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Customer Relationship Management. Websites Analysis of the Top Ten Consumer Goods Companies

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Abstract: Customer relationship management (CRM) became one of the marketing practices that is assumed to bring success to companies in recent years. Therefore, the present research aims to identify the level of development of CRM in the top ten consumer goods companies as ranked at world level in 2021. Different models describe components of the CRM and the present research uses the theoretical framework proposed by Sin et al. (2005) that comprises four CRM dimensions: key customer focus, CRM organization, knowledge management and technology-based CRM. The methodology employed includes documentary research based on the public information available on the websites of the selected companies. Two types of analyses are conducted, descriptive analysis and comparative analysis. On overall, the dimension that is the most visible is the key customer focus, while the dimension that is the least visible is CRM organization. The results reveal that CRM is present in all top ten companies, but at different levels of development. US companies are more oriented towards CRM than companies originating from other countries. Companies that have a more developed CRM act in the direction of all four CRM dimensions.

Keywords: customer relationship management (CRM); CRM dimensions; consumer goods; web analysis.

Introduction

As more and more customers become the centre of the marketing activity, the higher is the interest around their individual preferences (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018). Customer relationship management (CRM) is one way to deal with and try to better satisfy customers. CRM has gained popularity in the last decades due to the accelerated development of information technology that supports its development. Yet, the concept behind CRM is not revolutionary. It is the technology evolution that offers new and easier opportunities to manage information and communication (Eichorn, 2004), so necessary in CRM. Customer management on a long-term period is important in order to generate profit for the organizations, especially when is coupled with process and product innovations (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021a). High degree of evolution in the business environment and heightened competitiveness into volatile economic context generate more interest for the management of the customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018). Organizations adopting CRM achieve improved performance and develop a higher competitiveness because of their changes in structure and operations (Chalmeta, 2006; Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021a). A better relationship with the customers can finally lead to increased loyalty, retention, and profit (Ngai, 2005). Moreover, CRM can be used in improving new products development, consequently reducing failure rates (Ernst et al., 2010). So, CRM is an orientation with beneficial consequences at multiple levels in an organization.

In the context of increased importance of CRM, as an organizational strategy in recent years, it is of interest to understand how CRM develops at company level. The research

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question that the study aims to answer is “*What is the level of development of the CRM in consumer goods companies?*”. Further on, the research objectives envisage to: a) assess the existence and development of the main CRM dimensions at company level and b) compare companies, in respect to their levels of development of CRM.

Therefore, the present paper has the purpose to analyse the orientation towards CRM of some of the top companies at world level from the fast-moving consumer goods field. Consumer goods companies have been chosen, as they have a direct relationship with customers. The study is based on the in-depth and detailed analysis of the public information present on the companies’ websites. Sin, Tse and Yim (2005) conceptual framework is used to analyse the dimensions of CRM. The results illustrate that, even though most of the companies incorporate activities related to CRM, there are both similarities and differences in the way CRM is applied at organizational level. Also, the key customer focus dimension of CRM is prevalent in all companies, while other dimensions are less visible.

The sections of the paper are the following: the next section focuses on how customer relationship management is perceived in the literature; the following section presents the methodology used for the present research; the third section illustrates the results of the analysis and the paper ends with the conclusion section, that presents the implications and the limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research.

Customer relationship management (CRM) in the literature

CRM definitions

In literature several authors have tried to define CRM and there is no consensus one clear definition, as CRM are seen in the literature from different perspectives: tactical and narrow, strategic, and broad and integrated customer oriented technological solutions (Al-Homery et al., 2023). However, most definitions are built around the customer, as they contain a customer-oriented component. One of the first definitions belongs to Swift (2001, p. 12): “Customer relationship management is an enterprise approach to understanding and influencing customer behaviour through meaningful communication in order to improve customer acquisition, customer retention, customer loyalty and customer profitability”. Payne and Frow (2009, p. 11) underline the importance of process integration across departments within an organization and define CRM as “a cross-functional strategic approach concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate relationships with key customers and customer segments”. Same interest in mentioning the collaboration between different functions of the organization can be observed at Goldenberg (2015, p. 3): “Customer relationship management is a business approach that integrates people, process, and technology to maximize relationships with all customers, providing seamless collaboration between all customer-facing functions”. Srivastava, Chandra and Srivastava (2019) point out that organizations that implement CRM are customer-centric businesses which aim to satisfy customers. For those organizations CRM represents an aggregation of strategies and processes with proper software behind.

CRM dimensions

In the literature, CRM is described as consisting of various dimensions. Table 1 reveals the main dimensions identified by different researchers and authors for CRM. In their literature review Al-Homery et al. (2023) point out the multitude of facets and components for CRM, identifying even divergent trends from the perspective of focusing on one element or another. Also, Table 1 highlights some of the dimensions of the different models overlap. In the current paper, the main dimensions used to characterize CRM are the ones developed by Sin et al. (2005): Key Customer Focus, CRM Organization, Knowledge Management and Technology-based CRM.

Table 1. CRM dimensions in the literature

CRM dimensions/pillars	Authors
Personnel Organization Technology	Raab et al. (2016)
Key customer focus CRM organization Knowledge management Technology-based CRM	Developed by: Sin et al. (2005) Used by: Abdullateef et al. (2010); Mohammed & Rashid (2012); Mohammad et al. (2013); Yim et al. (2004); Chetioui et al. (2017); Sofi et al. (2020); AlQershi et al. (2020); Al-Gasawneh et al. (2021); Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh (2022); Al-Azzam (2016)
Organizational alignment CRM technology Customer management CRM strategy implementation	Pozza et al. (2018)
CRM Capability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information generation • Information dissemination • Responsiveness • CRM System Investments: • CRM activity investments • Relative CRM expenses 	Jossiasen et al. (2014)
Information sharing Customer partnership Long term relationship Joint problem solving Technology based CRM	Developed by: Ghafari et al. (2011) Used by: Shokouhyar et al. (2021)
Customer orientation CRM technology CRM processes CRM organization	Ali et al. (2019)
Customer identification Customer attraction Customer retention Customer development	Developed by: Ngai (2005) Used by: Guerola-Navarro et al. (2021b)
Interaction management Relationship development Quality of services Behavior of the employees	Long et al. (2013)
CRM Process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer information management • Customer segment value management • Multi-channel management CRM Technology CRM Reward Systems	Ernst et al. (2010)

Source: own processing based on literature

Next, Figure 1 presents synthetically the model.

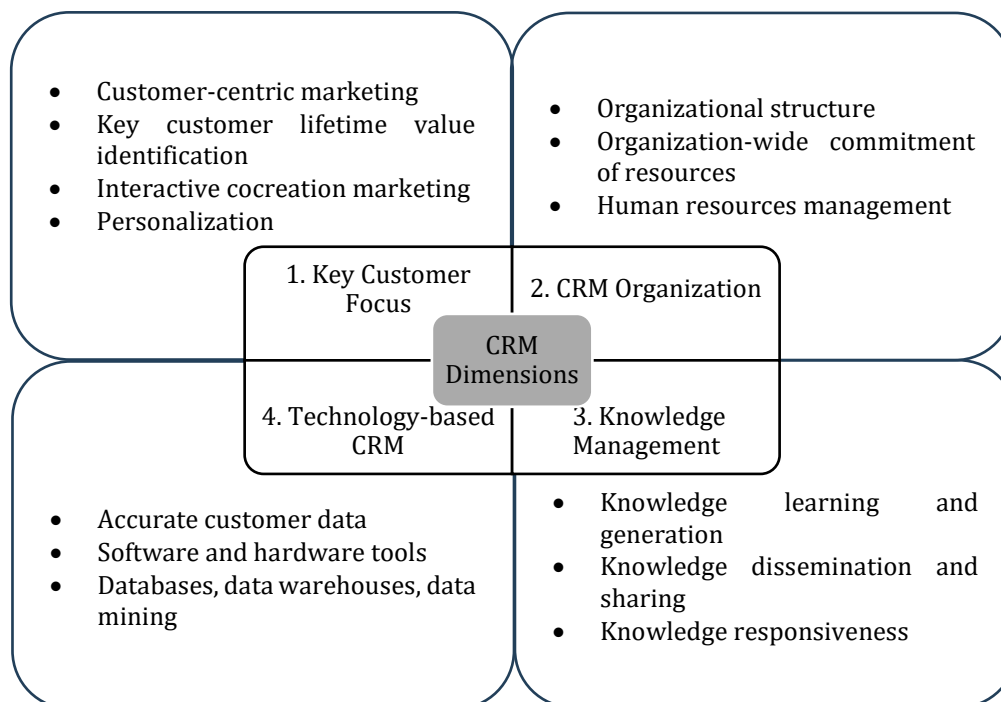


Figure 1. The CRM dimensions in Sin et al. (2005) model

Source: own processing

Key customer focus

Focusing on the key customers ensures a constant improvement in the goods or services that an organization sells them, by for example personalizing its offering. This dimension of CRM has four main facets: customer-centric marketing, key customer lifetime value identification, personalization and interactive co-creation marketing (Sin et al., 2005).

Doing marketing from a customer centric perspective implies understanding and satisfying the needs, desires and preferences of selected consumers (Sheth et al., 2000) and treat consumers according to their level of strategic importance for the company (Ryals & Knox, 2001). Customer-centric marketing is mandatory for a company in order to develop an effective relationship marketing strategy. According to Vandermerwe (2004) deep customer focus cannot be achieved only through CRM software implementation or out of the box innovations. Companies have to encourage an internal attitude towards customer centricity and identify with this value.

Customer lifetime value is an assessment way of the profit that each customer generates during his or her lifecycle. The measurement is very complex as it requires large data sets, forecasting techniques and future consumption behaviour and comprehensive analyses on the accuracy of the model used to determine the lifetime value (Chang et al., 2012).

Personalization (in marketing) stands for developing tailored products or services for individual needs of the customers. A personalized offer helps customers to reduce the time spent to search and choose for the needed product or service (Chandra et al., 2022). The personalization process has three steps: learning what the customers' preferences are, matching the organization's offer to their preference and evaluating the two previous steps (Murthi & Sarkar, 2003). Personalization becomes harder as the needs and resources of the customers are more diverse and their purchase behaviour is harder to predict (Sin et al., 2005).

Interactive co-creation marketing connects customers and companies in order to interact and create value (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014) and involves both marketers and customers

interacting in different aspects of the product design and production (Narayandas & Rangan, 2004). Value co-creation behaviour has a direct influence on attitudinal loyalty, as customers may experience different emotions toward a product, this influencing their preference for a certain supplier or recommendation to third parties. Attitudinal behaviour does not necessarily drive to the actual purchase (Cossío-Silva et al., 2016). Organizations and individual customers improve loyalty, generate relationship value, and reduce the costs through collaboration, communication and cooperation organization (Sin et al., 2005).

CRM organization

Organizations may take into account implementing CRM at all levels (Sofi et al., 2020). Moreover, a CRM oriented organization appears when companies foster an internal working environment through modern tools and proper tracking systems (Mechinda & Patterson, 2011). There are three mandatory aspects that a company must work on in order to organize its internal environment around CRM: organizational structure, organization-wide commitment of resources and human resources management (Sin et al., 2005).

Organizational structure is important as all the divisions within the company have to work for a common goal (Sin et al., 2005). Companies have to establish a structure for its functions, so that the entire CRM communication can be easily shared across departments (Mohammad et al., 2013). From an organization point of view, companies have switched from classical hierarchical structures to matrix structures, to better organize the complex activities they conduct.

Organization-wide commitment of resources is the next step after organizational structure is settled and it has the purpose to properly integrate resources such as: sales and marketing capabilities, technical expertise, service excellence capabilities (Sin et al., 2005). According to Hooley et al. (2005) marketing resources have an impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty, this indirectly generating financial performance. CRM involves coordination across several departments. Therefore, companies must be able to coordinate expertise from several people within different departments. Input from employees who work in technical and support departments is also required for large scale projects. Because companies have switched to matrix structures, the newer and more complex type of structure facilitate an easier dissemination of manpower resources and knowledge across departments (Gillard, 2009).

Human resources management is another element of the CRM organization dimension. According to Al-Refaie (2015), human resources management has several responsibilities such as employee recruitment and training, identifying staff needs, measure performance and offer proper compensation. Internal marketing that addresses employees, is important for human resources management and for its contribution to the development of CRM. Internal marketing is based on four processes: market training, internal communication, reward organization and employee involvement (Sin et al, 2005). Abstein and Spieth (2014) suggest that human resources management is contributing to innovative work behaviour of employees and reduces work -life conflict. Well-motivated employees can better contribute to foster CRM within organizations.

Knowledge management

The third dimension of CRM is knowledge management. In a highly competitive business environment, knowledge creation and diffusion are becoming crucial for a company's success. Therefore, knowledge is treated as a valuable commodity rooted in products and employees (Dalkir, 2005). Sin et al. (2005) explains that in regards with CRM, knowledge represents a company's learnings through experience or empirical studies. They consider that the three facets of knowledge management are: knowledge learning and generation, knowledge dissemination and sharing, knowledge responsiveness.

Learning and generating knowledge about the customer can be accomplished directly and indirectly. To do that, a company needs a two-way communication system and an interactive feedback system. Knowledge generation is translated into a 360-degree consumer view (Sin et al., 2005).

Dissemination and sharing of knowledge are generating enlarged information for the organization and its customers (Groff & Jones, 2003). Sharing process can be done either in written or verbal and is meant to help others to solve issues, generate ideas or implement procedures (Wang & Noe, 2010). Employees who share knowledge with their co-workers help themselves and the organization to evolve. Consequently, knowledge is a source for competitive advantage and many companies have designed systems and encouraged personnel to share the knowledge (Yang & Wu, 2008).

Knowledge responsiveness is represented by the adaptability of the company to offer customized products or services to their clients, after segmenting them based on the learned and disseminated knowledge (Sin et al., 2005). Organizations' responsiveness is based on flexibility and dialogue. Through organizational responsiveness companies can face changes and environmental fluctuations easier (Opara, 2022). Being flexible involves a quick reconfiguration of the processes in order to meet new requirements from the market via sharing information across the organization (Hoyt et al., 2007).

Technology-based CRM

Organizations that use technology-based CRM to strengthen their relationship with customers use IT infrastructure and IT applications. Moreover, those organizations focus on automation of the business process such as marketing, sales, or customer services (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2022). With the help of technology, customer data is gathered and analysed (Chetioui et al., 2017) and IT systems contribute to business improvement and processes optimization (Badwan et al., 2017). The fast evolution of information technology helped organizations to establish new ways of interacting with customers (Harrigan et al., 2015). Technology is so important in CRM implementation that some authors consider that CRM is actually a technology or a process of data mining (Soltani et al., 2018). Authors consider that data mining techniques contribute to extract information of value from huge data sets that is used further to develop useful information about customers. In this context, there are authors that even defined data mining CRM (DCRM) as a separate form of CRM (Pynadath et al., 2023). Besides the use of big data, other technological trends that can contribute to the development of "perfect" CRM systems include IoT, Social, Mobile and Cloud (Avdagić-Golub et al., 2022). Anyhow, technology plays an important role in CRM due to the fact that through technology organizations collect, analyse, and interpret consumer data to predict future behaviour. Technology-based CRM is regarded as one of the main practices in CRM, as a technological solution that is applied in the fields of marketing, customer services and support (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021a).

Methodology

The purpose of the present paper is to assess the presence and the extent of the development of the customer relationship management function as included in the information made public by top multinational companies. Accordingly, the research question is *"What is the level of development of the CRM in consumer goods companies?"*. The associated research objectives are: a) assess the existence and development of the main CRM dimensions at company level; and b) to compare companies, in respect to their levels of development of CRM. The information to assess CRM is collected from the websites of companies. Websites contain representative information that companies wish to make public about their activities (Nicolescu & Dominici, 2021) and therefore, are considered a good source of information to be analyzed in order to identify how CRM through its dimensions is present in companies.

To reach this purpose, the top ten world-wide consumer goods companies were selected for analysis. The ten top multinational companies have been identified based on a yearly ranking that is realized by Consumer Goods Technology using the companies' annual revenues. Table 2 includes the list of the top ten companies included in the study with details on their activities.

We hypothesize that successful companies have a strong customer relationship management function that comprises and integrates several important dimensions.

Table 2. Top ten consumer goods companies - 2021 ranking

No.	Name of company	Annual revenue – 2021 Bill. \$	Country of origin	Field of activity	Main Brands	Website
1.	Nestle SA	95.701	Switzerland	Food & beverage	Nescafe, KitKat, Nespresso	www.nestle.com
2.	Pepsi Co.	79.474	United States	Food & beverage	Pepsi, Lay's	www.pepsico.com
3.	Procter & Gamble	76.118	United States	Personal care & hygiene	Pampers, Head & Shoulders, Gillette	www.us.pg.com
4.	JBS SA	65.454	Brazil	Food processing	Swift, Pilgrim's	www.jbs.com.br
5.	Unilever	62.047	Great Britain	Beauty & wellbeing, personal care, home care & nutrition	Dove, Omo/Persil, Hellman's	www.unilever.com
6.	Anheuser-Busch InBev	54.304	Belgium	Beverage	Budweiser, Corona, Stella Artois	www.ab-inbev.com
7.	Tyson Foods	47.049	United States	Food	Tyson, Jimmy Dean	www.tysonfoods.com
8.	LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton	45.630	France	Wine & spirits, Fashion & leather, perfume & cosmetics, watches & jewellery, selective retailing	Tiffany & Co., Christian Dior, Moët & Chandon	www.lvmh.com
9.	Nike, Inc.	44.538	United States	Athletic equipment	Nike, Air Jordan, Converse	www.nike.com
10.	Imperial Brands PLC	39.517	Great Britain	Tobacco	Davidoff, Winston	www.imperialbrandsplc.com

Source: <https://consumergoods.com/top-100-consumer-goods-companies-2022>

The present paper uses as methodology the qualitative content analysis of the official websites of the multinational companies included in the sample with the aim to identify the main dimensions of CRM within the selected companies. Data collection was based solely on the information published by companies on their websites.

The orientation towards CRM was assessed through the existence of the four CRM dimensions as developed by Sin et. al (2005) on the companies' official websites' content.

To determine the degree of presence for each dimension, all the website sections were consulted. Two types of analysis have been conducted: a descriptive analysis and a comparative analysis through a three-step process.

The documentary analysis and the associated qualitative interpretation followed a three-step process: a) the first step of the analysis was based on an extensive examination of the companies' websites and their sections. The purpose of the in-depth exploration in this analysis was to identify declarative evidence of the CRM orientation of the company; b) in the second step of the analysis it was summarized and structured an overview of CRM dimensions' credentials on the official website for each company and c) in the third step of the analysis, a comparative synthesis was conducted using the Sin et al. (2005) framework for the CRM dimensions and the items for the CRM dimensions' operationalization. Two categories of elements of the Sin et al. (2005) CRM framework were used to conduct the two types of analysis: firstly, for the descriptive analysis there were used the key facets for each of the four main elements of the framework and secondly, for the comparative analysis, there were used the items that operationalized each of the CRM dimensions. The next section presents the results of both analyses.

Customer relationship management and dimensions in the top ten multinational companies

Descriptive analysis

The main four CRM dimensions and their key elements are shortly and synthetically presented for the top ten companies analysed in the present study.

Key customer focus

The first CRM dimension, the key customer focus, has as main facets the following: customer-centric marketing, key customer lifetime value identification, personalisation and interactive co-creation marketing (Sin et al., 2005).

The key customer focus dimension is present in most of the analysed companies, mainly via its first dimension, the customer-centric marketing, while the other facets are less visible on the companies' websites. Companies that offer fast moving consumer goods focus on the key customers only partially, given the profiles of these companies that sell products such as food, beverages, cosmetics for a large customer base. For example, at Nestle, the information on the website suggests a certain level of customer-centric marketing: the company constantly innovates the market through "creative exploration and consumer insights" and has a product portfolio which "is always evolving to meet consumer demands". Even though, isolating key customers is difficult given the company's products profile, Nestle develops specific products for specific groups of customers (ex: the introduction of compostable capsules based on demand from customers). For PepsiCo, the key customer dimension is also present only via a customer-centric approach, as the company states that it plans to be "even more consumer-centric", by "listening to, learning from and being led by the communities we serve is the only way we can take on the biggest challenges facing our global society", so that "in each market, our approach is customized to meet local needs". In this way the company shows that it makes an effort to find out what are the customer needs and that has the interest in providing customized products to their consumers. P&G established very clearly its consumer centric approach by considering that "people are the centre of all we do", the company being "obsessed with finding solutions to the everyday problems" that their consumers are facing, in order to anticipate "consumers' potential problems years in advance". At JBS S.A, the Brazilian origin multinational food company, the key customer focus and customer centric marketing results from the company's declarations on its website that it wants to "optimize the efforts for developing products with higher demand among customers" and to offer "exclusive products for each region, in order to meet demands from different parts

of Brazil and the world". Unilever demonstrates its customer-centric marketing as it uses different channels to find out what are the needs of its consumers: partnerships with retail chains and access to technology are used to "generate insights" and "create shopper profiles" that allow "to target and personalize campaigns". Unilever is aware of the fact that having business success is strongly related to the capability to "adapt to shifting consumer needs" and "anticipate and respond" to the changes people encounter all over the world. The company's aim is to understand consumers' "wants and needs better", so that "best products and services possible" to be offered. Anheuser-Busch InBev, the Belgian global company activating in the drink and brewing sectors is customer centric, as it makes an effort to meet consumers' needs through its "digital platforms, dedicated research labs, technology centres". In addition, it responds to new market needs "as consumer trends evolve", by respecting the "consumer desire of choice" and linking with consumers "by offering meaningful experiences".

As a concrete example, the company developed a direct-to-consumer channel "to provide the best experience across all beverage occasions". This was done through an e-commerce platform that connects consumers from Brazil, for example, with retailers "to deliver cold beer straight to their doorsteps within 30 minutes". This organization identified that "customers demand for premium brews has reached new heights" and developed its own infrastructure to react and bring its visions faster into the market. Tyson Foods declares that is represented by a "caring team that puts the customer first". This organization understands "consumers are always looking for quality and value" and that a new lifestyle (that focuses on convenience) evolves. They demonstrate their customer centric marketing, as they know that consumers' preferences go towards "healthier meal options" and "foods that are fresher, less processed". Therefore, the organization is constantly working on developing "products that meet these needs – products that are all-natural, organic, gluten-free".

LVMH Group, the holder of the Louis Vuitton brand, presents itself as "the world leader in luxury" and its customer centric approach is reflected by the effort this company makes in order to understand consumer needs. This is identified in the job-related section of the website. For example, an artistic director has "to observe fashion trends and know how to anticipate customer needs". Also, a perfumer, must "identify innovations, trends" as part of the job tasks. Nike makes an effort to understand consumers and to improve their experience with the brand by bringing together advanced technologies with "creative thinkers". It has collaborations with "commerce leaders, product and site merchants, digital marketers, strategists, data scientists, designers and analytics talent" and offers consumers "world-class retail and ecommerce experiences". Imperial Brands PLC, the British company that operates in the tobacco industry, has a customer centric marketing, as it argues that it can "adapt and respond to consumer needs and market trends" with innovative solutions. An example is Zone X bamboo fibre pouches developed to capitalize on "consumer interest in modern oral nicotine products in certain markets".

The consumer centric marketing dimension is present at all companies. Personalisation as another facet of key customer focus, is less present on the websites of companies. The Nestle company realizes personalisation rather at group and market segment level, than at individual level. PepsiCo also focuses on personalisation of products and services as it has the capacity to "develop personalized nutrition solutions beyond the athletes" via its Advanced Personalization Ideation Center. This center's mission is to "deliver actionable, personalized nutrition solutions across PepsiCo brands, to help support individuals on their health and wellness journey". LVMH Group declares the use of personalisation as one important facet of the key customer dimension, via shopping experiences, rather than products. Due to the uniqueness of each customer, the organization offers a shopping experience to every single client. Its objective is to "transform shopping into a unique experience" through "constant innovation, digitalization and personalization of relationships". Nike's effort to provide customized and personalised services to its consumers is well represented by its "Nike Training Club app". This is "an app for everybody", giving people the possibility of doing their workouts anywhere, serving

“athletes in all phases and life stages”. Through its digital capabilities Nike is “reimagining how design and technology meet to serve consumers more directly and personally”, offering “highly personalized, lifelong relationships with 100 million consumer members”. It can be observed that personalisation for the consumer goods companies is rather related to services associated to their products than the physical products themselves.

The interactive co-creation marketing is a dimension of CRM that is also less visible on the companies’ websites. However, at Nike, even though interactive co-creation marketing is not present in terms of product design and production, it is present in terms of “communicating openly and transparently” with internal and external stakeholders in order to customize their offering. Also, the dimension is highlighted as P&G as they have a declarative conversation with the customer in their public information published on the website: “we listen to you - making sure the products we design meet your expectations for safety and performance”. Although members of this organization “find inspiration in people” and do their best to solve “the problems real consumers face every day” there is no exact mention on the website of the precise forms of an ongoing dialogue with customers.

About the identification of the key customer lifetime value, there is no information on the websites of the analysed companies, but it is not expected, as this is confidential information.

CRM organization

The second CRM dimension, CRM organization, has as main elements the following: organizational structure, organization-wide commitment of resources and human resource management (Sin et al., 2005).

The CRM organization at Nestle can be characterized by organizational structure that is based on customer-focused teams and marketing employees that have the role to “encompasses all aspects of brand building”, while sales employees are “handling shopper management, customer relationship” in order to delight consumers and help them “live happier and healthier lives”. PepsiCo has an organizational structure that nurtures customer relationships, as the company fosters “a passionate culture of engagement that motivates employees to be their best”. The company’s website includes a section on careers with available jobs around the globe, as it has the desire to keep a “diverse and inclusive workplace” for employees capable of keeping good customer relationships. Procter & Gamble is operating a research & development department which consists of “in-house collective of experts who innovate with intent, sculpting science into irresistibly, superior consumer solutions”, proving its organization design around customers. Unilever has a complex organizational chart that proves that the company is organized around its customers. Its sales and marketing expertise in CRM, is depicted by the several functions with interest on consumers: marketing, data and analytics, customer development, research & development. The marketing department is structured in brand teams, business teams, digital hubs, media, consumer insights and artwork experience. Anheuser-Busch InBev has in its organizational structure a large number of functions and tools focused on consumers: digital platforms, research labs, technology innovation centres, accelerators, direct-to-consumer channels, data analytics, IT & Solutions, illustrating an organizational structure focused on customer. Tyson Foods is organized with a structure around the consumers, as depicted by the existence of several customer-related departments such as research and development, data science and analytics, data engineering and innovation centres. Nike has an organizational structure that is based on its customers: departments like marketing, retail stores, sports marketing, strategic planning, technology are all customer oriented. The marketing functions are “using channels ranging from retail stores to social media” in order to “connect the science and art of Nike innovations to the hearts and minds of athletes around the world”.

Many of the analysed companies have an organizational structure that can nurture CRM.

The organizational commitment of resources is not made public by many companies in the sample. Yet, this is present at Nestle, as the company provides its employees “the tools and information to take right decisions quickly and easily” through digital evolution and usage of artificial intelligence, illustrating the commitment of technological resources to CRM. Also, PepsiCo commits its knowledge resources to serve the customer. For example, the company’s employees engage with “key external stakeholders to educate about the role PepsiCo products play in increasing consumer choice and deliver a broader range of healthier products”.

Very detailed human resources management information is not available at neither of the companies analysed, as being sensitive information. Nonetheless, some companies include some information on relevant human resource activities. For example, at Nestle the customer orientation of the company is present as one of the six business principles of Nestle is “Focusing on Consumers”. P&G provides employee training for skill development, as it offers an “expansive array of skill-building programs that allow employees to grow their individual skills”, including for example trainings on data processing and management of security incidents regarding consumer information. There are companies that do not have at all information related to CRM organization on their websites: JBS SA, LVMH Group and Imperial Brands PLC.

Knowledge management

The third dimension of CRM, knowledge management has three key facets: knowledge learning and generation, knowledge dissemination and sharing and knowledge responsiveness (Sin et al., 2005).

Knowledge management at Nestle is represented by knowledge learning and generation as the organization combines “global resources with local know-how to create value for both society and shareholders”. Also, PepsiCo is involved in knowledge learning and generation. The company’s website provides a customer service section where consumers can share comments or compliments, concerns or issues, general questions, suggestions, and ideas. P&G learns from its customers as it has a very comprehensive “Contact us” page within its website. The contact points are structured based on the type of stakeholders. For example, this webpage is offering dedicated contact point for: partners and suppliers, media, retail customers, non-profit organizations, customers away from home and general contact data for each branch in which country where it operates, allowing the collection of specific and differentiated information. Similarly, JBS SA has a “Contac us” page in its website with the purpose to “clarify doubts, make compliments, give suggestions or criticism”. Unilever strongly believes in knowing the customer needs. This company has “teams of analysts” that process numerous “amounts of data” received daily from the consumers”, in order to “meet the constantly evolving needs of consumers”. Anheuser-Busch InBev uses digital platforms, research laboratories and a technology centre, for “unlocking and gaining unprecedented insight into the needs of our consumers and customers to deliver more innovation, more sustainability, more occasions and more value”. Tyson Foods has a Data Science and Analytics function for “developing algorithms to surface new insights” and at the same time, the company’s culinary professionals look at trends and listen to consumers in order to get innovative. The LVMH Group states on its site that there are job tasks that require employees to “observe fashion trends”, “anticipate customer needs”, “to meet specific demands of customers”, but there are no further details about the concrete tools used for this purpose. Nike is very consumer centric and uses different means for learning about consumers: consumer insights and analytics, based on “big data” which is turned “into digestible decision-making tools”. Also, the company analyses “consumer needs and market capacity” through its merchandising team. Imperial Brands also learns about consumers by “investing to support a consistent approach to consumer insight” and is continuing “to cater to the changing needs of consumers”. All companies pursue knowledge learning, but only some of them focus on big data analysis and foster detailed knowledge generation.

Also, knowledge dissemination and sharing are present at Nestle as it has mechanisms to collect information from customers (the “Contact us” section as a two-way communication system) and from other stakeholders, as it declares “We believe it's essential to engage with stakeholders and bring in relevant external views on important issues. This approach enables us to create opportunities for knowledge sharing, open discussion, and deep dialogue”. PepsiCo disseminates and shares knowledge on its websites. For example, the company has relevant sections for consumers, such as “the nutrition center”, “resource centre” and “events and webinars” where consumers can educate themselves about topics as nutrition, ingredients, health. At, P&G consumers can subscribe and receive regular information. JBS SA mentions an “interface between JBS and its main stakeholders”, among which consumers, with the purpose of “enabling a constant dialogue between the parties of interest”. Unilever enabled a two-way communication with customers: “We will use a combination of channels, which includes product labels, websites, careline phone numbers and/or consumer leaflets to communicate openly with our consumers”. The company can be contacted through the “contact us” form and its social media platforms. Nike uses two-way communication channels via the Nike “get help” section where consumers can contact the company via phone or messages and can find out information on shipping, delivery, order, returns and offers.

Most companies disseminate and share information with their customers. All companies have a “Contact us” function, but only in some companies this is more complex and more intensively used for both knowledge learning and generation and knowledge dissemination and sharing.

Knowledge responsiveness is present at Nestle in the sense that Nestle’s portfolio “is always evolving to meet consumer demands” and is constantly adapted “with products that are right for consumers” and the company wishes to “make a positive impact on people’s lives”, based on the information collected from the customers and markets. At JBS SA the company tracks the consumer profiles and makes “investments in research and technology”, in order to “make JBS a ground-breaking company” in innovating products. Anheuser-Busch InBev uses the insights gained using the technology innovation centers help to a better understanding of consumers’ needs and “create new occasions and experiences” for them. Tyson Foods transforms consumer insights into “ambitious and imaginative foods” as well as “breakthrough new products” through its research and development teams. Nike through its “cutting-edge digital product creation capabilities”, can offer “quicker responses” and through “physical and digital retail”, consumers are granted “complete access to premium products and immersive experiences every day”. Therefore, Nike’s employees from retail stores are willing to help customers in a responsive manner.

Only half of the analysed companies referred to the way they respond to the market and how they incorporate in their activities the knowledge they collect about the consumer.

Technology-based CRM

The fourth dimension of CRM, technology-based CRM incorporates IT in traditional CRM and includes aspects such as web-enabled approaches, customer information systems, automation of customer support and call centers (Sin et al., 2005).

For example, Nestle has hardware and software tools that generate a high capacity of analysing comprehensive databases: “Quick access to actionable data insights is key to understanding fast-changing consumer needs”. Also, Nestle improves engagement processes with consumers as it states: “We are also leveraging AI (artificial intelligence) with end-to-end analytics to deepen collaboration with customers, prioritize production and enhance promotion effectiveness”. PepsiCo focuses on collecting and mining “data for analytical insights” and has a database of its customers (as there is a newsletter in place), but there is not enough information on the website to assess if the company has the appropriate technical personnel to provide support for CRM technology. P&G has a

database with customers. Also, employees are trained on “data processing and privacy obligations” and the “management of security incidents”, indicating that the company has the right technical personnel to provide technical support for the utilization of computer technology in building customer relationships. Unilever collects, processes and analyses big amount of data about the customers and uses customers’ databases for CRM “we have access to a wide variety of datasets that we use to analyse consumer behaviour”, “we track over a billion digital consumer connections every day for insights, trends and opportunities”, “we have teams of analysts working hard to process the dizzying amounts of data we receive from our consumers each day”. Anheuser-Busch InBev owns a IT & Solutions team that is performing analytics of big-data, has databases with customers and has technology innovation centres that are used as “hubs of exploration, piloting and scaling of artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud and data analytics” as well as “other technology capabilities”.

Tyson Foods has a Data Science and Analytics department where “data scientists are developing algorithms to surface new insights and improve the decisions”. At Nike, “knowledge is power” and “data is supreme”. The DevOps engineering team “works to collect and display metadata for automated services, systems, and technologists that use Nike data to make decisions”. Nike Global Technology teams “reimagine the future” through “managing big data and providing leading edge engineering and systems support”. Through “high interest in consumer science and analytics, digital marketing, software development, and social media” Nike can offer “personalized digital experiences through every phase of brand engagement”. The company relies heavily on technology in its CRM. At Imperial Brands, there is an IT department which provides “new strategies and technologies that support a <<collaborative, consumer centric, data driven approach>>”, but no further details are outlined on the website. Some companies do not have on their websites information about the technologies used for CRM: JBS SA and LVMH Group.

Based on the available public information, it can be stated that the majority of the studied companies (80%) have the IT infrastructure and technologies required to conduct big data analysis that is essential for pursuing CRM.

Comparative analysis

This section compares the four CRM dimensions based on the way Sin et al. (2005) operationalized each dimension. Table 3 presents the comparison of the ten top companies analysed in terms of presence of the different operational aspects for each of the four CRM dimensions: key customer focus, CRM organization, knowledge management and technology-based CRM. As can be noticed the key customer focus is the CRM dimension that is the most frequently evidenced on the websites of the top ten consumer goods companies. All companies make an effort to find out what are the customers’ needs and at the same time, they offer customized products and services to key customers.

The next most visible CRM dimension on the companies’ websites refers to knowledge management, also in terms of knowledge learning by collecting information in order to understand the customers’ needs and in terms of two-way communication with customers. The third CRM dimension noticeable on the websites is the technology dimension. Most of the companies (7 out of 10) offer information about dealing with big data in order to know the consumer using both specific hardware and software for this purpose. The CRM dimension which is the least represented on the companies’ websites is the CRM organization, mainly because it deals with confidential information. However, most of the companies have an appropriate organizational structure to implement CRM.

There are companies that have a stronger CRM orientation (as evaluated through the four CRM dimensions and the way they are operationalized) than others, as depicted by the information available on their websites. Overall, Nike, the US based company displays the strongest CRM function, as it is active in 15 out of the 18 activities (18 items used to operationalize the four dimensions of the CRM). At the opposite end is the French

company LVMH Group, that is the least visible in terms of CRM dimensions based on the information available on the website.

Companies that are active in more than half of the elements used to operationalize CRM are seen as having a good CRM representation. The top three companies in terms of visibility of the CRM function are: Nike (15 out of 18), P&G (13 out of 18) and Nestle (12 out of 18), the first two of US origin and the third of European origin. There are other two companies whose visibility of the CRM is based on more than half of the operationalized items: PepsiCo and Unilever (11 out of 18). A medium representation of the CRM has Anheuser-Busch InBev, the Belgian company that has active 9 out of the 18 CRM items. Companies with less than half of the number of CRM items are seen as being overall less active in CRM. The least visible in terms of CRM are LVMH Group (4 out of 18), JBS SA and Imperial Brands (5 out of 18) and Tyson Foods (7 out of 18).

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the hypothesis was partially verified, as only half of the top ten successful companies have strong representation of the CRM dimensions and items on their web sites.

Figure 2 presents the hierarchy of the ten analysed companies according to the level of development of CRM, based on their visibility on the companies' websites and the number of CRM items identified at company level.

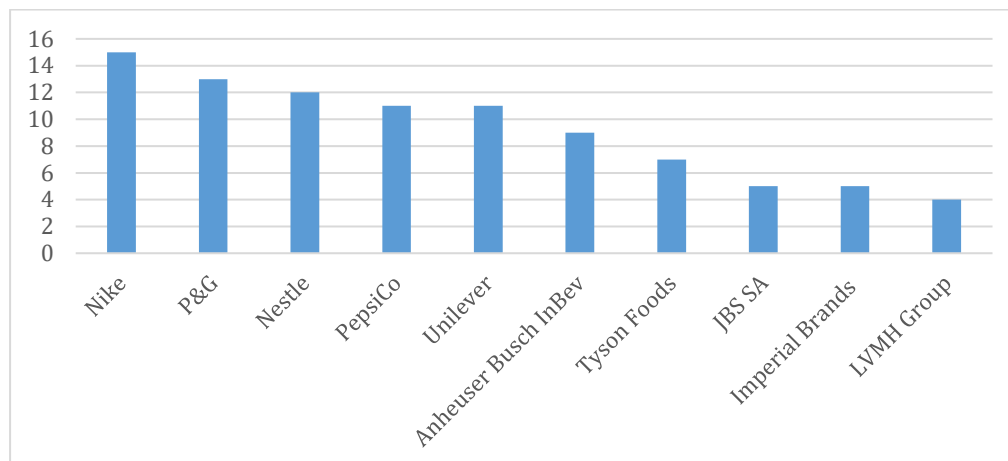


Figure 2. The CRM level of development and visibility in the analysed companies (the number of CRM items present in the company)

Source: own processing

Three of the four US companies, part of the top ten consumer goods companies, have a strong developed CRM, with many of the CRM activities being present and very visible in these companies.

Table 3. Comparative analysis CRM dimensions in top ten companies

CRM Dimensions	Companies									
	Nestle	Pepsi Co.	Procter& Gamble	JBS SA	Unilever	Anheuser-Busch InBev	Tyson Foods	LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton	Nike, Inc.	Imperial Brands PLC
A. Key Customer Focus										
Customized offerings via ongoing dialogue with key customers									✓	
Customized services and products to key customers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Effort to find out what key customers need	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Product / service modified according to customer needs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
B. CRM Organization										
Sales & marketing expertise and resources to succeed in CRM	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	
Trainings to develop the skills for acquiring and deepening customer relationships			✓						✓	
Clear business goals related to customer acquisition, development, retention, and reactivation										
Employee performance measured and based on meeting customer needs and on successfully serving the customer										
Organizational structure meticulously designed around customers	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	

Table 3. Comparative analysis CRM dimensions in top ten companies - continued

CRM Dimensions	Companies									
	Nestle	Pepsi Co.	Procter & Gamble	JBS SA	Unilever	Anheuser-Busch InBev	Tyson Foods	LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton	Nike, Inc.	Imperial Brands PLC
C. Knowledge management										
Employees are willing to help customers in a responsive manner	✓	✓	✓						✓	
Understanding the needs of key customers via knowledge learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Channels to enable ongoing, two-way communication with key	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Customers can expect prompt service from employees					✓			✓	✓	
D. Technology-based CRM										
The right technical personnel to provide support in utilization of computer technology in CRM			✓							
The right software to serve	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	
The right hardware to serve	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	
Individual customer information is available at every point of contact	✓								✓	
Maintenance of a comprehensive database of customers	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
TOTAL	12	11	13	5	11	9	7	4	15	5

Source: Authors' interpretation based on the official websites of companies

Conclusions

The paper started from a number of conceptual models depicting the CRM at company level and the Sin et al. (2005) theoretical framework was chosen to pursue the research purpose. The study aimed to identify the level of development of the CRM activities in the top ten consumer goods companies, as ranked in 2021. The four CRM dimensions (key customer focus, CRM organization, knowledge management and technology-based CRM) proposed by Sin et al. (2005) and the way they were operationalized were used to collect data about the companies from their websites and to compare them. Based on the public data available on the official websites of the ten selected companies, two types of analyses were conducted: a) a descriptive analysis that identified the main elements of the four CRM dimensions and b) a comparative analysis that compared companies according to their level of CRM development.

The results of the research reveal that CRM is present in most of the top ten consumer goods companies. There are certain CRM dimensions that are more developed than others in the top companies: the key customer focus is fully present in all ten companies, while CRM organization is only present through a limited number of activities and within a small number of companies.

In terms of organizations, US origin companies seem more oriented towards adopting CRM, with Nike being the top CRM company, while PepsiCo and P&G follow closely. The companies with the lowest level of development and visibility of the CRM taking into account our data sample originated from France, Brazil and Great Britain.

The present paper has theoretical implications as it applies, tests, and shows the validity of the CRM framework developed by Sin et al. (2005) in a multi-company and multi-national context. The study also has practical implications, because based on the results of the current study, any of the analysed companies can improve their visibility of the CRM principles and practices. Also, the study may set an example for other companies willing to incorporate CRM in their activities and makes it visible.

As any other research, the present research has its limitations, in the sense that the methodology employed comprised only one type of data source (the websites), thus this limits the data that can be collected by making it dependent on the availability of information on the website. Future research can complement the present one by extending the methodology and by integrating qualitative interviews with representatives of the companies to integrate new data source in order to have a more comprehensive overview of the CRM at company level. The paper has used one of the classical frameworks of CRM, but newer conceptual directions can be of interest. Another direction for future research can be to approach empirically the new trend in CRM, namely the one that contributed to the development of sustainable customer relationship management (SCRM), which takes into account the social, economic and environmental impacts of the CRM strategies and practices (Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta, 2023).

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