Relationship Marketing in Green Fashion—A Case Study of hessnatur

Elisa Wagner and Cecilia Mark-Herbert

> *The greatest challenge of the upcoming decades lies in combining the economic and ecological requirements of our modern society. This can only be achieved through persistent and active readiness, by all involved, to be part of a sustainable development.*
>
> Heinz Hess, ca. 1995 (hessnatur 2015c)

Abstract Contemporary marketing strategies offer an understanding of the importance of developing relationships with customers to promote sustainable development. This chapter explores how a relatively small German fashion retailer, 'hessnatur,' creates a relationship platform in their promotion of green fashion through dialogue with consumers. The main communicational platforms in their promotion of green fashion are digital, but importance is also given to engaging employees in personal communication with consumers.

Keywords Communication · Corporate social responsibility (CSR) · Green fashion · Relationship marketing · Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME)

1 Introduction

The clothing and textile industry is an important part of the global economy employing 26.5 million people worldwide (Jönsson et al. 2013, 59). The industry is characterized by chronic downward price pressure, international sourcing,

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high product variety, high volatility, and low predictability (Perry and Towers 2013, 478).

Customers, shareholders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public authorities, trade unions, and international organizations are showing increasing interest in environmental and social challenges related to the fashion industry (Gardetti and Torres 2014). Criticism concerning the treatment of materials, the proliferation of toxins in the workplace and child labor is increasing (Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen 2009, 75; Sevcenko 2013). Despite the critique and an increased awareness of risk in the fashion industry, major disaster still happen, e.g., the collapse of an eight-story garment factory in Rana Plaza in April 2013 in the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. In this disaster, some 1129 people were killed, and many more were injured (Butler 2013).

In light of the complex problems in fashion-supply chains, an increasing number of companies and designers realize their chance to differentiate by taking responsibility. As designer and founder of an eco-networking site van der Grinten puts it, they "want to change the entire fashion industry, because it's one of the most damaging industries in the world" (van der Grinten, quoted by Sevcenko 2013). Smaller brands as well as many multinational companies, including large chains such as C&A, H&M, and Zara, started selling clothes made of ecological fiber (Oberhuber 2014). Moreover, luxury designers—such as Giorgio Armani, Oscar de la Renta, Stella McCartney, Betsey Johnson, and Todd Oldman—are creating green fashion for runways, boutiques, mass markets, and celebrities (Winge 2008, 511). These examples indicate that an eco-image fashion is gaining acceptance among consumers (Weller 2013, 186). Germany is one example of a country in which the green fashion sector is emerging rapidly.

An increased consumer awareness of sustainable development challenges is reflected in gradual changes in consumption. In 2013, approximately 3.6 million pieces of clothing made from ecological fibers were sold in Germany (Oberhuber 2014). In the last 10 years, revenue from green fashion in Germany increased tenfold to currently 654 million Euro. Green fashion now makes up for approximately 4 % of the German clothing industry (Ibid.).

Consumer awareness is also influenced by cultural, financial, social, and environmental context. Berlin, a city that hosts the internationally renowned Fashion Week twice a year, is a cradle for a growing network of smaller, environmental friendly brands (Sevcenko 2013). Approximately 150 eco-brands are located in Germany, and 15 of them have their headquarters in Berlin (Sevcenko 2013; Schirrmacher n.d.).

As one of the pioneers in the field, the company hessnatur helped shape the idea of green fashion. It was founded in Bad Homburg in 1976 by Heinz Hess with the intention of producing ecological baby clothes. The company initiated the world's first organic cotton-growing project in Sekem (Egypt) in 1991 (hessnatur 2013a, 12; 72). The company has continued to pursue a holistic approach toward its sustainable development commitment, in which relationship marketing plays an important role (hessnatur 2013a, 10).

Challenges to establish a common ground between marketing and sustainability are stated by Tim Gnatek as follows (quoted by Shayon 2015):

> Marketing needs to understand how to speak to and message sustainability — there are nuances and tact that are sometimes lost, risking overselling sustainability aspects and jeopardizing trust, or simply missing big-picture opportunities. Likewise, sustainability professionals can miss opportunities to build a story and engage their audiences more fully throughout their journey of improvement.

These challenges are addressed by hessnatur. In an interview, the head of marketing of hessnatur, Betina Breucha, described what the notion of "marketing" means to her personally (hessnatur 2015d):

> For me, marketing means to take our present as well as future customers seriously. We have to understand what role hessnatur and fashion in general plays in the life of our customers. What relevance does our messages have for them? Does our communication reach our customers correctly or how we intended? Are we meeting at eye level and are we understandable? What can we develop from our history and our products, that is attractive and useful for our customers? Our credo is that humans should feel comfortable with fashion from hessnatur. However, this is a very subjective feeling. I can feel comfortable wearing a soft cardigan and having a feeling of security. I can also feel comfortable through the resonance from other people, this can be a "You look good today!" from someone.

This statement can be seen as an indicator that customers play an important role in the marketing strategies of hessnatur. Because the company pursues the production of ecological clothes with a holistic perspective on sustainable development, it is a suitable basis for trying to understand and analyze how marketing and sustainable development in the green fashion sector can be combined.

Parker et al. (2015, 365) noted that comparatively little research has examined how small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices using media outlets such as web sites. This chapter aims at contributing to close this gap by presenting a case study of hessnatur's marketing-communication strategies using the communication aspect of relationship marketing. Because hessnatur's culture and approach to manufacturing are focused on producing clothes as sustainably as possible while taking economic, social and environmental aspects into account, hessnatur's communication strategy is intrinsically connected to CSR and therefore lends itself well to this cause.

In this chapter, the notion of relationship marketing will be defined—before communications aspects are described and connections to the stakeholder theory are made—all with a focus on customers. In the following section, a literature overview on theoretical and empirical studies in the field of marketing, CSR, and SMEs will be provided. Empirical results are presented by introducing more details about hessnatur as well as describing examples from hessnatur's communication strategies with its customers. These examples are analyzed with regard to the relationship marketing-communications aspect introduced and are followed by a discussion that connects the findings to the literature presented. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and suggestions for further research are given (sect. 6).

2 A Conceptual Framework for Relationship Marketing

This section introduces several concepts that are crucial for the analysis (sect. 5); starting with relationship marketing, followed by communication aspects and implications. In this section, relationship marketing communication is linked to the stakeholder theory with a particular focus on customers. Finally, the connection of this conceptual framework links academic views of SMEs and CSR communication.

2.1 Definition and Development

Introduced by Neil Borden in his presidential address to the American Marketing Association, the term "marketing mix" refers to the combination of useful components in trying to achieve a certain market response (van Waterschoot and van den Bulte 1992, 84). In this context, many schemata were developed based on McCarthy's (1960) classical "4Ps": product, place, price, and promotion. The latter was split into advertising, personal selling, publicity (in the sense of free advertising), and sales promotion; this has become the most frequently cited and used concept in marketing practice as well as research (van Waterschoot and van den Bulte 1992, 84). Kent (1986, 146) even referred to the 4 Ps as "the holy quadruplet," which implies how much influence the concept has gained in the area of marketing.

In 1983, Leonard L. Berry presented a paper at the American Marketing Association's Services Marketing Conference introducing the term "relationship marketing," a different approach to marketing than the 4Ps (Berry 2002).

Berry introduced the concept in the context of service firms and defined it as follows (Berry 2002, 61):

> Relationship Marketing is attracting, maintaining and – in multi-service organizations – enhancing customer relationships. Servicing and selling existing customers is viewed to be just as important to long-term marketing success as acquiring new customers. Good service is necessary to retain the relationship. Good selling is necessary to enhance it. The marketing mind-set is that the attraction of new customers is merely the first step in the marketing process. Cementing the relationship, transforming indifferent customers into loyal ones, serving customers as clients – this is marketing, too.

Relationship marketing is seen as more than just a set of techniques, tools, and tactics (Palmer 1997). It is a philosophy, a sum of integrated parts that are the drivers of a firm's marketing activities (Berry 2002, 73; Grönroos 1996, 12). According to Berry (2002, 73), to implement excellent relationship marketing strategies, executives must ask "… *how must we fundamentally change what we do and how we do it to create lifetime customers?*" When presenting his paper in 1983, Berry could not imagine a phenomenon such as the Internet, which would tremendously influence the behaviors of customer as well as the marketing

practices and communication of companies. Today, "*customers can communicate, learn from and buy from marketing organizations without a word being spoken*" (Berry 2002, 72).

Trust and commitment are two concepts at the center of relationship marketing with trust defined in this context as "confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, 23) Commitment exists when the relationship is considered important by the parties involved and when they are willing to work at maintaining the relationship (Ibid.).

Moreover, Calonius (1988) argued that the concept of promise is an important element of relationship marketing. A responsibility of marketing activities includes not only giving promises and persuading customers to act in a certain way, but also keeping these promises. This contributes to maintaining and enhancing a relationship with customers. Additionally, Blomqvist et al. (1993) defined three key characteristics of relationship marketing: consideration of every customer as an individual person or unit, concentration of activities on existing customers, and implementation of activities based on interaction and dialogue with customers (Fig. 1).

In a study with Malaysian banks, Ndubisi (2007) identified conflict-handling as another underpinning of relationship marketing. The results of Ndubisi's empirical study implied that four underpinning factors (trust, commitment, communication, and conflict handling) have the greatest influence on customer loyalty: The greater the extent of these underpinnings, the more loyal customers will tend to be towards an organization (Ndubisi 2007, 103).

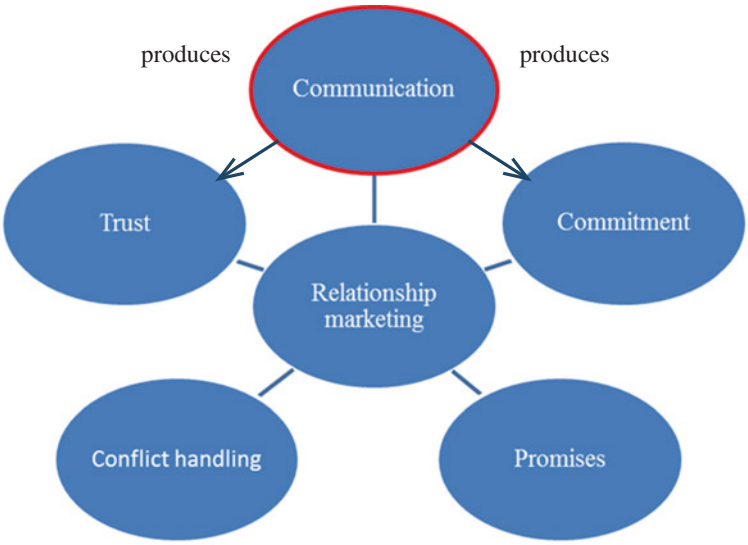


Fig. 1 Illustration of the central aspects of the relationship marketing concept. This section focuses on the aspect of communication

As shown in Fig. 1, trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling, and promises have been identified by various scholars as important parts of the relationship marketing concept. This chapter focuses on the *communication* aspects of relationship marketing (Fig. 1). The argument is that it sets the conditions for the identified cornerstones in relationship marketing.

2.2 Communication

Classical readings, such as Grönroos (1994, 10) emphasize the importance of market communication that entails the creation of a dialogue with customers. However, according to Duncan and Moriarty (1998, 3), relationship marketing research often does not focus on the communication process as a central part in establishing and maintaining relationships. Instead, above-mentioned concepts of trust and commitment, which are products of communication (see Fig. 1), were at the center of relationship-marketing literature in the late 1990s (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 3).

Duncan and Moriarty (1998, 2) define communication as

> […] the human activity that links people together and creates relationships. It is at the heart of meaning-making activities not only in marketing, but also in a wide range of political, social, economic, and psychological areas. It serves as a way to develop, organize, and disseminate knowledge.

According to Ndubisi (2007, 100), communication in the relationship-marketing context refers "to the ability to provide timely and trustworthy information," maintaining contact with customers, and informing customers proactively in case a problem occurs. If a customer is not satisfied, the company communicates clearly what steps will be taken to solve the problem (Ibid.). Figure 2 illustrates the central position of communication in relationship marketing.

An important aspect of communication is feedback. It refers to the continued dialogue where the sender receives a response from the person to whom the message was sent. Schramm (1973, 48) defines feedback as a "*reversal of the flow, an opportunity for communicators to react quickly to signs resulting from the signs they have put out.*" Without feedback, there is no dialogue. However, this dialogue must be purposeful for both the company as well as customers. If this is not the case, brand messages might be seen as intrusive or implausible (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 8).

The new technological development described previously has significantly changed the concept of feedback. On websites, including blogs or internet forums, feedback to companies can be given "instantaneously, more far reaching, and in greater quantities" (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 4). Moreover, in consumer behavior research it is emphasized that consumers decide within a "constellation of consumption activities, situations, social environments, and related products" (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 5).

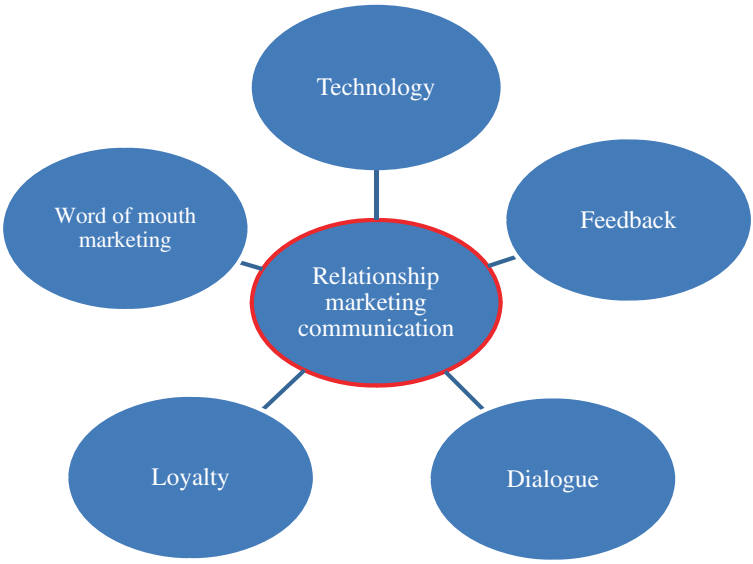


Fig. 2 Illustration of the central aspects of relationship-marketing communication

Factors—including an increasing recognition of relationship marketing's benefits to both firms and customers as well as the aforementioned progress in information technology—have led to an emerging interest in relationship marketing starting in the early 1990s (Berry 2002, 76; Grönroos 1996, 12). Grönroos (1996, 12) interprets this growing interest for relationship marketing as the largest paradigmatic shift in marketing since the introduction of marketing mix in the 1960s.

Due to globalization and intense competition, relationship marketing became of interest for retail consumer markets including small and medium-sized fashion retailers. It is crucial for retailers to create brand loyalty among their customers because loyalty has several benefits both for retailers and customers and makes access for competition difficult (Marzo-Navarro et al. 2004, 425). From a strategic-management perspective, one of the benefits a firm experiences from customer loyalty is an increase of profits per customer. The longer customers stay with a company, the more willing they are to spend more money or recommend the company to other people (e.g., family, friends). Murray (1991, 19) showed that service customers rely more on personal sources of information than impersonal ones such as mass or selective media. This is an indicator for the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication through ambassadorship. As research has shown, a satisfied customer will, on average, share that experience with at least three persons. However, negative experiences will spread with the same speed or even faster (Ndubisi 2004, 80f.). Loyal customers as communicators of favorable WOM about organizations can therefore attract new customers. Moreover, loyal customers can serve as valuable sources of new product ideas (Ndubisi 2007, 103; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995, 264). Therefore, companies seek profitability by building

long-term relationships with customers (Reichheld and Sasser 1990, 106ff). This is especially crucial for small- and medium-sized enterprises with limited marketing departments; they may benefit in many ways from customers' dialogue and positive WOM marketing.

The next section introduces stakeholder theory emphasizing the importance of communication, especially with customers.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is another concept closely linked to relationship marketing. According to stakeholder theory, a business is "an open and flexible system made up of diverse actors and active in a network of relationships with various other actors" (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, 5). Moreover, although stakeholders show concern for issues that affect them directly (e.g. product safety), they are also interested in issues that have no direct effect on their welfare but concern people in general or the environment (e.g., child labor) (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, 7). Although firms may react to stakeholder pressure and develop CSR strategies and measures to communicate with customers, some organizations have their own norms and may commit to a cause independently of any stakeholder pressure. These norms may even exceed expectations from particular stakeholders (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, 10).

Additionally, Duncan and Moriarty (1998, 7) state that "at the organizational level, a company's or brand's stakeholder relationships involve far more than just customers." They include many more actors such as the financial community, vendors and suppliers, employees, competitors, the media, neighbors and community leaders, special interest groups, and government agencies (Mitchell et al. 1997, 855ff.; Parker et al. 2015, 366ff.). These groups can affect and be affected by a company's marketing (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 7). This chapter concentrates on the stakeholder group of customers (Fig. 3).

To successfully communicate brand messages with the help of relationship-marketing communication, these messages must be consistent and positively influence brand perception (Duncan and Moriarty 1998, 6ff). Strategic consistency implies that there is a consistency in the presentation of corporate values, the performance of production, and the identification and positioning of the brand. Moreover, brand messages must focus on stakeholders and ensure that brand communications are interactive. Interactivity is created by a mix of one-way (e.g. mass media advertising) and two-way communication (e.g. personal selling, customer service) (Ibid.). Interactivity is crucial in relationship marketing because the relationship between consumers and a company becomes stronger when consumers are actively involved in the decisions of the company. Through this involvement, they become more committed to the relationship and are less likely to switch to a competitor (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995, 256). Moreover, when a firm uses communication to create an increasing interaction with its stakeholders, identification of stakeholders with the company is likely to be enhanced (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, 15).

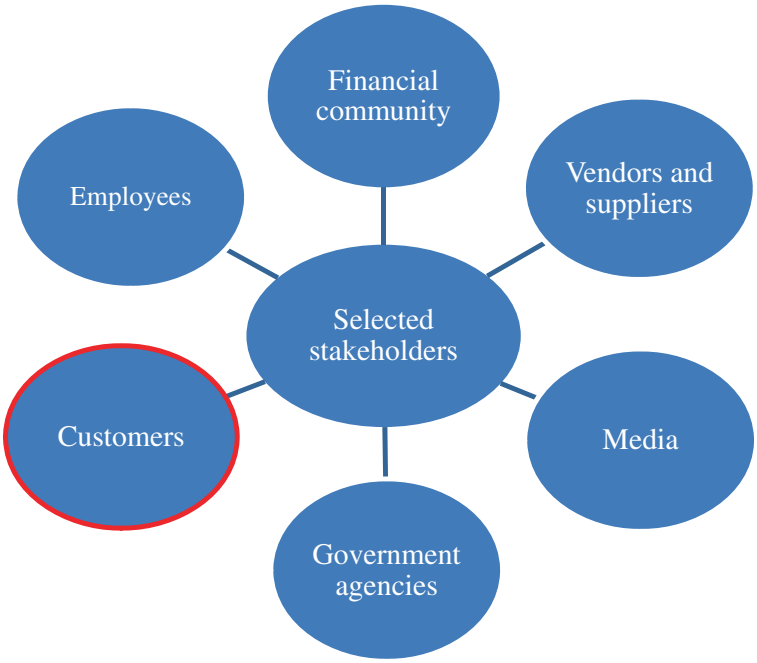


Fig. 3 Illustration of a firm's selected stakeholders. This chapter concentrates on the stakeholder group referred to as "customers."

2.4 Relationship Marketing and SMEs

Several characteristics of SMEs, including advantages such as greater flexibility, innovation, and lower overhead costs, differentiate them from large organizations (McCartan-Quinn and Carson 2003, 202). However, compared with large organizations, SMEs are disadvantaged when it comes to market power as well as accessing financial and managerial resources (Ibid.; Walsh and Lapinski 2009, 571).

Identifying the needs, wants, and aspirations of its target markets are is critical for a firm's success (Walsh and Lapinski 2009, 569). This is one of the aims of marketing that "places the consumer at the center of the firm's activities" (Fuller 1994, 34). The goals of marketing processes are to satisfy customers more effectively and efficiently than competing firms but also to establish long-term profitability (Ibid.). However, relationship marketing seems to be a valuable tool for SMEs, especially due to their smaller size, greater flexibility, and restricted resources. By creating positive, long-term relationships with their customers and using favorable WOM communication, SMEs can invest in marketing and benefit from relationships with their customers as previously described.

Moreover, when it comes to CSR, communication can play an important role in highlighting a message for which both the organization and its stakeholders

care. In this case, CSR can be a "potential bond between the firm and its stakeholders" (Maignan and Ferrell 2004, 15). However, although communication with customers is such an important aspect of relationship marketing and CSR strategies, Maignan and Ferrell (2004, 17) point out that there is still a need for more research in this field. Especially examination of communication strategy and relevant media that can be used for communication of CSR measures within the relationship marketing context is needed. Moreover, Maignan and Ferrell (2004, 17) suggest that businesses cannot benefit from CSR "*unless they intelligently communicate about their initiatives to relevant stakeholders.*"

3 Literature Overview

This section provides a literature overview (late 1990s to current date) on theoretical as well as empirical studies connected to SMEs, relationship marketing, and CSR. The sources will first be summarized in Table 1 and are then described in more detail in the following text.

Barnes (1994) reviewed how the relationship concept has been viewed by different marketing authors. The review points out that there exists a deficiency in the ways in which relationship marketing has been viewed in the past. With insights from social psychology, the author aims at identifying the nature of relationships.

Table 1 Overview on literature in the area of relationship marketing, the development of marketing concepts, and CSR and SMEs

Author (year of publication)	Title	Key findings
Barnes (1994)	Close to the customer: But is it really a relationship?	There are large differences in how relationship marketing is practiced and understood by firms and customers, with some definitions revealing obvious deficiencies
Bejou and Palmer (1998)	Service failure and loyalty: an exploratory empirical study of airline customers	Any given level of service failure resulted in reduction in commitment and trust, which was dependent on the duration to date of their relationship
Blois (1998)	Don't all firms have relationships?	Given its particular circumstances, a firm should determine what types of relationships are appropriate with each of its customers
Chaston (1998)	Evolving "New Marketing" philosophies by merging existing concepts: application of process within small high-technology firms	An entrepreneurial relationship-marketing orientation will enhance overall performance of these firms

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Author (year of publication)	Title	Key findings
Parker et al. (2015)	SME stakeholder relationship descriptions in website CSR communications	Reporting of the company's relationships with stakeholders—including society, communities, ecological environment employees, customers and suppliers—is an important aspect of CSR communication
Hwang and Kandampully (2015)	Embracing CSR in pro-social relationship marketing program: understanding driving forces of positive consumer responses	Consumers' CSR-driven cognition (CSR beliefs) and reciprocal emotion (feeling of gratitude) enhance their attitudes towards prosocial loyalty programs and increased participation intentions
O'Malley and Tynan (2000)	Relationship marketing in consumer markets—Rhetoric or reality?	Diversity in operational approaches employed and the lack of accepted definitions had caused boundaries of the concept to become permeable and elastic, making it difficult to identify appropriate contexts for empirical research. It remains unclear whether marketers have internalized the philosophy of relationship marketing
Sen and Bhattacharya (2001)	Does doing good always lead to doing Better? consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility	Findings implicate both company-specific factors (e.g., the CSR issues on which a company chooses to focus as well as product quality) and individual-specific factors (e.g., consumers' personal support for the CSR issues and their general beliefs about CSR) as key moderators of consumers' responses to CSR. The results also highlight the mediating role of consumers' perceptions of congruence between their own characters and that of the company in their reactions to its CSR initiatives. CSR initiatives can, under certain conditions, decrease consumers' intentions to buy a company's products
Webster (1992)	The changing role of marketing in the corporation	A new conception of marketing will focus on maintaining strategic partnerships with customer relationship as the key strategic resource of the business
Yan et al. (2012)	Marketing eco-fashion: the influence of brand name and message explicitness	Respondents formed positive attitudes toward apparel brands when the advertising message contained explicit information about environmentally friendly products. Attitude toward brand, subjective norm, attitude toward advertisement, eco-fashion involvement, and environmental commitment were strong predictors of intention to purchase an environmentally friendly apparel brand

He criticizes that "repeat business" alone does not mean that the customer is loyal. One reason for repeat purchases might be that it is convenient for a customer to buy a certain product, e.g., customers might be locked into a pseudo-relationship that is one-sided without the customers being willing participants (Barnes 1994, 565). Moreover, with a preliminary analysis of more than 40 focus group interviews, the author made a start to understand the relationship from customers' point of view (Ibid.). These interviews showed a range of relationships from the establishment of a positive, long-term relationship to relationships that customers have difficulty describing because they are anonymous or the service provided by the company is automatic.

Similar to Barnes, O'Malley and Tynan (2000) present a critical review of the history of relationship marketing in consumer markets. A number of critical issues that remain unresolved, including the diversity in operational approaches employed and the lack of accepted definitions, are identified in the review. This caused the boundaries of the concept to become permeable and elastic, making it difficult to identify appropriate contexts for empirical research. The authors conclude that the academy has extended the domain of relationship marketing into consumer markets with a lack of conceptual and empirical justification. Moreover, it remains unclear whether or not marketers have internalized the philosophy of relationship marketing.

Connected to Barnes and O'Malley and Tynan (2000), Blois (1998) argued in his paper "Don't all firms have relationships?" that it is impossible for firms not to have relationships. He suggests that firms should determine what types of relationships are appropriate with each of its customers depending on the circumstances of the firm. The depth of relationships might vary including situations where both supplier and customer recognize and accept their mutual interest. However, according to Blois (1998), a firm does not have a choice to decide whether or not it has relationships.

Webster (1992) advocates for strategic management, the conception of marketing as maintaining strategic partnerships, with customer relationship as the key strategic resource of the business. Moreover, he argues that strategic partnerships and networks are replacing simple market-based transactions and traditional bureaucratic hierarchical organizations. Importance is given to personal, targeted, special-purpose communication will be important, and the implementation of market-driven strategy will require skills in designing, developing, managing, and controlling strategic alliances with partners of all kind.

Chaston (1998) carried out a mail survey connected to performance and customer orientation to measure the revenue growth of small high-technology firms. Results of the study suggested that an entrepreneurial relationship-marketing orientation will enhance overall performance of these firms. However, Chaston (1998) points out that the danger of alternative emerging theories lays in researchers rejecting alternative points of view, even though hybrid approaches might be an appropriate solution to certain marketing issues. Moreover, Chaston (1998) emphasizes that the results of the study cannot be seen as prescriptive recommendations about the best style for small high-technology firms to adopt but that it

is important to recognize the company's circumstances as well as the manager's influence.

Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) conducted two studies to understand when, how, and why consumers react to CSR by focusing on both some key moderators of consumers' CSR responses and the mechanisms underlying these responses. Results implicated that both company-specific (i.e., the CSR domain, product quality) and individual-specific (i.e., CSR support, CSR-related beliefs) factors as key moderators of consumers' responses to CSR initiatives and highlight the mediating role played by consumers' perceptions of congruence between their own characters and that of the company.

Connected to Sen and Bhattacharya's (2001) investigation, Yan et al. (2012) conducted a study with ambitions to explore the influence of brand name and message explicitness on attitude toward brand. Their results indicate that respondents showed positive attitudes toward apparel brands when the advertising message contained explicit information. Moreover, attitude toward eco-fashion involvement and environmental commitment were strong predictors of intention to purchase an environmental friendly apparel brand. Implications are that when using more explicit information, marketers might be able to attract college students who are interested in environmentally friendly products but who are not fully committed to the green lifestyle. Moreover, by raising awareness about environmental friendly products, customers might be informed about sustainability issues at large.

Hwang and Kandampully (2015) collected data from 350 US consumers through web-based experiments to find out which factors influence consumers' responses to prosocial loyalty programs (prosocial LPs). These positive marketing programs represent an emerging phenomenon in relationship marketing associated with companies' CSR. Findings suggested that consumers' CSR-driven cognition (CSR beliefs) and reciprocal emotion (feeling of gratitude) enhance their attitudes towards prosocial loyalty programs and increased participation intentions. These results imply that loyalty programs might be a helpful approach to relationship marketing that might benefit companies that engage in CSR and overall.

Parker et al. (2015) carried out a qualitative content analysis of 22 Australian SME websites from the information media and telecommunications sector. Stakeholder theory was used as a basis for analysis. Their findings suggested that the reporting of the company's relationships with stakeholders—including society, communities, ecological environment employees, customers, and suppliers—is an important aspect of CSR communication. Communication examples on websites highlighted the three-way relationship between the firm, its customers, and other stakeholders including the community and the environment. Firms were using CSR as a way to promote to customers or to justify that the firm was worthy of their patronage (Parker et al. 2015).

Bejou and Palmer (1998) investigated a different aspect of relationship marketing: Handling service failure. They conducted interviews with customers to find out what customers perceive as a negative critical incident in their contact with airlines and how this might affect their relationship with the company. The results indicate that there appears to be a critical period in the development of a

relationship between customer and company when tolerance of services failure is very low. Quality of service and its effects on relationship quality are not perceived by customers in a constant manner throughout the duration of a relationship. One of several possible explanations might be that a long-term relationship might lead the customer to emphasize with the problems faced by the provider in trying to deliver high-quality service whereas relative new customers might be alienated through service failures because failures occurred before they had time to develop a relationship with the company (Bejou and Palmer 1998).

The literature review offers academic perspectives on relationship marketing from the time period of the late 1990s to current date. These insights offer a starting point for the continued understanding of how relationship marketing is used in a sustainable development perspective.

4 A Case Study—hessnatur

This section provides an overview of the case that will be analyzed, as well as different communication examples, which reveal how hessnatur uses relationship marketing to communicate with its customers.

4.1 Background Information

Hessnatur was founded in 1976 in Bad Homburg, Germany, by Dorothea and Heinz Hess. The company is a pioneer in the production of ecological clothing and produces clothing free from toxics and made under fair working conditions (hessnatur 2013a, 10). In 2008, hessnatur won the German Sustainability Award ("Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspreis") in the category "Germany's most sustainable purchasing department" (hessnatur 2013a, 12).

Currently, hessnatur has 343 employees and a turnover of approximately 70 million Euro per year (hessnatur 2013a, p. 28, 35). In 2005, the company joined the "Fair Wear Foundation" as the first German enterprise (hessnatur 2013a, 60). In the financial year 2011–2012, hessnatur worked with 119 suppliers, 75% of these suppliers were from Europe. Out of these 119 suppliers, 83 were in the textile area (hessnatur 2013a, 56ff.).

According to an interview statement by the former chief executive of hessnatur, Wolf Lüdge, the company gains 75% of its new customers through recommendations (Täubner 2012). Moreover, approximately 20–25% of hessnatur's customers can be classified as "dark green," describing customers who are often close to nature and who reject the pursuit of profit (Ibid.)

Hessnatur uses several channels to communicate with its stakeholders including the internet (online shop, blog, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest). However,

meetings with customers and the Client Council, to be described in more detail later in the text, are also part of hessnatur's communication strategy (hessnatur 2013a, 23). Table 2 summarizes the most important facts about the company.

In the following text, examples concerning strategies to communicate with customers will be described. Table 3 provides a short overview of these examples, which will then be described in more detail and finally analyzed in sect. 5.

Table 2 Company data (hessnatur 2013a, 10)

Year of foundation	1976
Corporate form	Ltd. (German: GmbH)
Range of goods	Full range of natural textiles, approximately 900–1000 models and approximately 8000 article items per season: – Women's and men's outerwear – Clothes for children and infants – Underwear and stockings – Home textiles – Shoes
Market position	Leading provider of natural textiles in German-speaking countries
Distribution channels	– Shipping (catalog) – Stationary sales (shops) – E-commerce (online shop)
Main sales markets	Germany, Switzerland, Austria
Branches	Shops in Butzbach, Hamburg, and Munich; remainders shop in Butzbach
Daughter company	Hess Natur-Textilien AG, Aarwangen (Schweiz)
Branch office	Austria
Company founder	Heinz Hess (died March 18, 2006)
Executive director	Marc Sommer (chairman)
Employees	343
Trainees	9
Client base	1,000,000
Revenue 2012	70 million €

Table 3 Summary of hessnatur's relationship marketing communication strategies

hessnatur blog	Product tests carried out by hessnatur customers that were reported on hessnatur blog
	Hiking trip with customers including an experiment to test the quality of hessnatur's fabrics
Client council	Meetings and outings of the client council (combined with, e.g., a visit by linen farmers)
hessnatur foundation for applied sustainability	Communication with a wider range of stakeholders, initiation of projects about environmental protection, textile ecology, development cooperation, and social topics

4.2 Online Blog

In 2008, hessnatur started an online blog where the company publishes current news about products, production processes, social projects, and projects with customers (among others). On this blog, readers can leave comments. Hessnatur can read and respond to these comments directly, thereby creating a dialogue with and between customers (hessnatur 2008). The internet platform is an example of a relationship marketing communication tool hessnatur uses to establish relationships through dialogue.

In this section, actions and initiatives published on hessnatur blog will be presented in detail.

In October 2012, customers could test cardigans and share their experiences on the hessnatur blog (hessnatur 2012f, h). The company set tasks for the tester, e.g. hanging the cardigan made out of natural wool in the bathroom next to a cotton shirt while showering (hessnatur 2012b). The goal of this task was to demonstrate that natural wool is more water-repellent than cotton. The testers were also asked, for example, to dirty the cardigan in order to determine the dirt-repellant characteristics of the piece of clothing (hessnatur 2012a). Additional tasks tested the fabric's crease resistance as well as its wear comfort among others (hessnatur 2012a, c).

In the comment section, customers could write comments about their experiences. Moreover, a quiz on hessnatur was used to select a single customer who then got the opportunity to write reports on the blog about her personal experiences (hessnatur 2012d, e, g). Thus, customers could not only comment on hessnatur's tasks but could actually create blog content. While sharing positive experiences about the product, the reporter had the possibility to voice criticism as well, as the following statement form an article written by the customer indicates (hessnatur 2012i):

> Unfortunately, the fitting is not ideal and I have to get used to the shape of the neckline. The cardigan appears very classic. However, I am rather the sporty type and like to wear T-shirts, hoodies and mainly casual clothes including basics without patterns or ruffles. I appear more serious wearing the cardigan, but also more conservative and 3-4 years older. I might have liked a smaller sized cardigan more and it would have fit better as well. If I had ordered the cardigan, I am sure I would have changed it for another […] We will see, maybe I have to get used to the new look.

A similar test was carried out for a hessnatur bath towel. Hessnatur summarized the results of the product tests as follows (hessnatur 2014b):

> 82 % were satisfied with the size of the bath towel
>
> 88 % would buy the hessnatur bath towel
>
> 89 % liked the bath towel's feeling on the skin
>
> 96 % liked the bath towel's finishing.

Additionally, hessnatur summarized positive as well as negative feedback:

> A bigger selection of colors would be nice

> An additional hanger loop on the long side would be great. This makes it easier to hang the towel without letting it drag on the ground. I think the absorbency could be better. Besides that, the towel is perfect and has a great color. Keep it up!

Another example of an initiative that involved customers is a hiking trip with customers that hessnatur organized in October 2013. Goal of this trip was to test hessnatur's functional underwear made out of merino wool, compare it with synthetic long-sleeve shirts from other companies, and demonstrate that the former is better suited for sporting activities. In this case, customers were part of an experiment: Each participant got had a so-called I-button attached to the upper body, which measures the amount of perspiration as well as changes in body temperature (hessnatur 2013b). Subsequently the collected data were analyzed. Results indicated that wool serves as a buffer compensating for fluctuations between skin surface and outside temperature. Ecological merino wool stores moisture and regulates moisture exchange naturally (hessnatur 2014a).

In 2013, hessnatur implemented another strategy to get customers involved with the company: the hessnatur client council.

4.3 Client Council

Hessnatur implemented a client council to represent hessnatur's customers. This council accompanies the company's development and observes whether hessnatur meets its standards and works according to the company's values and principles (hessnatur n.d.).

The client council examines and discusses the work of hessnatur. Moreover, they communicate the results of their discussions and meetings publicly. Their work creates a bridge between the company and its customers. According to hessnatur, impulses given by the client council are important to develop the company both according to its own values and standards as well as to the customers' interests. Suggestions from the client council can lead to strategic and operational decisions (hessnatur n.d.).

In June 2013, the client council was elected for the first time (Fig. 4). All members of the general public were invited to stand as candidates. Originally, the planned 150 members of the parliament were to be selected through a lottery under the supervision of a notary. However, as hessnatur reserved the right to allocate some seats directly, and also due to the large public interest, the client council was eventually extended to 200 seats (hessnatur 2013c, d). The speakers' panel (German: Sprechergremium), comprised of 12 delegates of the council, was then selected during a personal meeting of all council members, and it is responsible for voicing the opinion of the client council to the media and to hessnatur themselves (hessnatur 2013d; hessnatur n.d.). Visiting hessnatur's production sites gives the client council deeper insights into hessnatur's production processes (hessnatur 2015a). These visits are one possibility on which exchange with the company's management takes place. The client council has the possibility to give direct feedback to the management about past and planned future strategic decisions (hessnatur n.d.).

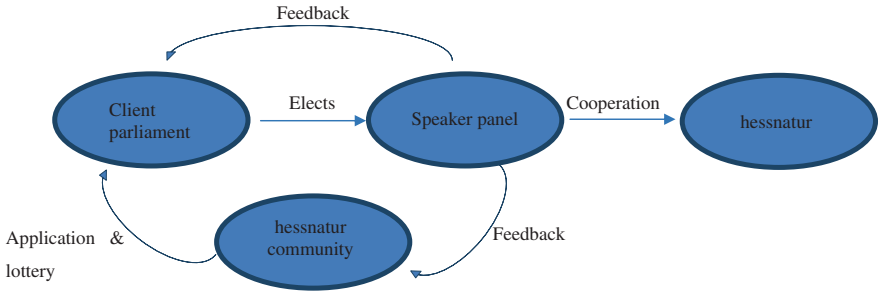


Fig. 4 Structure of the hessnatur client council (based on hessnatur n.d.)

In early 2015, hessnatur established the Foundation for Applied Sustainability, the company's most recent attempt to keep a dialogue going with both its customers and other stakeholders.

4.4 Foundation for Applied Sustainability

In establishing the hessnatur Foundation for Applied Sustainability, an institutional platform was created to inform the public about sustainable businesses. Cooperation with partners, companies, organizations, or scientific institutions is planned to be a central element of the foundation's work in order to communicate about sustainability and encourage awareness of sustainability issues. With the hessnatur foundation, this is possible independent of hessnatur's daily business activities and can be done with greater intensity. The foundation focuses on topics about environmental protection, textile ecology, development cooperation, and social topics. Projects include the support of education institutes and universities and the organization of workshops or projects connected to material development (hessnatur 2015b, c). The next chapter section will analyze the examples introduced in light of the conceptual framework developed in Sect. 2.

5 Analytical Discussion

In the following, the concept of relationship marketing introduced in Sect. 2 will be applied to the German fashion retailer hessnatur (see Sect. 4). It analyzes to what extent the fashion retailer has implemented relationship-marketing strategies based on the examples introduced in Sect. 4 including the online blog, the Client Council and the Foundation for Applied Sustainability.

5.1 Online Blog

The initiatives presented on the blog are examples of relationship-marketing tools that cover the main aspects of relationship-marketing communication. Hessnatur set several objectives over a limited period of time. During this time, the company engaged in a dialogue with its customers and received valuable feedback about their products as well. In addition, hessnatur offered customers the possibility to create blog content themselves. This can be interpreted as another aspect of relationship marketing that is facilitated by the progress of information technologies. Additionally, by letting customers share their views, including critical opinions, this form of customer-created marketing presents a certain credibility (see quote of product testers concerning the cardigan and bath towels in Sect. 4).

In organizing a hiking tour in combination with an experiment, hessnatur created an experience shared between customers and employees of hessnatur. It is likely that customers that went to this hiking trip felt as part of a community, thus making this initiative an example of a bonding experience. Customers who shared such an experience were most likely already customers of hessnatur because participants had to apply for this trip. Therefore, it is likely that people who knew about this trip were involved with the company prior to the hike, although it cannot be excluded that people received information about the experiment without having been customers at hessnatur. However, current customers that were part of the hiking tour are likely to continue purchasing at hessnatur, to become loyal customers, and to share their positive experience with other people including friends or families. By doing so, they are spreading positive word of mouth and attracting new customers. At the same time, hessnatur received valuable feedback and data about their products that they can use in future production and/or marketing activities. These aspects are important for well-functioning relationship-marketing communication.

5.2 Client Council

The Client Council discusses hessnatur's projects and exchanges opinions with hessnatur's executive board and employees (see Sect. 4.3).

By developing a Client Council, hessnatur implemented another relationship-marketing strategy that unites several aspects of relationship-marketing communication including the creation of a dialogue and the reception of feedback from customers. In that sense, it has similar implications to the product-testing initiatives analyzed previously.

However, in case of the Client Council, feedback refers not only to products as in the above-mentioned examples but also to internal decision processes as well. In addition, the hessnatur client council makes customers advisors of the company by entering a dialogue about the company's strategies and planned changes. Moreover,

the council receives confidential information. By doing so, hessnatur shows trust in the representation of its customers and indicates that the company takes their advice seriously. The speakers' panel is an additional element of the council that connects it to the public including a wider range of hessnatur's customers.

In the next section, the hessnatur Foundation of Applied Sustainability is analyzed before closing the paper with pointing to hessnatur's combination of virtual and personal communication channels.

5.3 Foundation for Applied Sustainability

The establishment of a foundation can be seen as another relationship marketing initiative, although it is different from the other initiatives described previously. The hessnatur Foundation for Applied Sustainability does not concentrate solely on the stakeholder group of customers but on other stakeholders as well, including, for example, companies, organizations, or scientific institutions. However, by engaging in different projects and organizing workshops, hessnatur might deepen their relationships with existing customers as well as gain new customers from these environments. The creation of a foundation can be seen as another relationship marketing tool because the focus of the initiative lies on interaction and dialogue with both customers and other stakeholders.

The previous analysis reveals that hessnatur keeps both virtual and personal contact with its customers. By doing so, the company gives customers a platform to communicate and voice their opinions from all over the world. By maintaining personal contact and creating experiences, the company might keep their loyal customers and even attract new ones due to the spread of positive word of mouth. Finally, by combining these measures, hessnatur, as a middle-sized company, established tools for relationship-marketing communication that can help the company retain loyal customers and save expenses in PR and marketing departments.

The following part of this chapter will discuss these results regarding the literature review presented in Sect. 3.

5.4 Discussion and Summary

First, Parker et al. (2015) found communication examples on websites highlighting relationships with society, communities, ecological environment, employees, customers, and suppliers that promote the company to customers and show that the company is worthy of their patronage. These aspects are important parts of CSR communication. This finding is supported by the examples found on hessnatur's blog, which encourage the relationship of hessnatur with customers as described previously.

Moreover, Webster (1992) suggests that personal, targeted, special-purpose communication is important for companies. This is supported by the analysis of

the examples of hessnatur's communication strategies listed previously. Initiatives posted on hessnatur's blog address customers directly and encourage them to participate in product testing or experiments (see Sect. 4). Webster (1992) further argues that the implementation of market-driven strategies will include designing, developing, managing, and controlling strategic alliances with partners of all kinds. The establishment of the hessnatur Foundation for Applied Sustainability, which plans projects and workshops with a wider range of stakeholders besides customers, supports this point of view (see Sect. 4.4).

Concerning the attitudes of customers, Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) identified company and individual-specific factors as key moderators of consumers' responses to CSR initiatives. Moreover, consumers' perceptions of congruence between their own characters and that of the company played an important role when it comes to consumers' responses to CSR. Results of the preliminary previous analysis seem to support this finding. About 20–25% of hessnatur's customer can be classified as "dark green," and initiatives to involve customers in company decisions or product tests created much resonance among hessnatur's customers. Instead of 150 seats as initially planned, the client council was enhanced to 200 seats (see Sect. 4.3) because many customers wanted to be part of the council. Moreover, hessnatur received approximately 47,000 applications for the cardigan product tests, of which 1500 were selected (hessnatur 2012d). These can be seen as indicators that customers of hessnatur are interested in environmental friendly products and do not just react to CSR strategies—which is a key element of hessnatur's corporate culture and the company's communication strategies (see Sect. 4)—but that they view the relationship-marketing strategies implemented by hessnatur positively and want to be actively involved in the company's processes. This in turn encourages meaningful communication between customers and the company in which the customers feel that their opinions are taken seriously and the company receives valuable feedback.

O'Malley and Tynan (2000) argued that the boundaries of the relationship-marketing concept have become permeable and elastic, thus making it difficult to find appropriate contexts for empirical research. However, the examples introduced in Sect. 4 describe communication measures that engage the customer, thereby developing an active relationship between company and relationship. Although O'Malley's and Tynan's (2000) argument is important to keep in mind when doing further research on relationship marketing in retail businesses, the examples in this chapter might be a good demonstration of how far relationship marketing can be taken (e.g., see hessnatur Client Council). Moreover, O'Malley and Tynan (2000) question whether companies really have internalized the philosophy of relationship marketing. Although this is an important question to ask when conducting research in the field of relationship marketing, the examples described in sect. 3 demonstrate that hessnatur indeed has internalized this concept. Not only does the company establish dialogues with its customers, it also makes them its advisors by, e.g., implementing the Client Council.

Barnes (1994) as well as Blois (1998) argued that the depth of relationships between companies and customers varies depending on the context of this relationship.

Moreover, Barnes (1994) criticizes that although a customer repeatedly purchases products from a certain brand, this does not mean he or she does so out of loyalty toward the brand. Buying this brand might be convenient for this customer for another reason, such as that it is the only brand a company has in store; thus, the customer might be in "pseudo-relationships" (Barnes 1994, 565) of which that they are not voluntarily a part. However, this seems not to be true for customers of hessnatur. Considering that hessnatur is one of the pioneers in the retail business of green fashion, that they communicate their values clearly, and that their products are only available through selected channels (see sect. 4), it is unlikely that customers buy clothes from hessnatur solely out of convenience. In addition, the examples demonstrating relationship-marketing initiatives show that the customer chooses to become actively involved with hessnatur by taking part in certain application processes (see sect. 4).

Moreover, Hwang and Kandampully (2015) obtained results from their study indicating that consumers' CSR beliefs, as well as feeling of gratitude, enhance their attitudes toward prosocial loyalty programs and increased participation intention. Although prosocial loyalty programs are not part of this analysis, but rather relationship-marketing initiatives that created a dialogue with and between customers and got them involved in company decisions, the implications of this analysis are similar. Attitudes toward CSR and green fashion of hessnatur customers tend to be positive (see sect. 4). Participation was very high in all the examples previously analyzed. This supports Hwang and Kandampully's (2015) results with regard to relationship-marketing initiatives involving customers.

Additionally, results of the study carried out by Yan et al. (2012) indicated that respondents formed positive attitudes toward apparel brands when the advertising message contained explicit information about environmentally friendly products. Similar to Bhattacharya and Sen's results (2001), attitude toward eco-fashion involvement and commitment were strong predictors of the intention to purchase an environmentally friendly product. In addition, the results indicated that brands can use explicit information about environmental friendly products to educate unaware customers about sustainability issues. These findings support the importance of a brand as shown by Gardetti and Torres (2014) in their studies of sustainable luxury. By using relationship-marketing strategies, hessnatur not only communicates with existing customers but might reach customers who are unaware of environmental problems in the textile industry. This is often the case through WOM marketing as well (see sect. 2.2).

Finally, Bejou and Palmer (1998) point out that there is a critical period in the development of a relationship between customer and company when tolerance of service failure is very low. They suggested that the duration of the relationship might influence the perception of service failure. Although the aforementioned examples do not include service failures, customers have the possibility to voice critical opinions in the comment section on hassnatur's blog. Moreover, the customer reporting the cardigan product test could express their critical thoughts in the articles (see sect. 4.2). This could suggest that customers participating in such initiatives, and who additionally have the possibility to express their opinion, might develop a certain tolerance to service failure. However, this is an aspect that must be examined by further research.

To conclude this discussion, it is crucial to keep in mind what Chaston (1998) pointed out in his study about small high-technology firms: It is important to stay open minded about other views of marketing. Similar to Chaston's (1998) emphasis regarding his results, the analysis provided in this chapter does not suggest that these findings are prescriptive recommendations for all small- and medium-sized fashion retailers. This chapter rather presents one preliminary case study based on selected communication channels of hessnatur. It contributes to the debate about relationship marketing by linking the concept to a green fashion company demonstrating what relationship-communication strategies might be possible for a medium-sized green-fashion retailer. Finally, with regard to the analysis, it is important to keep in mind that "*relationship marketing means different things in different cultures and marketers should be as wary of prescribing universal solutions for exchange bases as they are of developing universal product and promotion for all markets*" (Palmer 1997, 321).

The next section will draw a conclusion and gives suggestions for further research.

6 Conclusion

All initiatives mentioned in this chapter are examples from the field of relationship-marketing communication that incorporate many of the aspects mentioned in sect. 2. Hessnatur manages to not only encourage dialogue between customers and the company but actually integrate customers into product testing and development (see product testing campaign as well as hiking tour described in sect. 4). Moreover, hessnatur takes one step further and makes customers advisors of the company (see hessnatur Client Council described in sect. 4.3). The establishment of the hessnatur foundation might be at the start to develop this kind of dialogue further, thereby informing a wider public about sustainability issues. As discussed in the previous section, this study provided a preliminary single case study demonstrating possibilities of relationship-marketing communication that can support communication strategies with customers in the green-fashion sector.

Further research might include a study analyzing and comparing communication strategies of several retailers in green fashion or retailers that sell parts of their collection as green fashion. Additionally, it is crucial to explore more about the point of view of customers. Further research could explore what effect relationship marketing-communication strategies presented in this chapter have on short- and long-term purchasing behavior of green-fashion customers.

Finally, research can be extended to other stakeholder groups including employees, NGOs, the government or other companies. Questions that must be answered include: How does relationship marketing encourage relationships with these stakeholders? What benefits can small- and medium-sized enterprises gain when cooperating with each other and with other stakeholders when it comes to relationship-marketing communication strategies? How do employees influence

these strategies? What role does word-of-mouth marketing play regarding relationship-marketing communication?

While it might be true that all companies have relationships, as Blois (1998) pointed out, regarding the advance of green-fashion companies in Germany it is crucial to explore these relationships in order to spread awareness about issues in the fashion industry. Customers play a key role in changing the production of fashion and transforming the business into a human and environmentally friendly business in the long run.

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