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The Implementation of Relationship Marketing in Building Customer Trust at Smk Kesehatan Nusantara

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ABSTRACT

Increasing competition among vocational education institutions requires schools not only to improve academic quality but also to build customer trust through long-term relationship management with stakeholders. This study aims to analyze the implementation of relationship marketing in building customer trust at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal, public relations staff, parents, students, and industry partners.

The findings reveal that SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya has implemented relationship marketing principles through intensive two-way communication, continuous educational services, and prompt and transparent complaint handling. The implementation of relationship marketing has successfully built customer trust, reflected in the dimensions of reliability, competence, benevolence, and integrity. The established trust positively influences the school's image and stakeholder loyalty. This study concludes that relationship marketing is a relevant and effective strategy for vocational education institutions in building customer trust and sustaining long-term relationships.

Keywords: relationship marketing, customer trust, vocational education, health vocational school, customer loyalty.

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INTRODUCTION

Competition among vocational education institutions in Indonesia has intensified along with increasing public awareness of the importance of educational service quality and graduates' job readiness. Vocational High Schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK), as vocational education institutions, are required not only to excel academically but also to build a positive image and public trust through effective relationship management with stakeholders—particularly students, parents, and industry partners.

In this context, the concept of Relationship Marketing (RM) becomes highly relevant. Relationship Marketing is defined as a marketing approach oriented toward building long-term relationships with customers through trust, commitment, and continuous communication (Gómez-Bayona, 2024). This approach focuses not merely on transactions but also on value creation through consistent and personalized interactions.

The implementation of RM strategies in education has unique characteristics. Schools function as social service providers as well as service-based institutions that must maintain stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty. Miranda-Guerra (2024) explains that the success of educational institutions in maintaining their image and reputation depends on their ability to build emotional and rational relationships with customers, in which trust is a key factor.

SMK Kesehatan Nusantara, as a vocational education institution in the health sector, has significant potential to apply RM principles to enhance its competitiveness. The school interacts with various stakeholders: parents as primary decision-makers, students as service users, and health industries as strategic partners. In this context, trust becomes a critical asset that determines the sustainability of these relationships.

However, in practice, many educational institutions still focus on short-term promotional activities (advertising, exhibitions, brochures), while relational aspects such as two-way communication, customer satisfaction follow-up, and stakeholder experience evaluation have not been optimally implemented (Kusumawati, 2021). In fact, Rew (2023) demonstrates that stakeholder trust in educational institutions is directly proportional to relationship consistency and institutional commitment to service quality.

According to Faradilah (2005) in Strategic Communication of Educational Institutions with the Community, there are three strategic steps in building an institutional image: branding, positioning, and differentiation. First, branding represents the most essential aspect of an institution, as it shapes public perception and image. Second, positioning refers to placing the institution in an appropriate market position based on segmentation. To be more focused, institutions must target specific segments aligned with their objectives. Third, differentiation refers to institutional advantages not possessed by competitors. These advantages facilitate clearer communication of identity and positioning within society.

Therefore, it is essential to examine in depth how relationship marketing is implemented at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara, how this strategy builds customer trust, and what factors support or hinder its effectiveness. The findings of this study are expected to provide practical recommendations for school management and contribute to the academic discourse on educational marketing in Indonesia. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the research problems through an in-depth analysis of, how is relationship marketing implemented at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara, and how does this strategy build customer trust among parents, students, and industry partners?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

1.1. Relationship Marketing Concept

Relationship Marketing emphasizes the creation, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationships between institutions and customers through commitment, communication, and trust (Berry, 1983; Gómez-Bayona, 2024). In the digital era, this concept has evolved into customer engagement marketing, where customer interactions are not only transactional but also participatory (Roy, 2025). In the educational context, RM includes two-way communication with parents, post-service support such as graduate follow-up, and the creation of positive learning experiences (Maitreephun et al., 2023). Key elements of RM include:

Trust: confidence that the institution can fulfill its service promises

Commitment: willingness of institutions and stakeholders to maintain long-term relationships

Communication: openness of information and responsiveness to customer needs

Conflict handling: institutional ability to manage customer complaints professionally

1.2. Customer Trust in Education

Trust is a key variable in maintaining customer relationships. In education, trust is formed through stakeholder perceptions of institutional reliability, integrity, and benevolence (Rew, 2023). Gómez-Bayona (2024) emphasizes that the relationship between service quality and student loyalty is mediated by trust developed during interactions. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), four trust dimensions adapted to education include reliability, competence, benevolence, and integrity.

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RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a single case study method. The approach aims to provide an in-depth description of the implementation of relationship marketing within the specific context of SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya. The research was conducted from October to December 2025. Informants were selected using purposive sampling and included:

The principal and vice principal for public relations/industry cooperation

Marketing staff and guidance counselors

Parents of students (6–8 respondents)

Active students (5–7 respondents)

Industry partners (4 respondents)

Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore

experiences and perspectives on RM implementation, participatory observation of school promotion activities, industry collaboration, and public communication, as well as documentation such as brochures, social media content, public relations SOPs, cooperation reports, and stakeholder testimonials. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving interview transcription, open coding, categorization, theme development (strategy, trust, barriers), and thematic conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation as well as member checking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.3. Results

SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya is a private vocational health school accredited with grade A, located in the city center of Surabaya at Jl. Simpang Dukuh No. 11. The school's core strengths lie in its Pharmacy and Nursing programs. Additional advantages include:

A strategic location in the center of Surabaya

Well-equipped Pharmacy and Nursing laboratories

Flagship programs such as holistic therapy, baby spa, cupping therapy, and home care

Professional and certified teaching staff

Operating under the supervision of the Kunci Ilmu Foundation, SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya focuses on developing students' competencies in the health sector. The school was established in response to the demand for mid-level healthcare professionals who possess practical skills, professional ethics, and strong work readiness. The foundation demonstrates a strong commitment to improving human resource quality in the healthcare sector.

The school's vision is to produce competent, ethical graduates who are able to compete in the healthcare labor market. Its mission includes delivering competency-based education, strengthening collaboration with business and industry (DUDI), and fostering harmonious relationships with parents and the community.

The organizational structure consists of the principal as the main leader, vice principals responsible for curriculum, student affairs, facilities and infrastructure, as well as public relations and industry cooperation. The public relations division plays a strategic role in managing external communication, school promotion, and maintaining long-term relationships with key stakeholders, including parents, industry partners, and alumni.



Figure 4.1. Organizational Structure of SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya

Source: Processed research data, 2025

The school offers study programs such as Nursing Assistant, Clinical Pharmacy, and Basic Health Analysis. To support educational service quality, SMK Kesehatan Nusantara collaborates with hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, and health laboratories as venues for student internships (industrial work practice). Communication channels include face-to-face meetings, official correspondence, parent WhatsApp groups, social media platforms, industrial visits, and education exhibitions.

This profile indicates that SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya is not only focused on internal learning processes but also emphasizes sustainable external relationship management, aligning with the principles of relationship marketing in educational services.

Interview Findings with the Principal

In-depth interviews with the principal revealed that parental and public trust is consciously positioned as the foundation of school sustainability. The principal stated:

"For us, parents' trust is our main asset. When parents trust us, they do not only enroll their children here, but they also help maintain the school's good reputation."

This statement reflects managerial awareness that trust is a strategic asset, as emphasized in the commitment–trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The principal further emphasized that relationships with parents are viewed as long-term partnerships:

"We do not see parents merely as customers. They are partners in educating and shaping students' character."

In practice, the school conducts regular meetings with parents, provides periodic reports on students' development, and opens dialogue channels for both academic and non-academic issues. Regarding complaint handling, the principal explained:

"When there is a complaint, we try to resolve it as quickly as possible. Usually, we invite parents to discuss the issue openly so that misunderstandings can be avoided."

This approach reflects the conflict handling dimension of relationship marketing, where organizations maintain relationship quality through fair and transparent problem resolution.

Interview Findings with the Public Relations Division

Interviews with public relations staff indicated that their role extends beyond promotion to relationship management. One staff member explained:

"Our task is not only to recruit new students, but also to maintain communication with parents and partners so that relationships remain strong."

Communication strategies involve both digital media and direct interaction:

"Parents now want fast information. That's why we are active in WhatsApp groups and social media to ensure information is delivered promptly."

Regarding continuous service, the public relations division emphasized:

"Our relationship does not end once students are admitted. We accompany parents until graduation, and even alumni relationships are maintained."

On complaint management:

"When complaints arise, we record them and report them to school leadership. The principle is quick response to prevent trust from declining."

These findings demonstrate the active role of public relations in sustaining communication and commitment, key elements of relationship marketing.

1.4. Discussion

1.4.1 Implementation of Relationship Marketing at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara

The findings indicate that SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya has implemented core elements of relationship marketing, namely communication, commitment, trust, and conflict handling. These practices align with Berry (1983) and Grönroos (1994), who emphasize that service marketing focuses on long-term relationship development rather than short-term transactions.

Two-way communication through regular meetings and digital platforms strengthens emotional bonds between the school and parents. This supports Morgan and Hunt's (1994) assertion that effective communication is a prerequisite for the formation of trust and commitment.

1.4.2 Relationship Marketing in Building Customer Trust

Customer trust at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara is built through four trust dimensions (McKnight et al., 2002):

Reliability, reflected in consistent academic and administrative services

Competence, demonstrated by teacher quality and student success in internships

Benevolence, shown through the school's concern for students' development

Integrity, evident in information openness and financial transparency

Interview excerpts suggest that trust develops through repeated positive interactions, supporting Rew's (2023) finding that trust mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in educational institutions.

1.4.3 Impact of Trust on School Image and Loyalty

Established trust contributes positively to the school's image. Satisfied parents tend to recommend the school to others, fostering indirect customer loyalty. This finding is consistent with Dick and Basu (1994) and Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001), who argue that trust and positive image are critical determinants of loyalty in service organizations.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

1.5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion regarding the implementation of relationship marketing in building customer trust at SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Implementation of Relationship Marketing

SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya has consistently implemented relationship marketing principles, although not formally labeled as a marketing strategy. This implementation is reflected in intensive two-way communication with parents and students, continuous educational services, and prompt, solution-oriented complaint handling. These practices align with relationship marketing theory, which emphasizes long-term relationship development based on trust and commitment (Berry, 1983; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

2. Role of Relationship Marketing in Building Customer Trust

Relationship marketing plays a significant role in building customer trust among parents and stakeholders. Trust is developed through four main dimensions: reliability, competence, benevolence, and integrity. Service consistency, educator competence, institutional concern for student development, and transparency of information are key factors strengthening customer trust, as proposed by McKnight et al. (2002).

3. Impact of Trust on School Image and Loyalty

The trust established has a positive impact on the school's public image. Parents who are satisfied and trust the institution tend to recommend SMK Kesehatan Nusantara to prospective students, thereby indirectly fostering customer loyalty. This finding supports the theories of Dick and Basu (1994) and Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001), which highlight trust as a prerequisite for loyalty and positive organizational image in service institutions.

Overall, this study demonstrates that relationship marketing is a relevant and effective strategy in vocational education institutions, particularly in building trust and sustaining long-term relationships with customers.

1.6. Recommendation

Based on the conclusions above, this study proposes several recommendations of both practical and academic relevance, as follows:

1.6.1 Practical Recommendations

1. Strengthening a Structured Relationship Marketing Strategy

SMK Kesehatan Nusantara Surabaya is recommended to formulate a more systematic and well-documented relationship marketing strategy, for example by developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) for communication with parents and other stakeholders.

2. Optimizing the Role of Public Relations and Digital Media

The school should continue to optimize the role of the public relations unit as a relationship manager rather than merely a promotional tool. The utilization of digital media should be enhanced to strengthen two-way communication and foster long-term stakeholder engagement.

3. Regular Evaluation of Customer Satisfaction and Trust

It is recommended that the school conduct periodic surveys on parents' satisfaction and trust as a basis for evaluating and improving the quality of educational services.

4. Strengthening Relationships with Alumni and Industry Partners

Relationships with alumni and industry partners should be managed more intensively as part of relationship marketing initiatives, as graduates' success serves as tangible evidence of the school's quality in the eyes of the public.

1.6.2 Academic Recommendations

1. Future studies are encouraged to employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to empirically test the relationships among relationship marketing, trust, and loyalty.

2. Subsequent researchers may expand the research context to other educational institutions or conduct comparative studies among several vocational high schools to achieve broader generalizability of findings.

3. Additional variables such as customer satisfaction, school reputation, and service quality may be incorporated as intervening or moderating variables in future research models.

Overall, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of relationship-based marketing strategies in vocational education institutions, particularly in Indonesia.

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