

Demarcating And Anchoring Cause-Related Marketing (CRM)

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Abstract

As part of their commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR), companies today engage in a variety of programs and initiatives that support different social causes. One increasingly popular approach is Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), where businesses link their marketing efforts to social or charitable causes. Yet, the existing literature on CRM is filled with inconsistent terminology—different terms are often used to describe the same idea, while the same term is sometimes applied to different concepts. This lack of clarity can be confusing, especially for new researchers entering the field.

This study aims to clarify what CRM truly encompasses and to bring greater conceptual clarity to the discussion. It also seeks to trace the ethical foundations of CRM, an area that remains underdeveloped in current research. To accomplish this, the paper reviews key works in CSR and CRM and proposes two conceptual models: one that distinguishes CRM from related concepts, and another that connects CRM to the broader principles of business ethics.

Keywords: Cause-related marketing, CSR, Business ethics

Introduction

The marketing campaign linking credit card sales and usage to donations for renovating the statue of liberty by American Express in 1983 witnessed massive success. Since then, cause-related marketing (hereafter CRM) has been a staple marketing program of American Express and many firms worldwide (Berglind & Nakata, 2005; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). According to the IEG Sponsorship report 2018, in North America alone, the spending on CRM was \$2.05 billion in 2017. In the internet age and a well-connected world, consumers are highly informed about the firm's offerings and activities and seek higher accountability from the business entities.

In pursuit of their commitment to discharge corporate societal responsibilities, companies are engaged in myriad programs and activities supporting different causes. CRM is one such Corporate Social Responsibility (hereafter CSR). CRM is conditional support extended by the firm to the causes based on positive consumer response to the firm's offerings. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) defined CRM as "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives." Firm, Nonprofit Organization (hereafter NPO), and consumer are the primary participants of the CRM program (Andreasen, 1996). Firms use CRM as the source of differentiation for their offerings. Such differentiation based on benevolent acts of supporting causes could be a strategic asset for firms in a competitive market (Vrontis et al., 2020). For instance, TOMS shoe entered the footwear business with a CRM plank in 2005 with a promise of donating a pair of footwear for every pair of footwear sold. Within no time, it captured a significant chunk of the heart and wallet share of consumers. As per the

TOMS impact report 2019-2020, the company gave away 7,049,436 pairs of shoes in charity besides other philanthropic donations.

Unlike corporate philanthropy, wherein a share of the profit earned is donated to causes, donations are tied to favorable consumer actions for the company's offering in CRM. As donations to the causes are directly linked to the sales, the strategic self-interest of enhancing the sales is preserved. Various empirical studies have established that CRM helps firms earn the goodwill of different stakeholders. It allows firms to achieve brand preference (Chowdhury & Khare, 2011) and increase sales (Ballings et al., 2018). As firms carry most CRM in association with the NPOs, the latter form a strategic partner of CRM (Andreasen, 1996) and gain directly by the donations and indirectly by enhanced awareness among the public about the causes they espouse (Liston-Heyes & Liu, 2013). Consumer constitutes a critical component of CRM as their response determines the overall success. Apart from contributing to CRM success, consumers satisfy their own psychological needs, such as altruistic and egoistic needs, through their participation in CRM (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012).

There are variations in firms' support to causes that do not fall into the category of CRM (Kotler & Lee, 2005a). Some companies differentiate their ad appeal by championing the cause without explicitly making any donation to the cause. For instance, Ghadi detergent, one of the leading detergent brands in the north Indian market, executed a campaign creating awareness about the importance of wearing masks during COVID-19 pandemic. Given the prevalent pandemic and its airborne nature, this message aimed to develop and reinforce the importance of face masks as preventive measures. However, Ghadi detergent did not explicitly promise to donate or fight pandemic based on consumer purchase of detergent. Hence, this act will not fit into the definition of CRM given by Varadarajan & Menon (1988) as there is no conditional support to the cause based on the consumer response.

Similarly, some companies have consciously adopted fair trade practices (Ruggeri et al., 2019) throughout their supply chains to ensure fairness and justice to different stakeholders, including the explicit commitment to preserving flora and fauna. However, this act cannot be construed as CRM as these practices are not contingent upon positive consumer response. Hence there exist many variations of support to causes that may not fit into the typical definition of CRM as given by Varadarajan & Menon (1988). Moreover, there are many other concepts such as social marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate societal marketing, and so forth that are confusing to novice researchers.

Further, there has been a proliferation of different terminologies describing the same phenomenon and the same terminology describing various phenomena in the extant literature. Researchers in the field of CRM often get confused with these terminologies covering overlapping concepts. For instance, in the above example of Ghadi detergent, espousing mask-wearing may be considered as 'advocacy advertisement' as the sponsoring brand is espousing a cause (Haley, 1996). But Kotler & Lee (2005) term it corporate cause promotion as corporate creates awareness about a social issue. Menon & Kahn (2003), in their study comparing advocacy advertising and cause promotion, use the phrase 'cause promotion' to describe CRM as given by Varadarajan & Menon (1988).

This paper attempts to demarcate CRM from this plethora of interrelated terms. In other words, this study attempts to find the relationship between CRM and CSR, how CRM differs from other types of CSR, and the difference between CRM and Social marketing. Further, it also attempts to find the roots CRM and anchor it in CSR.

Demarcating The Concept Of Cause-Related Marketing

Firms discharge their corporate social responsibilities through myriad programs and activities supporting different causes. As if mirroring this phenomenon, there has been the proliferation of different terminologies describing these CSR programs (See terminologies used in following studies: Haley, 1996; Lii & Lee, 2012; Menon & Kahn, 2003; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Kotler & Lee (2005) have consolidated different types of corporate support to the causes in their book *Corporate social responsibility: doing the most good for your company and your cause* into six classes. To demarcate CRM, this study primarily stick to their typology and integrate two other prominent concepts, social marketing, and corporate societal marketing. Fig 1 represents the conceptual delineation of CRM from related concepts. At the macro level, the marketing domain directed towards addressing social issues can be categorized into two categories: social marketing and corporate social responsibility initiatives.



Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of various marketing concepts similar to CRM

Social Marketing is the application of principles and practices of marketing to bring about social change by changing the behavior of members of the society, and it is distinct from consumer marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Social marketing predominantly takes the form of non-government or quasi-government bodies' initiatives to educate the public to bring about behavioral change (Berglind & Nakata, 2005), like educating the public about the ill effects of smoking, drink and driving, the importance of polio vaccination, etc. Social marketing is more challenging than mainstream consumer marketing. It has to deal with societal members' core beliefs, values, and established habits compared to superficial preferences and opinions often dealt with by mainstream marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The social marketing core focus is societal welfare. It begins by identifying a social problem and ends with achieving societal welfare.

CSR initiatives of firms, though address social causes and issues, predominantly remain focused on the ultimate gain to the firm in terms of improved corporate and brand image, brand preference, sales, employee engagement, and so forth. CSR initiatives of firms have been classified into six types by Kotler & Lee (2005) as Cause Promotion, Cause-Related Marketing, Corporate Social Marketing, Corporate Philanthropy, Community Volunteering, Socially Responsible Business Practices. All these initiatives have an element of concern for social causes embedded in them. However, their dominant focus is on a profit motive. For instance, Cause Promotion firm associates its advertisements with a cause to differentiate its communication to beat the clutter. Hence self-interest predominates commitment to societal welfare.

Cause promotion (CP) facilitates firms to espouse their concern for societal issues. It aims at bringing about awareness about a social cause of urgent importance. At the same time, it differentiates brand communication and makes a firm break free from the clutter. Aircel's (a teleservice provider in India) communication strategy in 2010 captures the essence of cause promotion. Back in those days, telecom operators in India were coming with innovative advertisements. The leading telecom player Airtel came with ads with music and jingle composed by legendary music director A.R. Rahman. Idea cellular got its brand endorsed by Bollywood actor Abhishek Bachchan; Vodafone communicated its message with an artificial character called ZooZoo and captured consumers' attention. DoCoMo, the new entrant in the market, came with an innovative pay-per-second pricing strategy. When these players dominated the marketplace with their creative approaches, Aircel promoted its brand with a 'save tiger' campaign. The 2009-10 tiger census report expressed concerns about the dwindling number of tigers in the Indian forests, which became national and international news. Many media channels and NGOs were making efforts to mobilize public opinion in favor of saving tigers. Aircel sensed an opportunity and joined the chorus by associating its brand with the save tiger campaign. Unlike CRM, there was no explicit financial commitment or information about material support to the cause being espoused. Though there is no literature on the efficacy of this campaign in generating tangible corporate outcomes, it can be said that such tactics might not persuade skeptical consumers (Ellen et al., 2006; Webb & Mohr, 1998). However, like CRM, CP is another promotional program that may help in creating awareness about the cause and brand. Further, may help brands in breaking the clutter.

Corporate social marketing (CSM) refers to the for-profit firm engaged in social marketing to alleviate the social problem. In CSM, the prime focus is on bringing about behavioral change in the societal members (Kotler & Lee, 2005a). There is a high degree of congruence between the cause and the nature of the business. For instance, Safeco Insurance, a Seattle-based Fortune 500 company that sells personal and business insurance in the USA, launched a campaign named FireFree in Bend in 1997 in collaboration with local and federal fire organizations (Kotler & Lee, 2005b). It aimed at bringing behavioral change in the local community about fire safety. In this instance, the interest of insurance buyers and insurance providers were wholly aligned. In an extreme version of CSM, the nature of offerings of the firm is such that they are meant to solve society's problems. For instance, microfinance firms and their offerings are designed to cater to the financial needs of an excluded section of society. Microfinance as a concept is rooted in the vision of enhancing financial inclusion by drawing excluded sections of the community into the fold of the organized financial sector and liberate them from the loan sharks and vicious cycle of poverty. The bulk of the ventures based on the bottom of pyramid business models fall in the category of CSM. The proper alignment of business interests and societal needs is the quintessential nature of CSM. Firms can demonstrate their genuine commitment to social welfare through CSM. Unlike CRM, which is just a promotional tool and a tactic, CSM is a business philosophy. It tries to address the societal needs through innovative business models (e.g., Microfinance) or innovative marketing of existing products and solutions (e.g., selling Shampoo through sachet, making them affordable) and so forth. Whereas CRM appears to be more of an opportunistic alliance between firms and NPOs, the firm's commitment to societal welfare is demonstrated in the CSM. Moreover, firms' survival depends on the demand generated by the segment of society that requires its offering. Hence CSM appears to be more sustainable than CRM, as the latter can be abandoned if it is not contributing to the hard metrics of marketing.

Corporate philanthropy (CPh) is one of the oldest and most prevalent CSR practices in the world. Firms donate a portion of their profit for society's welfare, which might take the form of either cash or material donation to charities, NPOs, or firm-owned charitable trusts or foundations. CPh maintains some degree of distance between the firm operations and the charity/ cause being supported. Often, there will not be congruence between the firms' nature of business and the cause. For instance, India's software giant Infosys has donated a good amount of money to build civic amenities like public toilets in Bangalore. In this instance, there is no congruence between the nature of business and the type of cause. The only congruence or a common factor is that Infosys started its journey from this city. Some firms strategically approach CPh and try to reap the benefits associated with CSR, such as improvement in public image, firm reputation, support of different stakeholders, and so forth. However, other firms approach CPh less professionally, usually according to the promoters or the CEO's whims and likings. Compared to CRM, CPh carries more benevolent intention as firms' support is unconditional. In CRM, sales and profit are realized by invoking help to the cause. There is an element of soft-coercion on the consumer to buy the product in CRM, but CPh does not have any such coercion. The support to the cause through CPh is wholly based on the volition of decision-makers of the firm. Perhaps, CPh carries more legitimacy in the eyes of the consumers compared to CRM or CP. It is evident from the study of Lii & Lee (2012), which compared CRM with CPh and sponsorship; CRM performed worse in eliciting positive consumer responses like brand attitude, consumer-company identification, and so forth. Similarly, the study by Chen & Huang (2016) indicates that CPh is better than CRM in eliciting positive consumer responses.

Firms extend their support to the cause through **community volunteering (CV)**, another type of CSR. CV involves deploying or permitting employees of the firm to participate in cause-related activities. Employees of firms contribute their time, energy, skill, and knowledge to add value to cause-related activities and promote societal welfare. It could be participation in the afforestation program, teach school children in the nearby slums, or augment the regular curriculum with commercial skills such as computer operations, participation in rescue operations due to natural disasters, and so forth. CV offer firms to demonstrate its real commitment. Direct involvement in cause-related activities is evaluated more favorably by various publics and stakeholders than monetary and material support. It has also been shown that employees tend to derive higher satisfaction through participation in these activities. Further, employee identification with the company and engagement goes up with CV activities. CV has more significant potential in elevating the company's image in the eyes of employees than CRM. CV is a CSR based on employee and their involvement, whereas CRM is directed towards consumers. Though few studies indicate that even CRM can improve employee engagement, CV is more effective in promoting an image of the company among employees. Further, even consumers may favorably evaluate CV than CRM because CV is entirely devoid of commercial interest. In the case of CRM, it is pronounced due to the conditional support to the cause.

Socially responsible business practices (SRBP) focus on adopting best business practices that promote society's welfare and prevent exploitation due to its activities. An example of this could be a sustainable supply chain that strives to uphold the interests of multiple stakeholders (Mefford, 2011). Many consumers in western nations are conscious of fair trade practices and demand goods produced ethically (O'Rourke, 2005; Shaw et al., 2006). Such consumer-driven demand for ethical products compels MNCs to have policies and programs that prevent the

creation of sweatshops in the developing nations where they outsource. For instance, Nike, Inc., through its lean manufacturing program, is systematically improving labor standards in developing countries, particularly factory wage and work hour practices (Distelhorst et al., 2017).

Similarly, few companies have voluntarily adopted environmental standards to prevent further degradation of natural habitats, flora, and fauna. For instance, many MNCs like Unilever and P&G are Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) members. They have put a policy for procurement of RSPO certified palm oil that ensures rainforest protection in the tropical forest. SRBP is driven by both the pressure of interest groups and the enlightened self-interest of the firms. Whatever may be the reasons for the adoption of SRBP, it will demonstrate firms' commitment to causes in no uncertain terms to the concerned stakeholders and consumers. Certainly, CRM does not come anywhere near SRBP in terms of commitment to causes. Firms have to focus on the different points in their supply chain to identify opportunities and make suitable changes in their practices. SRBP requires more resources and strategic thinking compared to CRM.

In the above paragraphs I discussed different types of CSR, compared and contrasted them with CRM. One more concept called "Corporate Societal Marketing" warrants its comparison with CRM. The corporate Societal Marketing (CStM) concept was given by Drumwright and Murphy (2001) and is defined as "marketing initiatives that have at least one non-economic objective related to social welfare and use the resources of the company and/or one of its partners" (Drumwright and Murphy 2001, p. 164). By this definition, the first three CSR initiatives of Kotler & Lee (2005) qualifies to be part of CSM. If the remaining three elements of CSR initiatives are invoked during marketing efforts, they also become part of CSM.

Anchoring The Concept Of Cause-Related Marketing

CRM as a concept is rooted in corporate philanthropy (Berglind & Nakata, 2005; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988) and forms a subset of CSR (Robinson et al., 2012). Pirsch et al. (2007) have envisioned CSR on a continuum based on the degree of commitment to satisfying the interests of various stakeholders. At one end of the spectrum, there is 'Institutionalized CSR' with organizational-level policies to meet the needs of all the stakeholders. At the other end, there is 'Promotional CSR,' which is short-term orientated with an emphasis on eliciting a response from consumers in the form of sales. Since the basic tenet of CRM is that firm will support the cause if and only if it receives a positive consumer response to the offerings, CRM is a promotional tool. Hence, the concept of CRM fits into Promotional CSR. Therefore, CRM can be looked at as one form of CSR, specifically the Promotional CSR. However, compared to CSR, the scope of CRM is narrower. And also, the commitment to stakeholders' interest is shallower compared to some of the CSR initiatives like CSM, CPh, and so forth discussed in the previous section.



Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of the relationship among CRM, CSR, stakeholder theory, and business ethics

The pyramid model of CSR specifies four responsibilities to corporate— economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic (Carroll, 1991). CRM is asymmetrically congruent with these four responsibilities. Economic responsibility stipulates earning profit for the firm. Since CRM is tied with consumer response in terms of purchase, it will address the economic motive of the firm. Further, unlike CPh, the CRM ensures the contribution for cause is mobilized through consumers. Hence, it soothes the critics of CSR who think that CSR is siphoning of shareholders' wealth. The legal responsibility stipulates adhering to the law of the land. Since CSR has been made mandatory for firms in some countries like India, CRM has legal binding if shown as a part of CSR. Ethical responsibility sets society's expectations about fair (acceptable) and unfair (unacceptable) behavior. CRM, if done with due care, will ensure conveying the ethical stand of the firm. Philanthropic responsibility consists of exhibiting good corporate citizenship and involves volunteering for societal welfare by contributing resources. The donation made to the cause is in sync with the philanthropic dimension of CSR. It is evident from the above description that CRM touches all four aspects of pyramid model. However, it seems to be strongly related to economic and philanthropic dimensions and tenuously related to legal and ethical dimensions.

There are three viewpoints of CSR, namely normative, instrumental, and descriptive (Pirsch et al., 2007), having their roots in normative, instrumental, and descriptive stakeholder theory. Normative stakeholder theory holds that firms should involve in CSR to enhance societal welfare. Further, it stipulates that social welfare should be an end in itself. In the realm of ethics, normative stakeholder theory is in sync with Kantian ethics of categorical imperative. However, in contrast to normative stakeholder theory, the instrumental stakeholder's theory stipulates that the ultimate aim of CSR is to enhance the firm's self-interest. With their focus on winning stakeholders approval and cooperation, firms use CSR to achieve that end. If we subject CRM to close scrutiny, it is conceptually more congruent with the instrumental stakeholder view of CSR than the normative viewpoint (Jones & Wicks, 1999). The instrumental view visualizes CSR as a means to enhance economic performance and places a higher emphasis on those elements of CSR programs that are directly related to economic performance (Pirsch et al., 2007). Since the firms' support to cause is linked to positive

consumer response like purchasing CRM linked products, the firm's economic performance is aligned with the support for the social cause. Hence, the support to a cause is never divorced from the sales.

Further, the instrumental orientation of the CRM and instrumental stakeholder theory can be traced back to the utilitarian branch of ethics, which locates morality in the consequence of an action rather than the intention. Though driven by the firm's self-interest through its support for the cause, CRM creates awareness and generates and donates resources supporting causes. Hence, whether a firm has an altruistic motive or a self-interest motive, the result, in most cases, is favorable for cause beneficiaries and the NPOs. Further, it also helps consumers in realizing their altruistic needs. Hence CRM creates value for the firm, causes, and consumers, thus achieving maximum benefit for maximum people, which is the basic tenet of utilitarianism given by moral philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarian ethics locates morality in the consequences of an action. Hence, in Fig 2, it is shown as a subset of consequentialist moral reasoning. Ultimately, consequentialist moral reasoning forms an important branch of business ethics along with categorical imperative.

To sum up, CRM forms an essential subset of CSR, both of which find legitimacy as a concept in the stakeholder theory. Though there are different stakeholder theories, the theory by Robert Edward Freeman locates the motive of firms' CSR in gaining the broader acceptance of various stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). Hence his central premise for a firm to engage in CSR is the firm's self-interest. His theory looks at CSR as an instrument to achieve a firm's objective. However, though driven by self-interest, CSR creates value for different stakeholders and supports consequentialist moral reasoning, which locates morality, not in the intention but the consequence of action. The above discussion establishes the link between CRM and business ethics through different layers, as depicted in Fig 2.

Future Research Directions

As discussed in the previous section, firms discharge their corporate social responsibilities through various CSR programs and activities supporting different causes. Each of these programs has its strengths, weaknesses, and applications. However, the research involving comparative analysis of the efficacy of each of these different CSR types is sparse, and many questions remain unanswered, especially in comparison with CRM. This section discusses a few of these issues and sets a research direction for future researchers in CRM in particular and CSR in general.

As mentioned previously in CRM, firms' self-interest in promoting their offerings is explicit and unmasked. Consumers may interpret explicit self-interest in CRM as transparent, or they might get turned off by the firm pursuing self-interest in the guise of supporting a cause. There is also the possibility of consumers inferring the motive of the firm looking into the various other information such as CSR reputation. Different CSR initiatives discussed in the previous section might differentially contribute to corporate CSR reputation. However, we do not know much about which of these different types of CSR contribute most to corporate reputation. Similarly, a firm may practice multiple CSR initiatives. Whether and how this information supplements or complements CRM perception remains to be investigated by future researchers. Webb & Mohr (1998) classified consumers into four types based on their response to CRM: skeptics, balancers, attribution oriented, and socially oriented. Skeptics do not trust the CRM of firms and are least amenable for persuasion. Socially oriented are knowledgeable about the firm and its activities. They do not mind supporting CRM even if they doubt the credentials of the firm. In other words, they want to pass the benefit of doubt to cause. Attribution oriented are most interested in attributing the motive for a firm's CRM and are similar to skeptics, but

they support CRM if they attribute positive motive to the firm. Balancers support CRM if they do not have to make a significant sacrifice like paying higher price, putting more effort to access the product, or put up with inferior quality product. We do not know how these types of consumers react to other types of CSR initiatives of firms.

Past literature in the CRM consumers usually doubt benevolent acts of firms. In addition, they do not have much information about the company or the cause. Hence, they base their judgment on perceived causality, also known as the attributed motive — this attributed motive is known to mediate between CRM and the response. Usually positive attributed motive will generate a positive response. However, due to the inherent nature of CRM being conditional support, consumers will also sense the firm's self-interest. However, in other forms of CSR, the strength of the attributed motive may vary as a function of the perceived benevolence of the firm and its self-interest. Future researchers can explore this phenomenon using experimental design.

Companies are creatively coming up with different CSR activities combining elements of the above-discussed programs, which cannot be put into any one basket. For instance, while booking flights through an HDFC credit card, the webpage displays donations to a charity with a small amount. It is up to consumers to choose whether to donate or not. Similarly, Zomato provides an option to donate to the cause through its mobile app whenever consumers want to order. However, in these cases, companies do not make any explicit promise of donating to the cause. They merely facilitate consumer philanthropy. It is interesting to see if and how consumers perceive any difference between these practices and CRM.

Conclusion

CRM as part of the CSR portfolio of a company can be an essential tool to address the issues surrounding triple bottom line people, planet, and profit. It has been a favorite of both academicians and practitioners. However, the multitude of practices prevalent in the marketplace and their study in academic literature using different terminologies created confusion among the researchers, especially the novice researchers. There was an attempt to consolidate various CSR programs under six typologies by Kotler & Lee (2005). This study is mainly based on their work and advanced it further by proposing a model which delineates the CRM from the rest, including social marketing. Moreover, narrative analysis has attempted to root the CRM in consequentialist business ethics. I hope this will be helpful for novice researchers in the domain of CRM and CSR as well as multidisciplinary researchers interested in the area.

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