Symbioss
Transforming relationships, unlocking growth

The cost of treating clients alike

Eight findings on client portfolios, and four conclusions worth acting on.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

01 Client decisions run on rules of thumb

At leading Nordic retail banks, client management decisions ran on rules of thumb more often than on measures such as customer lifetime value.

02 Loyalty isn't the same as profitability

Across 16,000-plus customers at four organisations, one B2B, loyalty and profit correlated at just 0.20 to 0.45. Some loyal clients never pay their way.

03 Satisfaction pays, but not in a straight line

The link from satisfaction to profit is neither straight nor symmetrical. What another point of satisfaction is worth depends on where you're starting from.

04 Key client management has eight forms

A cross-industry study of how suppliers manage their key clients found eight distinct approaches in use, and significant differences in performance between them.

05 Spend and referrals are two different things

What a client spends and what they refer are separate things. The biggest buyers are probably not your best introducers, and billings alone miss that value.

06 Balance winning and keeping on data

Reinartz, Thomas and Kumar built a framework for finding the split between spending on winning and on keeping clients that maximises client profitability, and for spreading that spend across channels.

07 Key client management works best built in

How deeply key client management is embedded in the organisation is strongly related to all nine effectiveness measures tested. Supplier profit comes last.

08 Client data pays when leaders get involved

In McKinsey's surveys, 50% of heavy client data users reported sales well above rivals against 22% of light users. Value rose with senior leaders involved.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

01 Judge every client on what they're worth

Length of relationship and personal warmth are the two things most likely to decide where senior time goes, and neither is a measure of value. Assess every client on what they're worth now, what they could be worth and what they refer, then decide where the investment goes. Drawn from findings 2 and 5.

02 Set service levels by client value alone

Uneven service is rarely a decision. It's what happens when the level is set by whoever asks most persistently. Set the level for each tier, write it down and hold to it, including the part where some clients get less than they would like. Drawn from findings 1 and 3.

03 Don't manage clients out of habit

Most client management models are inherited rather than chosen, usually from whoever set up the sales function years ago. Decide how each tier is managed and how you split spending between winning and keeping work, and be able to say why you chose it. Drawn from findings 4 and 6.

04 Make client prioritisation a Board discipline

Differentiated service fails when it's left to the sales team, because the decisions it needs are above their pay grade. Put the client tiers to the Board. Drawn from findings 7 and 8.

Sources by finding 01 Persson & Ryals, Journal of Business Research (2014) · 02 Reinartz & Kumar, Harvard Business Review (2002) · 03 Anderson & Mittal, Journal of Service Research (2000) · 04 Homburg, Workman & Jensen, Journal of Marketing (2002) · 05 Kumar, Petersen & Leone, Harvard Business Review (2007) · 06 Reinartz, Thomas & Kumar, Journal of Marketing (2005) · 07 Davies & Ryals, Industrial Marketing Management (2014) · 08 McKinsey, DataMatics surveys (2013 and 2015). July 2026

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