systems within a company (Bull, 2003). Developing a CRM system life-cycle can contribute to the better comprehension around this type of enterprise system.

CRM System Life-cycle encompasses both pre- and post-implementation phases. There seems to be no single definition of a CRM system Life-cycle. However, cogent descriptions of its facets have been given by Paulissen et al. (2005), Esteves and Pastor (1999), and Bibiano and Pastor (2006).

Bibiano and Pastor (2006) contend that a CRM system's Life-cycle comprises six key phases: a) adoption; b) acquisition; c) implementation; d) use and maintenance; e) evolution, and; f) retirement. Table 1, a review of CRM system's Life-cycle literature seems to buttress the concept's definition. A definition of CRM system life-cycle that entails a combined business and technological factors right from pre- to post-implementation phases can throw greater light on the understanding of an enterprise or CRM system.

The first phase is **'Adoption'**. It commences with initiation of the CRM system project by top management, sponsors and teams (Corner & Hinton, 2002; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2002). Organisational needs analysis together with system's requirements, potential benefits and costs should be convincing to enable CRM adoption by the organisation (Bull, 2003; Kotorov, 2003; Lindgreen, 2004; Hart et al., 2004). The second Life-cylce phase is **'Acquisition'**. It concerns evaluation and selection of the CRM product befitting identifiable orgaisational requirements. Expertise advice goes into CRM software and hardware selection process. Price of the product, training and organisation-vendor contractual agreement are key factors of acquisition (Bull, 2003; Hart et al., 2004; Lindgreen).

Table 1 CRM System Life-Cycle Literature

Phases	Stages	Bose (2002)	Kotorov (2003)	Lindgreen (2004)	Corner & Hinton (2002)	Parvatiyar & Sheth (2002)	Hart et al. (2004)	Bull (2003)
Adoption	**3.1.1** Needs analysis		●	●	●	●	●	●
	3.1.2 Cost analysis.	●		●			●	●
	3.1.3 Feasibility analysis.		●	●		●		●
Acquisition	**3.2.1** Vendor/ product evaluation	●	●			●	●	●
	3.2.2 Implementation			●	●		●	●

Phase	Activity							
	evaluation							●
	3.2.3 Analysis of current technology				●			●
	3.2.4 Impact analysis	●	●	●			●	
Implementation	**3.3.1** Implementation plan	●		●	●	●	●	●
	3.3.2 Organisational alignment	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	3.3.3 Risk identification/mgt	●		●	●	●	●	
	3.3.4 Implementation process mgt			●	●		●	●
Use and Maintenance	**3.4.1** User training	●		●		●	●	●
	3.4.2 Implementation evaluation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	3.4.3 User satisfaction	●		●				●
	3.4.4 Return on investment				●		●	●
Evolution	**3.5.1** System maintenance				●	●	●	
	3.5.2 Integration with ERP	●						●
	3.5.3 Migration	●					●	
Retirement	**3.6.1** Implementation failure	●				●	●	●

Source: Bibiano & Pastor, 2006.

'Implementation' is the third phase in the CRM system Life-cycle. It involves customisation and adaptation of the acquired CRM software to meet the enterprise needs of the organisation. This is a very high risk phase since negligence of identifying and improving CRM processes for delivering value to customers may result in project failure.

The fourth Life-cycle phase **'Use and Maintenance'** covers the use of the product so that returns on investment are increased costs/disruption are minimised. Emphasis in this phase is on alignment of functionality, usability and adequacy with organisational and business goals.

The fifth phase **'Evolution'** involves the integration of additional capabilities into the CRM system to optimise benefits of interaction with relevant enterprise information systems such as SCM, business intelligence and collaboration tools.

The last phase of the CRM system Life-cycle **'Retirement'** is the stage when existing CRM system is replaced by new and more efficient technologies befitting business goals and needs (Bose, 2002; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2002).

3. Methodology

Case studies provide an understanding of dynamics present within real-life settings (Yin, 1994), and present valuable opportunity for comprehensive view (Lindgreen, 2001). This multiple-case method seeks to garner empirical evidence to explain CRM implementation in three Chinese service-sector companies (Yin, 1994) and enhance reliability of research. The context and background of the companies are explained in order to provide a full picture of the organisations' situations under investigation (White, 2007:40). The study approach allowed triangulation to include observations and interviews. It allowed 'the same problem is studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods' (White, 2007:67).

The basic knowledge of CRM management in the case studies was acquired through interviewing randomly selected middle and top managers each from the three organisations. The eight-question-open-ended interview instrument triangulated with observations assisted to explore CRM system implementation. Validity of the survey instruments was assured by structuring self-administered, logical flow, short and easy to understand questions. Forty-five interviews (15 for each company) were arranged with managers. The response rate was 67%. Analysis and interpretation was done with utmost care in a logical, and systematic way to strengthen the academic argument in this research (White, 2007:42)

The advantages of case study approach is well-documented by White (2007:42). It is suitable for this small-scale research, and was carried out by a single researcher. It is relatively cheap and not dependent on expensive technology and generated generate empirical data and information; not solely dependent on secondary or already published work. However, the disadvantages of the case study approach included: a) difficulty to separate out what is unique to each of the three cases and what is common to similar them, and; b) the whole issue of generalisation which has to be handled with caution. One might opine the study is subjective. But it was found to be necessary to keep the word 'objective' in mind (White, 2007:42).

The questions of this exploratory research include; a) How well do the three Chinese service-sector companies graduate through the CRM system Life-cycle? b) What are their specific experiences within the Life-cycle? c) What are the managerial implications for CRM system adoption?

4. Results and Discussions

Company Background
A background to the three case-study enterprises is summarized in Table 2.

Hotel Company was established in 1992. It is one of the largest (turnover) hotel groups in China. The implant from Hong Kong owns and manages 20 properties China-wide, and manages over 5,000 hotel rooms in Beijing alone. In 2002, Hotel Company implemented CRM system in a bid to enhance customer experience, achieve sales increase, enhance customer loyalty, and increase overall brand awareness.

Bank Corporation founded in 2005, is one of the leading players in Chinese banking industry. It is a Shanghai stock-listed and provides corporate, personal and internet banking, cash management and international business services. In response to integration needs in domestic and global banking and customer requirements, the organisation implemented targeted CRM solutions in 2006.

Table 2 Company Background

Name	Market Segment	Organisation Structure	CRM Application
Hotel Company	Hospitality, face-to-face, middle and high consumers, commercial and industrial, mainland China cities.	Centralised with independent branch management hotel branches.	• Customer information management • Contract recording and management • Consumption statistics • Membership management • Marketing activity management • Sales performance reporting • Customer feedback and complaints • Market share and competitor analysis • Internal information sharing • On-line booking.
Bank Corporation	Banking, consumer and commercial, various products including, savings, mortgages, business, mainland China cities.	Centralised and unified management.	• Customer information management • Customer feedback and complain analysis • Customer segmentation • VIP customer management • Innovative and personalised services (self-banking), Tel-marketing, one-to-one service, one-stop service) • Investment financing • Customer complaints.
Logistics Company	Individual clients and business enterprises, domestic and international.	Independent management within subsidiary companies.	• Customer information management • Customer feedback and complaints • Order classification and management • Customer visitations

			• Logistics service tracking
			• Call center
			• Employee reward system.

Logistics Company was founded as a private freight forwarding company in Jiangsu in 1999. It reconstituted as a joint venture with a world leading air freight and logistics company with a large hub in Beijing. Domestic and international logistics business has trebled, and a CRM system implemented in 2006 provides a management technology platform for synchronous pre-assembly, warehousing and transport services. Today, the company operates14 integrated logistics distribution centers, 55 distribution sites, 28 international freight forwarders and ten bonded warehouses that service many clients domestic and international.

Adoption

In Table 1 shows robust CRM Life-cycle experiences especially with Bank Corporation and Hotel Company.

More than 92% of all managers of the three organisations interviewed in the survey attested that most CRM system programmes fail mainly due to much focus companies place on software acquisition than on needs analysis (Adebanjo, 2003).

More 70% of all three organisations' managers matched carefully CRM applications they chose to fit in with their organisations' culture, processes, legacy IT systems, financial and human resource cost as well as the amount of time they required for systems' implementation. CRM feasibility analysis was found to be very robust in the hotel and bank enterprises than in the logistics company. It seems logistics company managers were in a hurry to catch up with competitors. Project teams prepared elaborate feasibility reports to introduce a CRM system to their organisations, including tentative impacts in work processes in marketing, sales and human resources (Raman et al., 2006).

An important resource that enabled Bank Corporation to adopt and easily implement 'customer-needs-driven' CRM strategies is the capabilities of the core selling (CS) teams. They appear to be imbued more than their counterparts with knowledge management and relationship marketing competencies (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005).

Table 3 Company CRM System Life-Cycle

Phases	Stages	Hotel Company	Bank Corporation	Logistics Company
Adoption	**3.1.1** Needs analysis	•	•	•
	3.1.2 Cost analysis.	•	•	•
	3.1.3 Feasibility analysis.	•	•	
Acquisition	**3.2.1** Vendor/ product evaluation	•	•	•
	3.2.2 Implementation evaluation		•	•
	3.2.3 Analysis of current technology		•	
	3.2.4 Impact analysis		•	

Implementation	**3.3.1** Implementation plan	●	●	●
	3.3.2 Organisational alignment	●	●	●
	3.3.3 Risk identification/management	●	●	
	3.3.4 Implementation process mg't		●	●
Use and Maintenance	**3.4.1** User training	●	●	●
	3.4.2 Implementation evaluation	●	●	●
	3.4.3 User satisfaction		●	
	3.4.4 Return on investment		●	●
Evolution	**3.5.1** System maintenance	●		●
	3.5.2 Integration with ERP		●	
	3.5.3 Migration			●
Retirement	**3.6.1** Implementation failure	●	●	●

Acquisition

Unlike the logistics company, the bank and hotel groups commissioned independent consulting companies to do vendor selection and product evaluation (Bose, 2002). The processes of evaluation, comparison and decision of software tool product to adopt, and vendor selection that best suited companies' CRM requirements for customer capture, retention and data analysis were perceived to be exceptionally elaborate, especially at the bank.

With exception of the hotel group, reputable blue-chip consulting companies managed the implementation of the CRM systems selected in the bank and logistics company. Prior to this, detailed analyses of companies' current technologies were made with the view to know if and how they could support the requirements of the CRM system. Of all the companies, the bank performed detailed impact analysis before introducing its CRM system so that management would not be blindsided system after its introduction. For example, the bank listed all existing systems including call centre operational systems, marketing and ERP systems to ascertain how they linked or integrated with candidate CRM system (Dyché, 2001).

Almost all mangers of the three organisations indicated that they aimed at the minimisation of the need for customising CRM system that best fitted the requirements of their organisations during the evaluation and selection processes. The areas of CRM systems' applications are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Areas of CRM System Applications

Name	CRM Application	Perceived Added-Value	Some Concerns
Hotel Company	• Customer information management • Contract recording and management • Consumption statistics • Membership management • Marketing activity management • Sales performance	• Innovative product and service • Increase interaction with customers • Better information sharing • Standardised	• Interaction with customers • One-stop service • Evaluation weaknesses

		operation process • Reduced waste	
reporting • Customer feedback and complaints • Market share and competitor analysis • Internal information sharing • On-line booking.			
Bank Corporation	• Customer information management • Customer feedback and complain analysis • Customer segmentation • VIP customer management • Innovative and personalised services (self-banking), Tel-marketing, one-to-one service, one-stop service) • Investment financing • Customer complaints.	• Innovative products and services • Increased interaction with customers • Better information sharing • Transparency, convenience, efficiency and accessibility to service • Reduced waste • Cross-selling efficiency	• Customer segmentation • Cross-selling
Logistics Company	• Customer information management • Customer feedback and complaints • Order classification and management • Customer visitations • Logistics service tracking • Call center • Employee reward system.	• Innovative services • Increase interaction with customers • Streamline information flow • Standardise operation process • Increase up-selling efficiency	• Cross-departmental and systems' integration

Implementation

The companies invested large sums money in their CRM programmes and pursued expected returns.

All managers interviewed gave definite CRM system implementation plan strategies and objectives as shown in Table 5 developed to achieve them (Peppers et al., 1999; Greenberg, 2001; Kim et al., 2003; Lindgreen, 2004). The Bank, for example, gave further leads that explained how CRM system application supported strategy objectives, corporate vision, business goals and technology.

Table 5 Strategies and Objectives

Hotel Company	Bank Corporation	Logistics Company
Increase revenue • Better information	**Customer identification** • Identify customer via marketing channels • Interaction and transaction to provide vale	Customer knowledge • Appropriate customer information collection • Secure service
Cost of sales reduction • Sales automation	**Customer differentiation** • Identify needs and demands • Estimate life-time value	**Fast deal closure** • Train staff
Increase sales productivity • Reduce steps in tracking and customer data • Integration with sales	**Customer interaction** • Keep track of customer behaviour • Estimate customer's long-term profitability	**Customer interaction** • Response appropriately to requests • Business process integration
Sales staff retention • Empower staff • Motivate /insentivise	**Personalisation** • Personal banking • Increase customer loyalty	**Customer value** • Improve retention • Improve profits
Create competitive advantage • Use CRM effectively	**Create competitive advantage** • Use CRM effectively • Cross-selling	**New customers** • Improve intelligence
Improve profitability • Focus sale organisation • Better information for sales force	**Customer satisfaction** • Quick response • Easy access to contact front-end person	**Customer satisfaction** • Improve service quality • Relationship links

The Bank was found to be relatively more organisationally aligned in bringing together executives, IT professionals, managers and users to understand the business objectives of the CRM system's programme and to support the implementation initiative. However, some concerns about customer segmentation and cross-selling in this phase were reported.

The logistics company did less risk identification and management. Also, concerns about interaction with customers, one-stop-services and weaknesses of impact analysis were expressed. The Bank was highly engrossed in evaluating the main risks for the CRM implementation, and delineation of contingency plans for those risks than any of the organisations. Overall co-ordination of CRM implementation process management was found to be highly successful in the bank and logistics company.

Use and Maintenance

This stage corresponds to the use of the product in a way that returns expected benefits and minimizes disruption. It is recommended to be aware of the issues related to functionality, usability and adequacy, and how they interact with the organizational and business processes.

All the organisations with support of software/hardware vendor delivered user training sessions for staff of the organisations in effective use their systems. Users from sales, marketing and customer service departments of the organisations were give priority in the training.

Evidence indicated that the companies showed concern for staff during and after-implementation. All had the idea that achieving innovative customer service and long-term strategic relationship with customers is driven by three interrelated business factors - people, service and profit – as illustrated in Figure 2. Satisfied employees provided valued service to customers whose loyalty brought increased profit to enhance business performance, improved welfare and functioning working environment.

More than 80% of Bank managers agreed that great commitment was shown by staff to understanding and applying the CRM system to meet the requirements of continuously changing and competitive financial market. It appeared process management, understanding customer experience, people and organisation, and analysing data were much more sophisticated activities in the Bank.

More than 90% of Bank managers agreed they understood their customers, whilst 75% and 70% of the hotel and logistics enterprises were positively inclined.

Figure 2 Three Business Drivers and Environment
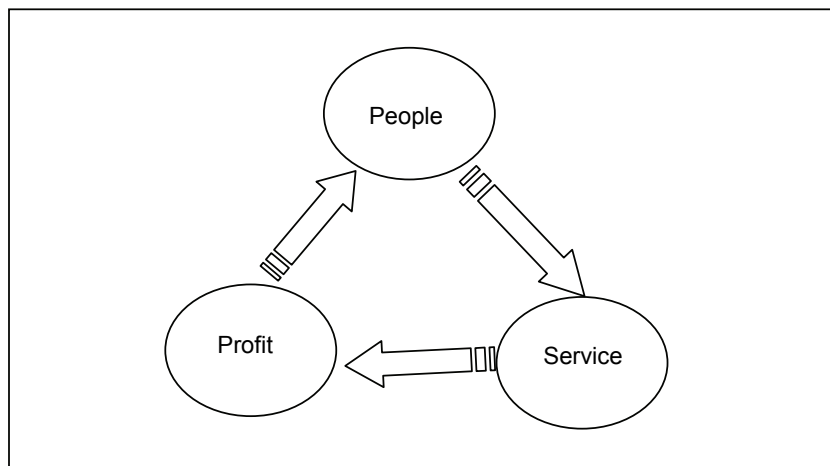
All managers analysed and determined the impact of CRM system implementation after installation. User satisfaction and usage intention rates were high, especially in the Bank and hotel chain. Managers at the Bank and logistics company indicated that reports on return-on-investment were prepared. But managers of the logistics company were unsure about ROI calculations or benefits of their CRM system. It is true that the realisation of tangible benefits takes time. Moreover, the intangible nature of CRM benefit such as customer loyalty, value enhancement, service quality, and innovation of operation, effectiveness of process, trust and competitiveness blur performance

measurement (Kim et al., 2006). Thus, suitable, simple and measurable qualitative and quantitative measures can be selected.

Evolution

Over the years the organisations succeeded in integrating more capabilities into their CRM systems, providing new benefits such as interaction with other enterprise information systems (ie. ERP, SCM and business intelligence). Some cross-departmental and systems' integration problems were the lot of the logistics company. However, the Bank expanded more than its counterparts its system across its frontiers for external collaboration with other partners. Thus, it changed its CRM system version more than the rest.

Retirement

All the organizations at one time have experienced inadequacies in their systems to reach business goals and needs; managers thus, substituted them for state-of-the-art CRM system technologies (Hart et al., 2004).

5. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The three Chinese service-sector case studies seem to evince high CRM Life-cycle experience with the Bank showing a steep learning curve followed by the logistics company. Adoption of CRM appears to be well-thought of with implementation much attention since that phase was perceived to be the most risky. The company groups have ample room for improvement: recognise the diversity of experience and needs of different customers; device practical and simple CRM performance measure; sponsor different activities and education for stakeholders; predict future value/growth and increased marketing research.

Overall, the Bank has a clear vision of desired strategic position and the capacity to differentiate brand and products through superior customer service. All companies possess recognisable CRM system strategies. But, it has not been easy capturing the benefits which their systems have brought them. Further research needs to be done on performance measurement and management. Inter-departmental bickering that usually accompanies enterprise-wide adoption of CRM systems was not reported in the survey. Thus, internal politics to CRM applications tools was no stumbling block to managers.

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