# CREATING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENTS IN THE IT ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract.** The course of the relationship building process that may turn out to be the key element depends on several factors, for example the behavior and style of human being, both the customer and the salesperson, the form of sales, networking of business and marketing processes, building trust between the parties, as well using the latest IT solutions in the sales process. In the contemporary world of business, where the Internet is a very important medium for the promotion of an enterprise, brand or product, various IT systems help in managing the customer information or adapting the offer for him/her. In the article the authors will try to present the following elements in the area of creating customer relations: basic assumptions of the concept: client-relationship-IT environment, identification of dominant attributes of the IT environment in the context of e-business, networking of business and marketing processes, virtualization of processes that enhance the value of the product in contemporary organization or enriching information resources about the product. This is a theoretical and empirical article (based on the case study of Apple company) and its objective is to show the process of building the relationship with customers in the contemporary enterprise, mainly concentrating the issue on the IT environment. The article tries to answer to, among many others, the following questions: 1. What are relations with clients and types of the building relationships with customers?

2. What are the basic concepts of creating the relationship between the customer and the firm in the IT environment?

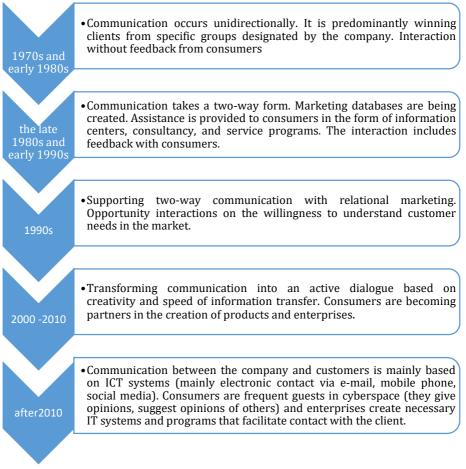
3. What are the determinants of good practice in the researched enterprise?

*Keywords:* relationships with clients; IT environment; e-business; IT management systems; Apple company.

#### Introduction

In terms of behaviors in the "sale-purchase" process, one can find relations between the company and the customer, which are based on a variety of strategies and activities of both sides. This area is one of the most important elements of the functioning of companies because without the recipient there is no entity on the market (Ogilvy, 1983, pp.22-23). This correlation causes each party to perform its functions in the sales process, which leads to maintaining parity in the context of the strategic importance of both parties. In order to determine the current position of the client in the company's strategies, it is necessary to pay attention to the very evolution of consumer-market

contacts (Doligalski, 2013, pp.9-10). Analyzing communication between clients and enterprises, two trends can be observed in the 20th and 21st centuries. The first one depicts one-sided contact, where the company appointed a close group of clients, to which it directed its offer without conducting an open dialogue with other consumers. Since the late 1980s, the communication between the pillars described has been observable until now. Communication has become a two-way name, on the basis of which the idea of relationship marketing was created; what is more, both the customer and the company are more focused on the use of ICT technologies and systems in everyday functioning. The following figure introduces the discussed evolution of communication in building relations between the consumer and the supplier of products or services (Figure 1).



#### Figure 1. Communication and client-enterprise interactions over decades (own study based on Maciejewski, 2012, pp.39-40)

Continuing the discussion on consumer relations with enterprises over the decades to come, one can distinguish another category helping to understand the evolution of the concept of "consumer, customer, buyer". The role and character of clients in the economic market can be considered, along with the perception of these groups by enterprises (Wereda, 2009, pp.50-53). This consumer viewpoint goes from mass perception to individual perception. The very role of consumer units is transformed

from passive buyers into members of the culture-forming part of enterprises who are active in cyberspace, doing most online shopping, suggesting opinions on portals, blogs or social media, and on the other hand placing their insights and seeking information in IT programs and systems. The purpose of this article is to present the process of building customer relations and improving these relationships through the IT environment, both from the theoretical side and the example of a case study.

### Creating relationships with clients - theoretical overview

The basis for the customer-company relationship is a number of individual transactions between the seller and buyers, leading to an increase in the customer's sense of value. The correct cycle of relationships consists of three elements: value offer, customer satisfaction and, in effect, customer loyalty based on trust (Kotler, 2005, p.13). In connection with the above, building a customer relationship is a process that requires patience, commitment and reliability on the part of the enterprise. Building long-lasting relationships with customers is simply profitable because customers who are offended by poor service quality often do not return to the company in which they are badly served, while well-serviced buyers can bring new consumers to the company. According to Harker, building a solid relationship with the client consists of seven values: creation, development, maintenance, interaction, long-term, emotional content and result (Harker, 1999). What's more, a very important process in building a customer relationship is communicating with one. Many marketing authors and practitioners indicate that to be effective in communicating with the client, one should show:

- empathy;
- show proper respect to the interlocutor and take into account his/her beliefs and views;
- cordiality without intrusion;
- create bonds without elements of favor or subjectivism;
- authenticity; which means openness of behavior and freedom, sincere reactions and rejection of a defensive attitude (Burnett, 2002, p.260);
- attract attention and gain customer engagement;
- use all possible forms of mobile communication and use all the Internet functions to advocate a product and brand knowledge (Kotler et al., 2017, pp.14-15; Stawarz-Garcia, 2018, pp.10-12).

In modern relations with clients, the company must demonstrate: knowledge of the subject, conviction about the propriety, communication skills, not only in the context of vertical relations but above all in horizontal relations, that is obtaining information and knowledge from external sources, for example, consumers or market partners (prosumption). Customers should be perceived as equal to the brand of the company, i.e. as friends, and the brand should present its true character and show its value fairly, only then will both parties build credibility in a mutual relationship (Kotler et al., 2017, p.27).

An important aspect is the fact that the company can build various types of relationships with the client. Depending on the aspect of the relationship and the form of commercial transactions or behavior on the part of the company, relations can generally be divided into:

**1. Reactive relationships** consist of the fact that the company sells products to customers and encourages them to contact in case of any doubts or problems.

- 2. **Proactive relations** boil down to the fact that the company periodically contacts clients to inform about new products on offer or to provide suggestions for using the product. Currently, such materials are sent mainly by e-mail (e.g. in the form of newsletters or calls from the Call Centre).
- **3. Responsible relationships** consist of the fact that the company contacts the customer after the purchase to check whether the product meets the expectations of the consumer. The company also tries to systematically learn about the possible improvement of the product and determine the reasons for possible dissatisfaction with the purchase. In responsible relations, communication on the company-company line takes the form of a dialogue. Such feedback allows the company to best match the offer to the customer's needs (Dejnaka, 2013, pp.396-397).
- **4. Relations based on trust** consist in creating trust between the client and the company. Because this is the foundation of the mutual commitment of the parties and striving to maintain the continuity of the relationship. The occurrence of trust both within the organization and in relations with the environment is not obvious, especially in the conditions of uncertainty, crisis or the high value of the object of relational exchange (Jonczyk, 2010, p.141).
- **5. Customer relations** in the network consist in conscious building positive relationships with the consumer on the Internet, from the very beginning of the company's existence on the website, also through the social media platform or creating blogs or company portals.
- 6. Relations based on intercession rely on creating in the minds of customers a sincere and honest image of a service/product provider so that in conversations about the company with other clients in the social circles, both "face to face" and online influence the purchasing behavior other people. Such social contacts have more influence on the choice of brand or loyalty to the company than false promises or advertising tricks of big marketing companies (Kotler et al., 2017, p.21).

The division of customer relations is presented below (table 1) due to different criteria and authors (Czakon, 2012, pp.49-54; Cygler, 2002, pp.163-165; Todeva, 2006, pp.160-213; Witek Hejduk et al., 2016, pp.37-41; Wereda 2009, pp.71-77).

Criterion	Type of relationship
Power on the	relations dominated by the enterprise
market	relations dominated by clients
	relations of equal partners
The degree of ordering of contacts	ordered relations (in the form of long-term commercial contracts) unstructured relations (orders are carried out continuously, but without the conclusion of commercial contracts) sporadic relationships (depending on the order) fuzzy relations (depending on market factors)
The degree of	stable relations
stability and	unstable relations
mutual loyalty in	relations of intercession
relation	relations of advocate loyalty
Number of contacts	frequent relations
	rare relationships

Table 1. Classification of business relationships with clients due to selected criteria

Criterion	Type of relationship
Geographical scope	relationships with local clients
of the company's	customer relations within a regional range
operation on the	customer relations at the national level
market	customer relations at an international level
	customer relations in a global range
Long-term	ad hoc relationships created without loyalty, only for a limited time
relationships	relationships created on the basis of long-term contracts
Formalization of	formal relations in the form of bilateral agreements
relationships	informal relations on the basis of an oral contract
The strength of the	strong relationships
company's	weak relationships
connections with	
the customer	
Place of	off-line relations (making purchases and building relationships at
transaction and	stationary points)
relationship	on-line relations (making purchases and building relationships only
	in cyberspace)
Product innovation	quick innovation relations
and relationship	(focused on quick creation by companies of innovative products and
service	offering customers before they are released on the market)
	slow innovation relationships (focused on creating innovative
	products by companies and offering customers after they are released
	on the market)
	open innovation relations (clients in the course of long-term
	cooperation and purchases in the enterprise become prosumers and
	also co-design market novelties)
Location in the	vertical relations
value chain	horizontal relations
network	mixed relations

In the contemporary business world, each enterprise must be based on a certain market orientation. Depending on what stage the company operates, the orientation indicates further activities of the organization. Currently, companies operate mainly in customer orientation, technological or business orientation. In reference to the observance of the belief that customer's needs and its satisfaction for the company is the most important, resources and processes in the organization should be subordinated to creating value for the client and building long-term relationships with one (Doligalski, 2013, p.21).

Generally, it should be noted that building customer relationships is critical to the existence of a product, brand or company on the market. It is now necessary to ask a question about what can help these relationships, so that, on the one hand, the company is sufficiently informed about the customer's needs and had customer data, and on the other hand, the buyer was able to freely obtain information about the company. All these processes can be improved by ICT. What's more, in the era of the information society, organizational models and structures are strongly determined by the tools and information technologies used, and above all communication platforms and systems that support the creation of knowledge in the customer - information resources becomes the key attribute of the operational efficiency. The information structure is an integral tool for organizing elements and logical grouping of resources (human, material, financial, information) on the basis of established and defined relations between various elements of operating systems, such as modern enterprises. In addition, the

organizational structure appears as a dynamic creation, subject to changes in accordance with the tasks and objectives and the strength of the relationship with the environment, including business partners, in particular with clients.

# Basic assumptions of the concept of building and improving the customer-IT environment-enterprise relationship

The IT environment is today a real determinant of the efficiency and effectiveness of modern organizations and a prerequisite for the implementation of the concept of process organizations, based on a model of multidimensional relations, both in executive teams and relationships with clients. The communication system in the company and beyond is thus becoming the dominant component of the entire information system in the organization. Contemporary business entities often rely on working in a dispersed geographical environment and demonstrate the possibility of transferring some of the activity to the network environment with an emphasis on virtuality and multi-entity nature of process organizations. The efficiency of their functioning is often referred to as the criterion of such shaped action structures. One of the important assumptions is to expect that process structures should be favorable (Zaskorski, 2012a, pp.55-189) maximizing the synergy effect, especially in the case of multi-stakeholder organizations. The dominating attribute of modern IT tools should, therefore, be the possibility of strengthening the flexibility of operation and shortening the communication path from the manufacturer to the client and the decision processes themselves by creating conditions for the development of business entities with regard to time-cost criteria.

Contemporary information and teleinformation technologies are a potential for virtualization (Zaskorski, 2012b, pp.24-33) structures based on network and the informal combination of action entities (including clients) around shared values. An important assumption is first of all the ability to quickly adjust the company's configuration to the challenges and requirements resulting from the needs of its potential customers. Such a model should be based on a trust in the knowledge and skills of cooperating entities, which requires the introduction of standards limiting the risk of incorrect matching of tasks to the capabilities of individual co-developers of processes and, above all, customer expectations. Therefore, the activities of such an organization can be developed through the implementation of ICT technologies on the Internet platform, including the use of cloud computing services (CC/Cloud Computing).

It is worth paying attention to the important assumption about the possibility of the socalled "danetization" of all objects and processes using IoT/Internet of Things by collecting data about any object, customer or process with no time limits or geographical, but with access to the Internet (Dominique & Vlad, 2017). This means using IoT technology to monitor the so-called "smart" things that can emit information about themselves and their location. The communication platform is complemented by the so-called Big-Data systems (Zaskorski & Zaskorski, 2016), which are able to collect, store and analyze this multiform information (data, films, texts, etc.) and generate useful knowledge.

### Identification of dominant attributes of the IT environment in the context of ebusiness

The Internet platform combined with integrated information management systems, in which CRM systems play a highly creative role - is an important challenge for modern ebusiness. In addition, information services can be transferred to the cloud computing (CC services) and can be scalable in relation to the needs (costs adequate to the duration of the service or the size of "consumed" information resources), which becomes an important attribute especially for smaller enterprises. The previously mentioned Internet of Things (IoT) and systems for collecting a very large number of multiform data strengthen modern management systems by providing their ability to discover knowledge (Data-Mining model) about the customer or product and market trends related to quality or even to individual phases of the cycle product life.

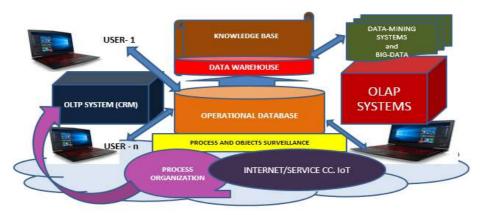


Figure 2. Virtualization of information services in the context of IT technology and the functionality of process-oriented organizations

Contemporary IT solutions and ICT platforms provide the opportunity for a global reorientation of information and decision processes and communication processes both within the company and its surroundings (Figure 2). Such opportunities are primarily related to access to the Internet platform and to virtual resources residing in the cloud in order to provide information business continuity (Zaskorski, 2011, pp.145-170) of a given entity. Services available on the Internet platform with access to various types of information resources and technical and technological resources in the so-called cyberspace is a great opportunity to counteract information exclusion of enterprises. Reaching for solutions related to the collection and processing of current data online (OLTP/On-Line-Transaction-Processing systems, including CRM systems) and the collection of large amounts of historical data (OLAP / On-Line-Analyzing-Processing systems) together with access to multi-aspect analyzes, it gives business entities the possibility of a flexible impact on the client-company relationship. These analyzes can be based on cluster models, behavioral similarity, time series analysis, regression analysis, etc., and give the chance to get answers to the question "we do not know what we do not know?".

For several years, access to the so-called Big-Data systems gathering large amounts of information of a global and local nature in any form with the mechanisms of their selection and knowledge discovery according to similar models, as in OLAP class

systems. These systems complement the possibility of using services and various data in the network access mode without time-space constraints. A good complement to these services may be the so-called business geoanalysis, which is related to access to geographic information systems and the use of geographical dimension for analysis, which can be dynamically redefined (region, set of countries, area within the country, a collection of selected places or cities, etc.).

As previously mentioned, the functional extension of the possibilities of obtaining and collecting data for the needs of process-oriented business organizations are IoT or more broadly IoE (Internet of Everythings). These technologies belong to one of the fastest growing information technologies that can integrate various devices and objects related to the activities of specific entities in the global space. IoT/IoE are technologies that use all the advantages of the Internet and other information technologies - enabling building networks of interconnected devices (including devices connected directly with the client). Further development of this technology can become the basis for the development and effective communication process in any business space. It is worth noting here that the security of data processing and the security of the organization and its continuity are of great importance, which is conditioned by the effectiveness and credibility of information-decision processes in cyberspace. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the resulting threats.

Implementation of process models is today a certain pattern of flattening structures in a modern enterprise. Access to common, consistent, reliable and up-to-date data becomes a prerequisite for effective operation and coordination of business operations (Timmers, 1998, pp.3-8). Network and network-centric structures (with the so-called "crawling" competence center) determine the model of communication and interaction with the client and other stakeholders of the organization. The advantages of the Internet as a universal network are well exposed, but also the limitations and weaknesses of this should be identifiable. The aforementioned possibility of cooperation of various business process executors through standardized access to a common data repository without major time and geographical constraints becomes a driving mechanism in a modern group work model and shaping a new work culture based on mutual trust in the network not only corporate but also global. This process can be enhanced by the functionality of internal and external communication systems in the company and in particular CRM class systems. A comprehensive model of this strategy is the use of resources and services located in the cloud with dedicated access for selected groups of clients, and even with the possibility of conscious (acceptable) monitoring of the behavior of a single customer or product (e.g. using Big-Data analyzes - see details on the complexity of this topic in Crişan, Zbuchea & Moraru, 2014). The systemic requirement should, however, be to protect the privacy of each client according to its indications and requirements in this respect.

### Networking of business and marketing processes

Process structures and cooperation of entities as well as using the potential of other clients and stakeholders in online mode is one of the attributes of modern organizations (Fig. 2). A global network of Internet type enriched services in cloud computing today is not innovation, but still remains a phenomenon which creates opportunities for the development of information and communication services without major restrictions especially for smaller businesses. Still, technical and technological investments in the IT

area are quite expensive. Cloud computing (CC) evidently mitigates these limitations. In the era of globalization and computerization of enterprises, information and constant access to current information resources - is one of the areas of competitive struggle. This change follows the model of the communication system in companies through the wider use of network models, since in many cases, smaller companies cannot afford to buy professional equipment, and custom applications, the cost of which could be many times their financial possibilities.

Nowadays, functioning without integrated and efficient IT solutions becomes less effective regardless of the nature of the business. The network services platform (fig. 2) enriched with access to virtual, unlimited resources residing in the computing cloud (hardware, data centers, applications/software) is a technical and technological base supporting solutions to problems of both large organizations and individual entrepreneurs taking into account the current preferences of clients. The network model based on CC services (Cloud Computing) therefore fosters the informational integration of not only service and production processes, but also the improvement of more effective activities through the improvement of the communication system and contact with the client. It is nothing else than a new business model based on solutions provided in cyberspace with the possibility of creative use of the Internet phenomenon by creating a new type of process organization (Amazon Web Services, 2018). CC IT services allow to use unlimited data resources about own operations and competitors, as well as from advanced applications and the computing power available in the network without the need to incur expenditures to purchase licenses and software. These services are offered in the mode of outsourcing by external entities are an economically very profitable solution (Mateos, 2011, pp.26-27). The modern process organization based on the network model has, therefore, the possibility to market many internal relations thanks to the access to the Internet (a communication system almost without boundaries), taking into account such attributes (Mateos, 2011, pp.27-31) as:

• availability of computational resources for all registered users and the possibility of their maximum use thanks to virtualization;

• scalability of the service depending on the specific needs and adjustment of the level of costs to the resources used.

The availability of resources for registered users is adequate to the computing power used. Starting a business can be considered in principle at no cost, and then with a relatively low fee. In addition, data in the enterprise network model should be protected and secured with the appropriate level of attributes (Lidermann, 2000, p.12), data security secrecy (proper protection of information according to the level of data sensitivity), integrity (consistent, complete and reliable data) and availability (according to the accepted access rights according to the requirements of the user/customer). Depending on the nature of the business, some of the attributes may be considered as priorities (confidentiality, authenticity, and non-repudiation as necessary elements of information security).

In reference to all aspects of presenting the offer to the customer, it can be noticed that there is more and more often the product virtualization, which includes two processes: product digitization and its enrichment in information. Digitization of the product is a total or partial conversion of the product form from material to digital, exchange of atoms into bits. In each company it goes differently, e.g. airlines have only digitized part of the product, which is a ticket (replacing a traditional ticket for an electronic ticket), however, computer equipment or the air transport service itself requires material infrastructure. Fully digitized products are characterized by zero marginal costs and are easily distributed over the Internet, which reduces the client's transaction costs (e.g. musical works that were originally inseparably connected with such carriers as a CD or cassette now appear in the form of a digitized music record between others in the form of mp3 (Doligalski, 2006). The second element of product or service virtualization is its enrichment in information, i.e. the product itself does not have to change its form, but it receives an information layer that increases its value (e.g. enrichment in information is a frequent form of innovation values on the Internet). Examples of this type of process are courier services, which are enriched with the service of identifying the current location of the shipment (Doligalski, 2013, p.81).

# Apple as a leader in the implementation of IT innovation in the world and a company building customer relations based on the "walled-garden" approach - a case study

#### Short history

Apple is one of the leading and most valuable companies in the world, which consistently follows the path of permanent innovation, as well as built a leading position among global brands in the electronics industry. The company's activities are focused on both creating new markets and giving value to innovation and a new pace on existing ones. Apple was founded as a result of cooperation between Steve Jobs and Stephen Wozniak. In 1976, both men started their activities in Jobs' bedroom, moving it to the garage. In the same year, a personal Apple I computer was created, which cost 666.66 dollars, and it was produced in 200 copies. A year later, Apple II was created, which was already mass-produced. The successor was easier to use and had more functions. The second model was the basis for education in the 80's and 90's (www.applecenter.pl, 2018). Over the next years, an Apple III computer was created for business, as well as an enhanced Apple IIe and an Apple Lisa computer. Over the last, Jobs did not work, so he took care of the project called Macintosh. These activities, however, were not successful, because the price of the computer fluctuated around 10,000 dollars. Unfortunately, in 1985, Steve Jobs left Apple for 10 years, after a quarrel with another employee. The founder himself had a difficult character, and the crisis in sales caused a violent reaction, so after his departure, Apple was in an increasingly bad financial condition. Subsequent products were not successful and were not popular among customers. In addition, Microsoft released the Windows 3.0 market, which became a direct rival of Apple. The advantage of Microsoft was the fact that the software was compatible with products from various, cheaper manufacturers (Primack, 2011). Apple regained good standing only when Jobs returned as the operations director.

Already in 1998, the founder released a computer that was given the name iMac. On the computer market, it turned out to be a revolution, and moreover, as many as 800,000 iMac computers were sold over 139 days (www.applecenter.pl, 2018). The next steps that Steve Jobs made were: the liquidation of many production lines, leaving only four: a home desktop computer, a professional desktop computer, and portable computers, respectively. Recovering the competitive edge on the market, Jobs's next moves led to additional products bringing huge profits (for example, the breakthrough was the introduction of the legendary iPod in 2001 - it was a portable player with iTunes software, and the user was able to move data freely from computer to iPod and vice

versa). What's more, an online store has been created, from which you can buy different content, which has revolutionized the music industry (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010, pp.50-53). Since the return of Steve Jobs, Apple's shares have increased sevenfold. The founder himself did not want to take over any packet of shares. But if he did, after a short time his stock would reach \$ 400 million (Isaacson, 2011). The next big steps Apple made in 2007 launching the first iPhone, and in 2010 the iPad (www.apple.com, 2018). In 2011, Steve Jobs died, leaving Apple with a value of over 300 billion dollars. The power over the company was taken over by one of the trusted employees - Timothy D. Cook, who was responsible for minimizing costs and simplifying production processes (www.applecenter.pl, 2018).

# Activity and business strategy of the company towards building relationships with customers

The company deals in the design and production of consumer electronics, software and personal computers. In recent years, thanks to new business models, created in the direction of building a specific culture on the market and innovative rules of competition in the IT industry, Apple has become the most recognized global brand. In reference to the "BRANDZ TOP. 100 most valuable global brands in 2018" the Apple brand is gaining in value both from the investors' point of view and customer experience. It is generally seen that the rise of technology is most apparent in the 12-year change of the Top 10 ranking. All but two brands are technology-related in 2018, compared with only four brands in 2006 (figure 3).



Figure 3. Top 10 global brands in 2006 and 2018 (Report "BRANDZ TOP....",2018, p.22)

Continuing the overview of the report the creators stated that "leading brands, such as Apple and Amazon continued to raise the bar on expectations for customer experience at every customer touch point—both online and offline—from trial to pick-up or delivery. And brands used more tools, such as augmented reality (AR), to improve the experience. AR software contained on smartphones made it easier for brands to develop relevant AR apps and for consumers to use them. People could shop at furniture stores

like IKEA and view how a particular item of furniture would look in an actual room in their house. Customer experience becomes an even more important driver of differentiation. The challenge for brands was not just to use tools like AR, but to find new, creative, and different ways to use them" (Report, 2018, p.25).

# Conclusions and discussions for managerial practice in the area of building customer relations in the IT environment

The technical and technological base of modern platforms and IT solutions indicates the special rank of network models and their usefulness in creating dynamic process structures. Internet as a universal network in connection with the Internet of Things (IoT, IoE) is a technology that changes the perspective of perceiving the world through so-called "datazing", means the ability to collect and store data about "everything, anytime, anywhere" where there is access to the Internet. Thus, the basic canon of the future is the inevitability of the description of each information object (including the client) and the collection and exploration of data in order to discover previously unknown regularities. Connecting more and more devices/sensors to the Internet and using this to monitor their work status gives an idea of the potential of the future use of the Internet in various aspects of managing production, service and marketing processes. Further development of this technology may become the basis for the next dynamization of activities in network models in order to improve the efficiency of business processes (including e-business). The effectiveness of these activities may be directly related to the collection of large amounts of data (the petabyte government) of various stakeholders, including clients and their multi-aspect exploration on-line (Big-Data systems) which may change the level of effectiveness and adequacy of business activities aimed even at the individual customer. Building relationships on the web is an increasingly popular form of contact between the company and the customer due to the technological development of the client himself/herself, who makes purchases online, uses electronic money, and more often transmits information to friends and family electronically than in person, because he/she does not want to waste time or bear costs. Is such a situation conducive to interpersonal contacts? - this question is not the responsibility of today's enterprises, for which an increasing number of transactions counts, not limiting their activities to the chain of stationery stores, because in the first place the speed, efficiency, satisfaction, and trust of the customer to the company count, a good example is Apple.

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