

Long-Term Relationships with Pilgrimage Organizers Within the Framework of Partnership Marketing*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the importance of long-term relationships with pilgrims in the activities of pilgrimage organizers in the context of partnership marketing. The study demonstrates that these relationships are multidimensional and encompass both functional and emotional-spiritual aspects. It emphasizes that the specific nature of pilgrimage services fosters the building of lasting relationships based on trust, loyalty, and shared experiences. The article presents the theoretical foundations of partnership marketing and its application in pilgrimage activities, highlighting the importance of relational capital as a factor determining organizational development.

Keywords: partnership marketing, pilgrimages, loyalty, customer relationships, religious-pilgrimage services

Introduction

Contemporary approaches to managing service organizations increasingly focus on building lasting relationships with customers, which form the foundation for long-term development. This approach is particularly important in sectors where services are intangible, emotional, and experiential.

One such area is the activity of pilgrimage organizers, which combines elements of tourism, religion, and social life. In this context, pilgrims are not merely customers but participants in an experience with a spiritual and communal dimension. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that building long-term relationships with pilgrims is a manifestation of partnership marketing and a key element of pilgrimage organizers' operations.

In pilgrimage tourism, the possibilities for applying traditional, impersonal marketing are limited, while the use of partnership marketing would create, enrich, and maintain long-term, personalized relationships with pilgrims. Furthermore, an individualized and personalized approach is also applicable in pilgrimage tourism. The concept of partnership marketing emphasizes the management process of creating, developing, and maintaining relationships between a company and other entities.

The basic idea of partnership marketing is the bond. A bond is what connects, unites, and binds people together (SJP, 1981).

Partnership Marketing and Long-Term Relationships with Pilgrims

Partnership marketing is a customer relationship management concept that aims to build lasting relationships based on trust and commitment (Grönroos, 2007). Unlike transactional marketing, which focuses on a single exchange, partnership marketing assumes long-term collaboration with the customer (Payne, 1994).

According to the commitment and trust theory, marketing relationships develop based on mutual trust and the desire to maintain the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This ultimately leads to increased customer loyalty and organizational stability (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

The concept of partnership marketing emphasizes the direct, interactive, bilateral, and multilateral nature of the relationship between the seller—the pilgrimage organizer—and the buyer – the pilgrim, as well as other entities – including representatives of pilgrimage centres – in the process of creating and delivering products and services related to pilgrimage tourism. Furthermore, this concept emphasizes the lasting nature of relationships between exchange partners. Establishing and maintaining these relationships requires time, effort, and money. A consequence of the partnership marketing concept is that pilgrimage organizers shift their activities from individual transactions toward building long-term and lasting relationships with pilgrims, whereas in the traditional approach, the primary goal is the continuous search and acquisition of new buyers for pilgrimage services. The partnership marketing concept emphasizes the need to offer pilgrims value, which increasingly must exceed their expected benefits. Pilgrimage organizers should be interested in maintaining lasting bonds with pilgrims and value partnerships, as pilgrims develop a strong bond with them and the services offered during the pilgrimage. Many pilgrims feel the need to maintain these bonds over time. A partnership between organizers and pilgrims is mutually beneficial, but it should be noted that it cannot be forced. An ideal partnership would be one in which both the pilgrimage organizer and the pilgrim are interested in creating a lasting, mutually beneficial bond. Both parties should be involved in the relationship. The relationship should be characterized by commitment, the ability to compromise, mutual trust and respect, communication, support, care, assistance, and long-term thinking. The bond is related to the concept of exchange. The essence of market behaviour is the exchange of values between the parties to the relationship (Furtak, 2003).

Both pilgrimage organizers and pilgrims should put effort into the exchange and feel the benefits of the relationship. Exchange between organizers and pilgrims involves receiving specific intangible goods and giving something in return. Organizers provide pilgrims with the expected service and pilgrimage ministry, as well as specific benefits from maintaining relationships with them during the inter-pilgrimage period, while organizers receive, in return, among other things, the fulfilment of their spiritual mission.

Pilgrimage services constitute a special category of services, combining tangible and intangible elements. In addition to organizational aspects (transportation, accommodation), spiritual experiences, emotions, and the experience of community are crucial (Mruk, 2012).

Assessing the quality of these services is complex and encompasses both functional and emotional criteria. Therefore, the relationship between organizers and pilgrims is deeper than in the case of standard tourism services (Grönroos, 2007).

Long-term bonds with pilgrims form the foundation of pilgrimage organizers' activities. These relationships are based on repeated experiences, trust and a sense of security.

These include:

- participant loyalty and repeat participation,
- recommendations and word-of-mouth marketing,
- maintaining contact beyond the pilgrimage,
- a sense of belonging to a community.

Unlike many other service sectors, these relationships also have a spiritual and emotional dimension, significantly strengthening their longevity (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Partnership marketing is widely used in pilgrimage organizers. It manifests itself in, among other things:

- personalizing the offer,
- building a community of participants,
- maintaining relationships after the service has concluded,
- using recommendations as a promotional tool.

These activities contribute to building lasting bonds and strengthening the organizer's market position (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

A crucial condition for the continued bond between pilgrims and pilgrimage organizers is the commitment to the exchange partner.

According to L.L. Berry and A. Parasuraman, "the basis of the bond is mutual commitment" (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991), while according to Scanzoni, "attachment is the most advanced phase of mutual dependence." A similar approach is presented by R.M. Morgan and S.D. Hunt, who believe that "attachment is a key element of the partnership marketing concept." A characteristic feature of pilgrims who have deep ties with pilgrimage organizers is a high level not only of trust but also of commitment (Furtak, 2003). According to Morgan and Hunt, attachment is "maximizing effort to maintain the relationship with the exchange partner." According to C. Moorman, G. Zaltman, and R. Deshpandes, "attachment means a constant desire to continue a valuable bond." The above definitions indicate that the basic conditions for attachment are: perceiving the relationship as important and, consequently, the desire to maintain and deepen the bond (Furtak, 2003). It is possible to create a model of the organizer-pilgrim bond. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

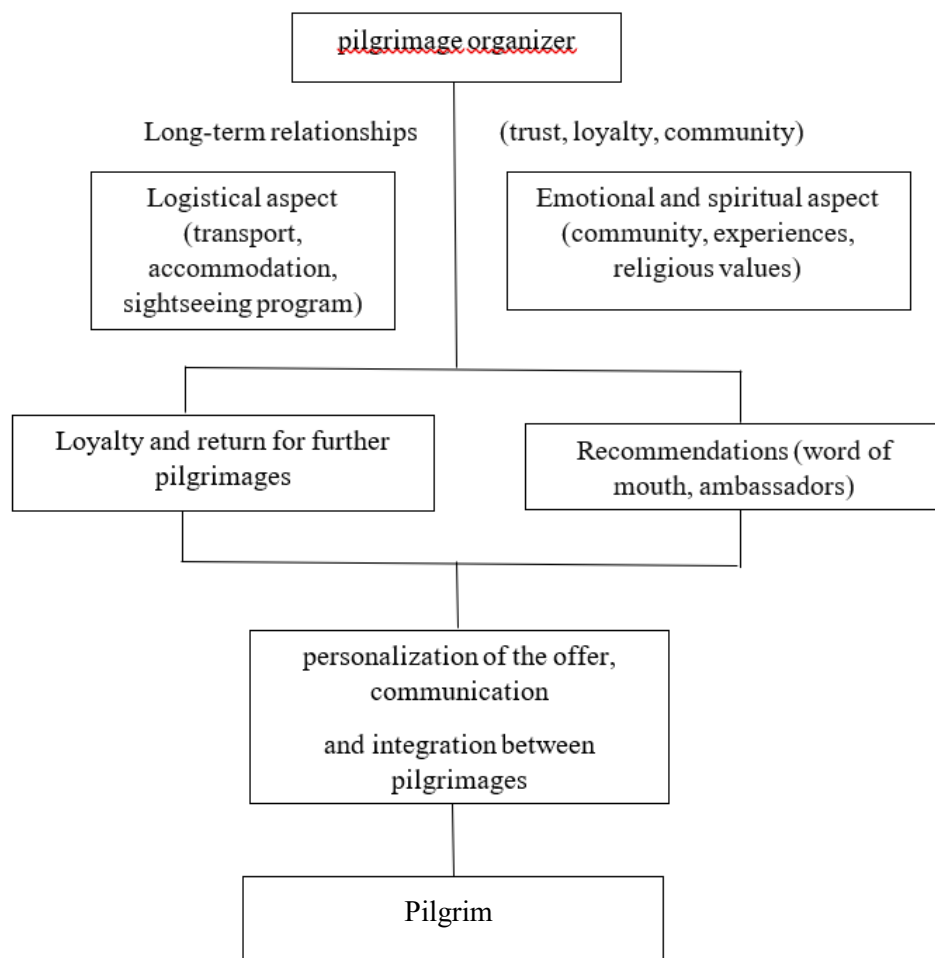


Fig. 1. The model of the organizer-pilgrim bond in partnership marketing

Source: own elaboration on the literature

The figure shows that the bond between the organizer and the pilgrim is based not only on the quality of logistics services but, above all, on emotional and spiritual values, which strengthen loyalty and recommendations. As a result, partnership marketing takes on a particularly lasting and communal character. Relational capital, understood as a resource resulting from relationships with customers, constitutes a significant element of competitive advantage. For pilgrimage organizers, it encompasses trust, loyalty, and a network of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986).

Strong relational capital translates into:

- stability of participation,
- resilience to competition,
- a positive image of the organization.

It's also worth noting that, in terms of loyalty, loyalty in religious tourism is currently understood as a tourist's desire or intention to return to a religious or sacred site and correlates with satisfaction scores. According to various authors, loyalty is tourists' intention to revisit a destination and their willingness to recommend it. Furthermore, it would be a significant moderator of place attachment and loyalty to the destination. In this regard, Kim et al. pointed out that individuals identifying as religious tourists often demonstrate significant loyalty to sacred sites (Carvache-Franco et al., 2024).

Many authors also emphasize the importance of authenticity of religious experience in building attachment to a pilgrimage site. This can be linked to theories of relational capital and partnership marketing (Wang et al., 2024).

Summary and Discussion of Research Results

Partnership marketing is an appropriate approach to analyzing the activities of pilgrimage organizers. Long-term bonds with pilgrims, based on trust, community, and spiritual experience, are a key element in the development of these organizations.

These relationships transcend the economic dimension to encompass social and cultural aspects, making them particularly enduring and valuable.

The research results confirm the assumptions of partnership marketing, according to which the relationship between an organization and its client is dynamic and varies depending on the level of engagement of the recipients (Grönroos, 2007). In particular, it is evident that in the case of pilgrimage services, the level of expectations is not uniform but depends on the importance respondents attach to culture and religion in their lives. The lack of statistically significant differences in the assessment of basic services indicates that the functional elements of the offer (e.g., transportation, accommodation) are perceived relatively objectively and constitute a kind of "market standard." This result is consistent with Grönroos's (2007) concept of service quality, which distinguishes between the technical dimension (what is provided) and the functional dimension (how the service is implemented). In the analyzed case, the technical dimension did not significantly differentiate the respondents' assessments. In turn, clear differences emerge with regard to experiential and spiritual services. Respondents more engaged in culture and religion demonstrate higher expectations and more critical evaluations. This result can be interpreted in light of cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), according to which individuals with greater cultural competence and experience demonstrate higher levels of demand for cultural goods and services.

At the same time, the obtained results confirm the importance of trust and commitment as key elements of marketing relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Despite their higher expectations, more engaged respondents often remain loyal to pilgrimage organizers, which indicates the strong nature of relational bonds. This means that these relationships are more complex than in the case of traditional market services – higher demands do not automatically lead to service abandonment but can foster further improvement. Another interesting aspect is that in some cases, the results were close to statistical significance. This may indicate potential changes in the perception of service quality in the future. As participants' experience increases and the pilgrimage market develops, differences between groups may deepen, increasing the importance of audience segmentation and tailoring offers to their needs (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

The study results also align with the concept of partnership marketing as a process of building long-term relationship value. Long-term relationships with pilgrims enable a better understanding of their expectations, but also lead to their growth. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a natural consequence of deepening relationships – the stronger the bond, the higher the expectations for its quality.

In summary, the conducted research confirms that partnership marketing is an adequate approach to analyzing the activities of pilgrimage organizers. The results indicate the need to simultaneously develop relationships with pilgrims and improve the quality of services, particularly in the area of spiritual and communal experiences, which are a key element of the value offered to participants.

Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

The theoretical analysis and empirical research findings allow us to formulate several key conclusions.

First, the activities of pilgrimage organizers rely heavily on building long-term relationships with participants, which confirms the validity of applying the concept of partnership marketing in this area. These relationships are multidimensional and encompass both functional and emotional-spiritual aspects.

Second, the level of expectations regarding pilgrimage services varies and depends on the respondents' level of cultural and religious involvement. More engaged individuals demonstrate higher expectations, particularly regarding the quality of spiritual and communal experiences. Third, basic services do not significantly differentiate respondents' ratings, indicating that they are standardized and treated as necessary, but insufficient, elements for building a competitive advantage. Fourth, long-term relationships with pilgrims contribute to increased loyalty, but also lead to higher expectations for service quality. This means that pilgrimage organizers should treat customer relationships as a process requiring continuous improvement of their offerings.

Based on the conducted analyses, the following recommendations can be formulated for pilgrimage organizers:

1. Segmentation of pilgrimage participants

Organizers should identify different audience groups (e.g., those with more or less religious commitment) and tailor their offerings to their diverse needs and expectations.

2. Development of spiritual experience offerings

Particular attention should be paid to intangible elements, such as the atmosphere, spiritual program, and participant integration, which most significantly differentiate service quality ratings.

3. Building and maintaining relationships

It is advisable to maintain contact with pilgrims even after the trip, for example, through meetings, online communication, or information about upcoming events.

4. Personalization of the offering

Tailoring the pilgrimage program to the specific needs of different groups (e.g., seniors, youth, families) can increase participant satisfaction and loyalty.

5. Leveraging recommendations and word-of-mouth marketing

Satisfied participants are an important source of promotion, so it's worth supporting recommendation mechanisms, for example, through loyalty programs or initiatives that engage the pilgrim community.

6. Continuous monitoring of service quality

Organizers should regularly assess participant satisfaction and respond to changing expectations, especially in areas approaching statistical significance.

7. Integrating logistical and emotional aspects

High-quality technical organization should be paired with attention to the spiritual experience, which allows for the creation of a comprehensive value proposition.

Implementing the above recommendations can contribute to strengthening relationships with pilgrims, increasing their loyalty and building a lasting competitive advantage for pilgrimage organizers.

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