Corporate social responsibility and loyalty in services sector


Abstract
The current paper analyses the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer behaviour, since it brings up new questions related to the effect of this issue on traditional loyalty models. Starting from a literature review about the concept, several hypotheses about the influence of corporate social responsibility on the traditional antecedents of loyalty, image and valuation of services are formulated. Using a methodology support in personal surveys, the study is able to verify a direct effect of corporate social responsibility on service valuation and, therefore, an indirect influence on loyalty and image.

Key words: corporate social responsibility, commercial responsibility, service evaluation, switching cost, perceived quality, loyalty, image, mobile phone.

JEL codes: M1, M3, M14, M30, M31.

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1. Introduction
In the 60s the idea that companies had responsibilities towards their environment beyond their legal and economic obligations was advocated; the concept of social responsibility arose and several currents of study tried to give it some content and to analyse its real influence. We find ourselves in a new stage, where companies are aware of the need to act responsibly. Consequently, the analysis of widely studied marketing variables have to be reset.

The objective of this research is to study the concept of corporate social responsibility and to verify if behaviour guided by legality, honesty and social orientation should be included as an additional variable in the study of the user’s loyalty to a service. Concretely, its influence on the perception of the service quality and global image of the company is analyzed; variables that, together with switching cost, have been traditionally included in loyalty models.

Interest in carrying out this work comes from various aspects. On the one hand, good social behaviour has proven to have an influence on image (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), although these studies are only centred on corporate philanthropy. The consideration of social responsibility as a multi-dimensional concept thus limits those papers analyzing social matters only (Seifert, Morris and Bartkus, 2003). On the other hand, the lack of research on the effect of social responsibility in the consumers’ segment is still evident. For instance, in the service sector there is a greater implication with consumers, therefore the perception of responsible behaviour is liable to acquire great importance and have direct consequences on the evaluation of service and perceived quality (Sureshchandar, Rajendran and Kamalanabhan, 2001).

Finally, many conclusions have been extracted using experimental methodologies (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Berens, Van Riel and Van Bruggen, 2005), although in a real context the results may vary. For this reason, in this work the methodology of surveys is used to collect direct measurements of the knowledge and opinion of consumers on the social responsibility of companies.
2. Concept and content of socially responsible behaviour

The creation of value within a company is related with the maintenance of responsible behaviour with all stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995); this fact implies developing honest business practices, offering safe and quality products, taking good care of employees, respecting the environment and getting involved in social causes (Esroch and Leichty, 1998). All this without forgetting that companies have economic obligations, related with being productive, obtaining profit and improving their efficiency (Carroll, 1991; Maignan et al., 1999). These ideas are related to the philosophy of social responsibility, which leaves aside the idea that organizations should only be shareholder-oriented, to incorporate other matters in corporate strategy planning. According to Carroll (1979), companies have economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities with respect to all their stakeholders, and these four dimensions give shape to the structure of social responsibility.

This model has become a reference to explain responsible behaviour (Lewin et al., 1995; Maignan et al., 1999); however, in some studies, doubts are introduced in the inclusion of economic matters (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001). Actually, Aupperle et al. (1985) observe that this dimension is inversely correlated with the remaining associations; this result leads them to consider the categories “concern for society” and “concern for economic outcome”. In the same way, García de los Salmones et al. (2005) verify that consumers do not include the economic dimension in the global construct of corporate social responsibility, and Bigné et al. (2006) notice that economic issues are weakly associated with corporate social responsibility practices.

This matter is resolved with the contribution of Graafland et al. (2004). According to these authors, economic dimension is related with product merchandising. Equally, following De la Cuesta and Valor (2003), economic responsibility, from the consumer perspective, is related to train and motivate the personnel who take part in the sales process, and to innovate and improve the production process in order to offer quality products. This fact leads us to consider a “commercial responsibility” concept, leaning on the concepts of quality and perceived value, variables that are tra-
ditionally studied in marketing literature (Bloemer et al., 1999; Hellier et al., 2003).

Concerning the inclusion of social matters, there are not many doubts on this matter. In fact, corporate social responsibility was intended on some occasions to be a one-dimensional variable, centred on the company’s orientation towards society and environment (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Handelmann and Arnold, 1999). However, considering that responsible behaviour includes all moral obligations that maximize the company’s positive impact on the social environment and minimize its negative one (Pride and Ferrell, 1997), it is more correct to widen the concept and regard it as multidimensional (Maignan, 2001; Graafland et al., 2004).

3. Socially responsible behaviour in loyalty models: literary review and foundation of research hypotheses

The purchase of some products can be risky for consumers, a fact that should encourage marketing managers to analyze the perceptions of their products and brands and the strategies used on the part of clients when it comes to buying (Pérez, 2008). The same analysis must be done in order to identify the key attributes to create customer loyalty. In this sense, the first one is to define the true loyalty, differentiating on this matter two approaches: behavioural and attitudinal. The behavioural perspective considers consumers to be loyal when they rebuy the product or use a service continually (Jones et al., 2000). However, this approach has been criticized because it does not take affective issues into account. The second perspective overcomes this limitation defining loyalty as “the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchasing behaviour from a service provider, possesses a positive attitudinal disposition toward the provider, and considers using only this provider when a need for this service arises” (Grem- ler y Brown, 1996). Therefore, the role of attitude in customer loyalty is vital, since a previous positive attitude is required to consider repetitive behaviour as true loyalty (García et al., 2006).

Taking into account this second perspective, it is common to include perceived service quality, image and switching costs as independent variables in the loyalty models. On the one hand, and considering that true
loyalty is based on satisfaction (Day, 1969), the global evaluation of the service offered undoubtedly holds prevalence, and there is a consensus in affirming a direct and positive relationship between both concepts (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Jones et al., 2000; Aydin et al., 2005). We link this evaluation with the perception of commercial responsibility, which includes aspects related to technical quality, interpersonal relationships (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Grönroos, 1994) and perceived value (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Zeithaml, 1988).

Brand image is another variable with positive influence on loyalty (Selnes, 1993; Nguyen y LeBlanc, 2001; Flavián y Guinaliu, 2007). Image is an overall evaluation of the company, a subjective and intangible judgment relating to emotional connections between consumer and the brand (Rust et al., 2000). It includes feelings and associations (Barich y Kotler, 1991) and it is created as a result of a process generated by the perception of a company’s concrete attributes and global impressions (Zimmer and Golden, 1998).

Finally, together with commercial behaviour and perceived image, switching costs are liable to play an important role (De Ruyter et al., 1998; Aydin et al., 2005). They encompass any factor that makes it difficult for consumers to change their suppliers, for example the mental effort required to search for information from other alternatives (De Ruyter et al., 1998). When these barriers appear, consumers become less sensitive to levels of satisfaction when they show their loyalty towards a brand (Hauser et al., 1994). We can therefore say that:

**Hypothesis 1:** The perception of the commercial responsibility of a company has a direct and positive influence on loyalty towards the service.

**Hypothesis 2:** The image of a company has a direct and positive influence on loyalty towards the service.

**Hypothesis 3:** The existence of switching costs has a direct and positive influence on loyalty towards the service.

The antecedents of image become factors indirectly influencing loyalty. Firstly, experience with a company itself influences the process of image
formation, and as long as consumers are satisfied with the service offered, the company image improves (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998). Actually, one can expect that commercial responsibility will have a strong impact on consumers when forming corporate image. Each target audience will be interested in different aspects of the company activity (Fombrun, 1996), and will use different cognitive filters as well as giving more or less weight to the different attributes according to its relationship and interests with the organization (Caruana, 1997). As far as consumers are concerned, the quality of the product and service received will be key factors in image creation, since an important source in generating an impression is the shopping experience, and global evaluation is a function of that experience (Aydin et al., 2005). Therefore it is considered that:

Hypothesis 4: The perception of the commercial responsibility of a company has a direct and positive influence on the corporate image.

On the other hand, perceptions of social responsibility can also give substance to the image. Linking a brand with ethical and social matters enforces its brand value (Berry, 2000; Rust et al., 2000), in so far as how values that communicate respect towards the customer and enforce confidence towards a company are transmitted (Maignan et al., 1999). The relationship that exists between philanthropy and corporate reputation has already been verified in previous studies. In some cases, company rankings compiled by managers themselves are used, such as lists from Fortune (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) or Management Today (Brammer and Millington, 2005). In others, experimental scenarios and methods are worked on (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999; Mohr and Webb, 2005; Ricks 2005). In a real-life context the results may vary, since communication on social responsibility is still at an initial phase (Bigné et al., 2005) and there may be a lack of knowledge by consumers which may explain that social and ethical matters are not taken into consideration when the company is evaluated (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Nevertheless, with reference to experimental work, it is considered that:
Hypothesis 5: The perception of corporate social responsibility has a direct and positive influence on the global image of a company.

Finally, the sense of confidence which a socially responsible company transmits can also influence the evaluation the consumer makes on the global quality of the service received, in so far as consumers assume that a company maintaining this behaviour is honest, and thus will offer quality products (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001). Corporate social responsibility can add value to a product (Mohr and Webb, 2005) and in fact, Sureshchandar et al. (2001) and Sureshchandar et al. (2002) consider that ethical behaviour can be seen as an extra component in service quality. Furthermore, a good social image has a positive effect on product evaluation (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Klein and Dawar, 2003). It is established that:

Hypothesis 6: The perception of corporate social responsibility has a positive and direct influence on the perception of commercial responsibility.

Therefore, the hypotheses shape a tri-component model: cognitive, affective and conative (Lutz, 1991; Nandan, 2005). The cognitive component refers to the consumer’s knowledge or belief system about the brand, in this case the perception of commercial and social responsibility, formed by experiences of consumers, personal characteristics and information received about the company. These perceptions give rise to the affective component, specifically an image or overall evaluation that includes emotions and feelings. The cognitive and affective elements, together with switching costs, influence the consumer behaviour with respect to the brand (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Model of loyalty

4. Research methodology

Research activity is applied on the mobile phone market. Three companies operate in this market (Telefónica Móviles, Vodafone and Orange\(^1\)), which maintain high notoriety rates (over 97% penetration in December 2005\(^2\)) and an active behaviour in social responsibility matters.

Data is derived from marketing research carried out in Cantabria in April 2004. Personal surveys were carried out, obtaining a total of 689 valid surveys, with a ±3.7% sample error, leading to a 95% confidence level and to the most unfavourable case (p=q=0.5). Data is processed with statistic software applications SPSS 14.0 and EQS 5.7b. The sampling procedure used is non-probabilistic. Specifically, a quota stratification is employed in accordance with two socio-demographic criteria: individuals’ age and gender.

To measure commercial responsibility, user satisfaction with different service attributes is considered. Technical and functional quality is analyzed, as well as the perceived value, referring to the studies of Lee et al. (2001) and Olsen and Johnson (2003). As for the social responsibility

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\(^1\) Amena changed its brand name to Orange in October 2006. That year a new brand, Yoigo, was launched into the market. Nowadays, these companies compete with other virtual entities.

\(^2\) Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce.
scale, we initially follow guidelines from Carroll (1979, 1991) and we focus on ethical-legal and social aspects, i.e., on the “concern with the company” categories defined by Aupperle et al. (1985). We use the works of Brown and Dacin (1997) and Maignan (2001) to back up its design. In order to assure content validity, a previous quality study was performed, and various pre-tests were carried out before closing the questionnaire.

The global image is measured with items in the scale from Rust et al. (2000) and for switching costs the items used in the work of Jones et al. (2000) are considered. Finally, loyalty is measured with items derived from the commitment scale from Delgado and Munuera (2001) and from the scale from Zeithaml et al. (1996). All scales are detailed in the Appendix.

5. Results of the research
In the first place, reliability and validity of all constructs of the casual model are verified by means of confirmatory analysis. The established model is correct (see Table 1), since all second order latent variables have internal consistency, as shown by the value of Cronbach \( \alpha \) coefficient and the composed reliability coefficient. Moreover, the standardized coefficients are significant and have a value greater than 0.5, thus guaranteeing the convergent validity of all dimensions (Steemkamp and Van Trijp, 1991).
The discriminant validity of the model is evaluated from confidence intervals for pairs or latent concepts (Table 2). It was verified that none of the calculated confidence intervals for the two-on-two variable verifications includes unity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988)\(^5\).

(5) Values are averaged to facilitate the analysis.
The structural model that allows us to contrast the established hypotheses is presented below (Figure 2). The indexes of goodness of fit are acceptable, since the statistics values go beyond the optimal values. In the first place it is proven how the perception of commercial responsibility, measured through technical and functional quality evaluation and perceived price, influences directly, positively and significantly on the user’s loyalty. Kugyte and Sliburyte (2007) verify that in the mobile phone sector, the issues related to price, personal treatment, range and reliability are extremely important selection criteria. And from the results of the model, we can gather that they are also key variables to explain loyalty. In the same manner, the impressions one has of a company influence the loyalty shown towards it, as well as switching costs do. It is observed that people perceiving costs in time, effort and money to change brand are more loyal than individuals with an opposite perception. These costs condition the user’s behaviour and impulse the consumer to a higher preference and commitment towards the company providing the service. Therefore, hypotheses 1 to 3 cannot be refuted.

Table 2. Correlations and discriminant validity

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Correlations and confidence intervals for the correlations:

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<td>0.649</td>
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Social and commercial responsibilities are regarded as direct determinants of the overall evaluation of the company, and therefore, as having a direct influence on loyalty. With respect to this, it is proven that commercial responsibility is the main determinant of image (hypothesis 4 is not refuted), while socially responsible behaviour has no significant effect. Although in experimental studies the relationship did appear to be significant, it seems that when taking direct knowledge and evaluation measures the output varies. This result leads us to reject hypothesis 5. Thus, users let themselves be guided by their direct experiences with the service when called upon to evaluate a company, while social responsibility plays a secondary role. Perhaps this is due, as Mohr and Webb (2005) prove, to image being more affected by receiving information about negative practices than about positive ones, i.e., consumers react very negatively to information over irresponsible practice, while they are less sensitive to positive messages (Sen and Battacharya, 2001).
However, the fact that social responsibility does influence global service evaluation grabs our attention. The ethical behaviour of companies and social image have effects on the perception of commercial responsibility of companies, and thus hypothesis 6 is not refuted. Therefore, corporate social responsibility does have an influence on the consumer’s behaviour and must be included in loyalty models.

6. Research conclusions

The present research is based on the loyalty model to incorporate matters of corporate social responsibility. Specifically, it establishes several hypotheses on loyal determinants and the effect of responsible behaviour, answering by means of marketing research within the mobile phone market in Spain.

Furthermore, opinions on commercial responsibility of companies are collected, evaluating perceptions about quality and perceived value of service offered and the socially responsible behaviour of companies in ethical and philanthropic aspects.

It is proven that loyalty towards a service is directly influenced by the perception of technical quality and, above all, functional quality and perceived value. It is also influenced in a direct manner by the image of the supplying company and by the costs of change perceived by users. Therefore, companies must be concerned about all impressions they create, fundamentally those related to marketing aspects, and develop a relational marketing strategy that favours the creation of switching costs. This is a key question nowadays as attracting consumers is necessary for survival, but it is not enough. The important thing is to keep and to create consumer loyalty, stressing the long-term relationship. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to change the traditional marketing approach based on the generic market and to put into practice a strategy focused on a one-to-one relationship (García y Rodriguez, 2004). It is important to start off customer orientation that takes all aspects related to service quality into consideration; among those aspects we find corporate social responsibility. The perception of ethical and socially responsible behaviour brings about favourable associations that convert into a better evaluation of the service.
Social responsibility and commercial responsibility are thus closely related with each other, the former influencing powerfully on the latter. According to Pérez (2007), it is advisable to spread information about the service offered and about the company, with arguments that reinforce the trust of consumers. In this sense, and due to the results of the research, commercial campaigns should be complemented with the company’s social orientation being made public knowledge, using various methods within the company’s reach to give implicit and explicit reference to its ethical and social orientation. Smart communication about the corporate social responsibility would support the credibility and honesty of the firm, and therefore would reinforce perceptions about it.

As far as image is concerned, it turns out that opinions about the company are created mainly by contacts and experiences with the service. On this occasion, no direct influence by social responsibility was observed. The fact that we are considering a heavily utility-based service, of common and daily use, explains that in this case the perception over the way the company offers its service and cares about customers takes a dominant role. Nevertheless, we must remember that social responsibility influences indirectly via global evaluation of the service, and therefore companies must make sure that their codes of ethics and other social responsibility matters are reflected not only in their advertising, but also in their daily behaviour and in all contact with the customer. Corporate social responsibility is an important way of differentiation, and it is capable of creating affective responses which support loyalty.

Finally we should mention limitations and future lines of research. Firstly, further work on the development of the social responsibility scale is proposed, fine-tuning it with new items. From a different angle it would be interesting to include moderating variables, such as the endorsement customers give to these measurements, knowledge perceived by companies, or matters of a social-demographic kind. Likewise, future research will develop the loyalty model and other important issues, such as commitment, confidence or identification with the company. The results obtained must be considered within the framework of the study conducted; for this reason, in order to generalize results, widening the study to different sec-
tors, most of all to the ones where sensitivity to social matters is a priori more evident.

References


Appendix

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (7 point Likert scales: 1, total disagreement; 7, total agreement)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe my operating company...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethical-legal responsibility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always respects the norms defined in the law when carrying out its activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is concerned with fulfilling its obligations vis-à-vis its shareholders, suppliers, distributors and other agents with whom it deals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaves ethically/honestly with its customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks that respecting ethical principles in its relationships has priority over achieving superior economic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philantropic responsibility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is concerned with respecting and protecting the natural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directs part of its budget to donations and social works favouring the disadvantaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is concerned with improving the general well-being of society</td>
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<tr>
<th>COMMERCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (7 point Likert scales: 1, total disagreement; 7, total agreement)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical quality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good coverage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good sound quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good variety of additional services</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Functional quality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good commercial advice to customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid resolution of problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly treatment from staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived price</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Compared with other operators offers good price level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prices in accordance with level of services provided</td>
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<tr>
<th>LOYALTY (7 point Likert scales: 1, total disagreement; 7, total agreement)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself to be loyal to my operating brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To me, my operating brand is clearly the best brand on the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend my brand if somebody asked my advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I had to contract the service again, I would choose my operating brand again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I shall continue with my operating brand in the next few years</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGE (7 positions, 1 strongly disagree; 7 strongly agree)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have positive feelings towards my operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My opinion about my operator is highly favourable</td>
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<tr>
<th>SWITCHING COSTS (7 positions, 1 strongly disagree; 7 strongly agree)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally, it would be troublesome to change brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing brand would take my time and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To me, costs in time, money and effort to change brand are very high</td>
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