

# Managing Relationship with Supplier(s): An Exploratory Study of Select Indian Manufacturing Firms

Vibhava Srivastava\*, Tripti Singh\*\*

\*Faculty, Management Development Institute, Mehrauli Road, Sukhrali, Gurgaon, Haryana, India. Email: vibhava.srivastava@mdi.ac.in, vibhava.sri@gmail.com

\*\*Faculty, School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India. Email: tripti@mnnit.ac.in

## ABSTRACT

Manufacturing industry is said to be partially driven by the component/input suppliers. The idea of developing and managing relationships with suppliers has been intensified due to the occurrence of rapid globalization and technological innovation. A paradigm shift can be witnessed in firms' approaches towards supplier management which is gradually moving from a transaction-based arm's-length approach to a relationship-based cooperative approach. Firms apparently, have started adapting various practices to strengthen the relationship with their respective supplier(s) to ensure the smooth functioning without any operational difficulties. The present study explores various practices pertaining to Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) from Relationship Marketing(RM) perspective, in the context of Indian manufacturing sector. The study is exploratory in nature where in the unit of analysis is collaborative manufacturer-supplier relationship. Information was collected through a self-administered questionnaire-based survey from a sample of 206 executives across levels of purchase department from select manufacturing firms in India. Data analysis, both descriptive as well as inferential were carried out with SPSS. Subsequently, the theoretical and managerial implications of the study are discussed.

**Keywords:** Supplier Relationship Management, Relationship Marketing, Exploratory Research, Indian Manufacturing Sector.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A firm's goal is to establish and maintain a competitive advantage in its product markets (Walker, 1988) and central to achieving this goal are the firm's sourcing policies and relationships with its suppliers (Porter, 1979). The strategic importance of sourcing/purchasing has fundamentally increased during the past decades (Reid and Plank 2000; Carter and Narasimhan, 1996). Sheth and Sharma (1997) observe the changing paradigms of organisational buying behaviour which is likely to result in a two-dimensional shift; one of the shifts is from a transaction oriented approach to a relational oriented philosophy. Thus, with increasing turbulence in the marketplace, it is clear that firms have to shift from transaction oriented marketing strategies toward relationship oriented marketing strategies for enhanced performance (Noordewier, John, and Nevin, 1990).

Relationship with suppliers is often termed as manufacturer-supplier relationship or industrial buyer-

seller relationship. Here the concept of Relationship Marketing (RM) has been identified as a strategic approach directing all marketing activities towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). RM has been identified as an extended perspective which not only includes marketing as a discipline but also has implications at different functional levels.

The present research explores the phenomenon of supplier relationship management in the context of Indian manufacturing industry. This study particularly focuses on supplier relationship management (SRM) in business-to-business domain. It endeavours to understand various practices adapted by firms to strengthen the relationship with their respective supplier(s). The underlying rationale for it will be explicated in subsequent sections of the paper where the existing literature on relationship marketing (RM) and supplier relationship management (SRM) was reviewed. The present study provides an understanding on the factors to be taken into consideration for developing successful relationships between/among

buyers (manufacturers) and supplier(s). The final section of the paper deals with the theoretical and managerial implications of the study.

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

### 2.1. Relationship Marketing (RM)

The term Relationship Marketing (RM) has become a buzzword over the period of time, more like a catch-all phrase. It has its proponents not only in the marketing academia but in industry as well and has had a major impact upon the marketing discipline, triggering a paradigm shift away from transaction-based marketing towards a relationship focus (Kotler, 1992; Webster, 1992; Parvatiyar, Sheth and Whittington 1992). A diverse stream of research has evolved and developed around relationship marketing focusing on various paradigms; one of such paradigms is value and supply chain management (Niraj, Gupta, and Narasimhan, 2001). This diversity of research has resulted in Relationship Marketing becoming a “popularized buzzword” (Coviello *et al.*, 1997; Palmer and Bejou, 2005) that has been applied to a variety of themes and perspectives (Nevin, 1995) which range from industrial marketing perspective (IMP) to service marketing perspective (Nordic School of Services).

RM has been viewed as buyer–seller encounters that accumulate over time with opportunities to transform individual and discrete transactions into relational partnerships (Czepiel, 1990). This view supports the notion that a relationship exists when an individual exchange is assessed not in isolation, but as a continuation of past exchanges likely to continue into the future (Wong and Sohal, 2002). It thus ensures the continuation of exchange process between buyer and seller by managing the existing relationship and is oriented towards creating and sharing value among customers, suppliers and other stakeholders by mutual and extended exchanges through close interactions subsequently resulting into profitability. It thus can be identified as a strategic approach for developing and managing various relationships. The emphasis is now on a holistic view of the supplier–manufacturer–customer chain which becomes visible (Aijo, 1996).

### 2.2. Supplier Relationship Management (SRM)

Supplier(s) can be identified as the player(s) supplying inputs to the focal firm which subsequently provides value to the customers. Supplier adds technical product features or supporting services to the core solution so that

the total value of the offering is increased (Christopher *et al.*, 1991). Many companies today have partnered with specific suppliers and distributors to create a superior value delivery network (Magnet, 1994) through collaborative (Bakker *et al.*, 2008) as well as sustainable procurement (Walker and Phillips, 2009). Sheth and Sharma (1997) have identified that having a relationship with suppliers will enable firms to receive better service and therefore be more efficient in procurement and firms will recognize that supplier relationships will allow them to be more effective and implement strategies such as quality platforms. Finally, competition and the growth of alliances will force firms to develop better supplier relationships to maintain a competitive edge. Kalwani and Narayandas (1995) have found a positive correlation between long-term relationships and profitability of suppliers. A successful relationship with supplier can result into a number of economic consequences. Eccles (1991) has further identified various relationship benefits viz cost benefits and revenue benefits.

Such relationships between manufacturers and their suppliers are known as “supplier–manufacturer relationships” though more popular and broader term has been “buyer–supplier relationships”. According to the IMP Group interaction approach, industrial buyer–seller partnerships are theorized to evolve and mature over time in five stages: the pre-relationship stage; the early stage; the development stage; the long-term stage, and the final stage (Hakansson, 1982). In a successful relationship, at the long-term stage, social distance is minimized and a “close relationship” is said to have been established (Ford, 1980, p. 347) and such closeness in relationship may result in customer value creation (Srivastava and Singh, 2010). The buyer–seller relationship, at this stage, can be compared to a marriage suggesting the need for “intimacy” (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) between partners. In order to create closer ties, firms tend to engage in “bonding behaviour” (Heide and John, 1988, p. 24) which includes actions such as developing personal relationships, creating specialized procedures, and dedicating some assets to the relationship. Social exchange theory also suggests that interpersonal relationships are critical to close inter-firm relationships (Metcalf and Frear, 1993).

With this background, it is evident that SRM has its own set of advantages and it requires a dedicated effort keeping the various stages of relationship evolution, formation, development, management, and continuity or termination into consideration. It would be interesting to see how Indian manufacturing firms are trying to develop and manage relationship with their respective supplier(s), if at all they do it. However, reportedly Indian organisations

**Table 1: Sample Profile**

<i>Clusters</i>	<i>Clusters</i>	<i>Types of Firm</i>	<i>No. of firms</i>	<i>No. of re-spondents</i>
Cluster one	Naini Industrial Area: located near the city of Al-lahabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh.	Heavy pumps, compressors, components, engineering equipment, transformers, tele-equipments etc.	6	53
Cluster two	Gurgaon and Faridabad Industrial Area: part of the national capital region and is located near New Delhi and is in the state of Haryana.	Automobile firms, auto-component manu-facturers and consumer durable firms.	7	50
Cluster three	Noida and Greater Noida Industrial Area: part of the national capital region and is located near New Delhi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh.	Automobile firms, auto-component manu-facturers and consumer durable firms.	8	47
Cluster four	Ludhiana and Mohali Industrial Area: located in the state of Punjab.	Hosiery firms, household appliances and cycle manufacturer and manufacturer of industrial products etc.	8	56
Total				206

do strongly believe in taking the suppliers into confidence for their subsequent decisions (Gupta and Narain, 2012).

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The objective of the research is to explore SRM practices by Indian manufacturing firms. The unit of analysis for the present research is specific collaborative manufacturer–supplier relationship. Here supplier can be identified as the player supplying inputs/components to the manufacturing firm. It was observed that the people from purchasing department of a particular manufacturing firm are required to manage suppliers. Thus the target population was identified and same comprises of executives across levels from purchasing department of different manufacturing firms.

Cluster sampling was used to draw sample firms and sample size of 250 respondents was kept for consideration however the valid responses were 206 thus the final sample size for the said purpose was 206. These clusters were identified from northern region of India (Table 1).

A self-administered and structured questionnaire was developed to collect data through survey.

### 4. SAMPLE PROFILE

Data were collected by administering questionnaires amongst the respondents on a personal basis by the researcher. The sample comprises of manufacturing firm in diverse areas, such as automobiles, electronic appliances, household appliances and industrial products etc. and it

ranges from small and medium-sized manufacturers to multinationals, employing a workforce between 400 and 5000. Out of 250 total 206 questionnaires are found valid and appropriate.

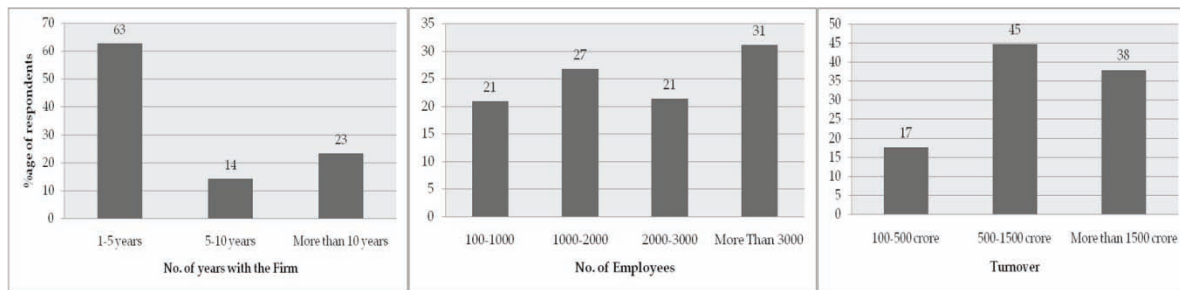
Fig. 2 presents the profile of respondents interviewed, in terms of their work experience, employee strength and turnover. Here work experience signifies the number of years, for which an executive has been associated with a particular firm. 63% of the total respondents have been associated with a particular firm since 1-5 years while 14% of the respondents for 5-10 years and 23% of the respondents have been associated with a particular firm since more than 10 years.

21% of the total respondents told that their respective firms have employee strength from 100 to 1000 employees, while 27% respondents said that employee strength in their firm ranges from 1000 to 2000 and 52% said it is more than 2000 in their respective firms. 17% of the total respondents said that the turnover in their respective firm varies from 100 to 500 crore while 45% said it varies from 500 to 1500 crore and 38% respondents were from the firm having turnover more than 1500 crore.

### 5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The present study explores how relationship with respective supplier(s) is developed and managed by Indian manufacturing firms. In this regard responses were sought for various questions from sample. Descriptive as well as inferential analysis was done in order to ensure a focused research approach. The subsequent discussion deals with statistical data analysis.

Fig. 1: Sample Profile



The relationship between manufacturers and suppliers can take many forms (Webster, 1992). This can be seen on a continuum ranging from purely discrete transaction at one end to long-term relational exchanges between interdependent partners at the other (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). Respondents were asked to opine about different types of relationship, a manufacturing firm can have with supplier(s). *Two-steps* cluster analysis was carried out to conclude different types of relationship, Indian manufacturing firms have with their supplier(s), shown in Table 2.

The findings shown in Table 2 suggest that Indian manufacturing firms do develop relationship with supplier(s) which can further be categorized into three categories; first category comprises of 40% respondents and as per them, they have continuous transactions and high involvement with identified supplier(s) for a long period of time; the second category has 31% respondents having adhocism evident in their practices where they not only have discrete transactions but also continuous one with every supplier; the third category has 29% respondents whom have discrete relationship with any suppliers and continuous relationship with identified suppliers however in both the cases, relationship are short-lived.

Respondents were then asked to characterize the relationship they have with supplier(s). *Two-steps* cluster

analysis was carried out (Table 3) which suggests that on the basis of characteristics of relationship, two categories can be identified; one wherein relationship is of contractual in nature and another wherein no contractual agreement happens.

There might be different ways to look for and select the supplier(s). Respondents were asked to give their responses on various ways to search for supplier(s). *Two-steps* cluster analysis was run and the findings suggest that based on different ways to search for suppliers, following four categories can be identified (Table 4):

There might be various criteria considered by manufacturing firms for the selection of supplier(s). More and Mateen (2012) opined that a good supplier management starts with the selection of most effective and efficient suppliers from a given pool however the selection criteria could vary. With the help of rank order calculations following factors were identified as factors for selection of suppliers (Table 5). Ironically the personal relationship factor got lowest ranking though we are talking closeness in relationship is desired. The finding reiterates the fact that the hardcore factors matter most in comparison to soft or behavioural variables.

In order to manage the relationship with supplier(s) different sub-processes might be followed. These sub-processes signify relationship marketing (RM) practices

Table 2: Types of Relationship

Clusters	Profile	Cluster Size(%)
Cluster 1	CONTINUOUS transactions and HIGH INVOLVEMENT with IDENTIFIED supplier(s) for a LONG period of time	40
Cluster 2	DISCRETE transactions with ANY supplier(s) also with IDENTIFIED supplier(s) CONTINUOUS transactions and HIGH INVOLVEMENT with IDENTIFIED supplier(s) for a LONG period of time	31
Cluster 3	DISCRETE transactions with ANY supplier(s). CONTINUOUS transactions with IDENTIFIED supplier(s) for a SHORT period of time (less than 3 years)	29

**Table 3: Characteristics of Relationship**

<i>Clusters</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Cluster Size (%)</i>
Cluster 1	We sign an agreement specifying price, delivery, lead time, quality specifications, and estimated annual usage. In addition to an agreement we sign a detailed legal contract with this supplier.	62
Cluster 2	We undertake no contractual agreements with this supplier beyond each order as it is placed.	38

**Table 4: Ways to Search for Supplier(s)**

<i>Clusters</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Cluster Size (%)</i>
Cluster 1	No specific ways	39
Cluster 2	We recognize/identify suppliers within the industry. We have our own database for suppliers.	24
Cluster 3	We recognize/identify suppliers within the industry. We have our own database for suppliers. We invite call for bidding/tender for procurement. We search and select supplier(s) from open market.	21
Cluster 4	We have our own database for suppliers. We invite call for bidding/tender for procurement.	16

being exercised by a particular firm. After running *two-step* cluster analysis, two categories were found; First category has sub-processes are practiced while the other category don't follow those sub-processes (Table 6).

There are various approach(s)/practice(s), in order to procure/get supply of required input/component. Respondents were asked to give opinion on different approach(s)/practice(s) for the procurement of required supply. Table 7 lists the approaches/practices which were identified to procure supply.

Early supplier involvement (ESI) ensures the participation of supplier(s) at early stage in the product development cycle. Table 8 presents the list of levels of ESI signifying the degree of involvement.

**Table 5: Factors for Selection of Supplier**

<i>Sr. no.</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>Rank Order</i>
1	Delivery Performance	Rank 1
2	Quality Performance	Rank 2
3	Technology	Rank 3
4	Competence	Rank 4
5	Experience	Rank 5
6	Cost Performance	Rank 6
7	Reputation	Rank 7
8	Location	Rank 8
9	Buy Back	Rank 9
10	Personal Relationship	Rank 10

**Table 6: Sub-processes to Manage Relationship with Supplier(s)**

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Size (%)</i>
Category 1	1. Every employee as well as supplier has a specified role. 2. Developing strong communication between you and your supplier(s). 3. Developing Common Bonds and relationship between you and your supplier(s). 4. Linkages and coordination between different supplier(s) is developed in the network. 5. Employees are motivated to manage and govern the relationship with supplier(s). 6. Processes are duly monitored and controlled through various programmes.	79
Category 2	Firms don't follow above-mentioned sub-processes.	21

**Table 7: Approaches/Practices to Procure Supply**

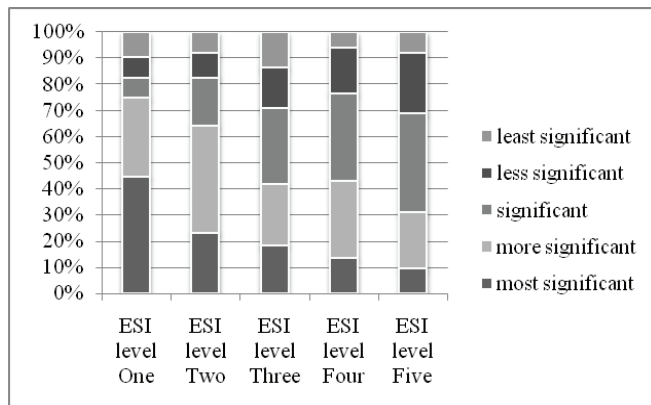
Approaches/Practices to Procure Supply	Mean
1. Supply is procured Just in Time (JIT).	3.64
2. Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) is used to get/procure supply.	3.99
3. Inventory is being managed by Supplier/Vendor (VMI).	3.81
4. Quick Response (QR) to procure supply.	4.15

**Table 8: Early Supplier Involvement (ESI)**

Early Supplier Involvement (ESI)	Factor Loading
1. Supplier provided input into your product’s design by sharing information about its equipment and capabilities.	0.803
2. Supplier provided feedback on your design including suggestions for cost and quality improvements.	0.803
3. Supplier took full responsibility from concept to manufacture for the design of an entire part/ component.	0.721
4. Supplier took full responsibility from concept to manufacture for the design of a system/sub-assembly incorporating one or more parts with it also designed.	0.678

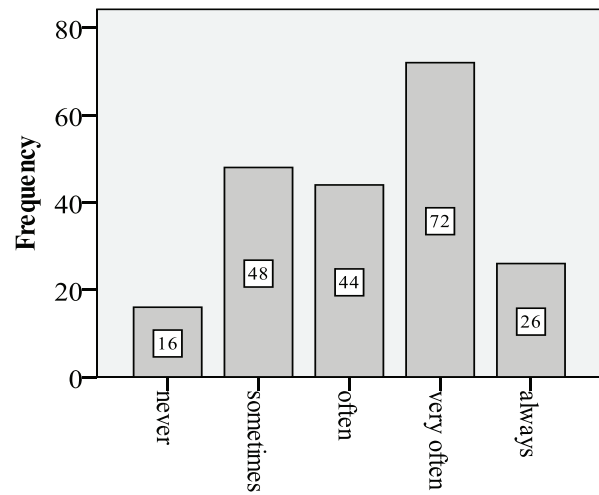
It is found that the firms are practicing early supplier involvement. Their presence at every level was found significant. Suppliers get involved not only by sharing information but also at each stage of product development.

**Fig. 2: Frequencies-ESI Level**



Focal firms often involve their supplier(s) in the product development process. This may often require suppliers to either upgrade or acquire new capabilities (Kim *et al.*, 2007). Respondents were asked to what extent they involve supplier(s) in this process.

**Fig. 3: Supplier Involvement in Product Development Process**



One sample *t-test* was carried out to find out the statistical significance of the finding. The result suggests that Indian manufacturing firms more often involve supplier in product development process ( $t(205) = 8.582, sig > 0.050$ ).

There might be various criteria considered by manufacturing firms for the performance evaluation of supplier(s). With the help of rank order calculations some factors were identified as factors for performance evaluation of suppliers which are shown in Table 9.

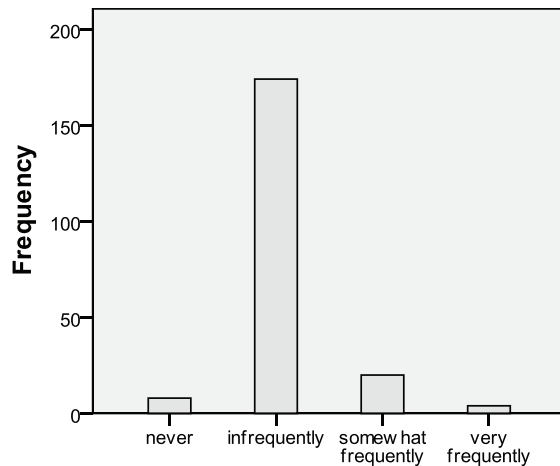
**Table 9: Factors for Supplier’s Performance Evaluation**

Sr. no.	Factors	Rank Order
	Supplier’s quality rating	Rank 1
	Complaint handling	Rank 2
	Supplier’s on time performance	Rank 3
	Average lead time for purchases	Rank 4
	Volume of turnover	Rank 5
	Supplier’s involvement in product development	Rank 6
	Average cost per requisition	Rank 7

Respondents were asked question regarding termination practice that how frequently it is done, assuming that they would have terminated a relationship with any of the supplier(s) at any point of time. The frequency of termination is shown in the figure 4. It was found that suppliers were terminated infrequently as per the opinion of majority of the respondents. One sample *t-test* was carried out to find out the statistical significance of the

finding. The result suggests that Indian manufacturing firms infrequently terminate the relationship with their supplier(s) ( $t(205) = 3.076, sig > 0.050$ ).

**Fig. 4: Frequency of Relationship Termination**



Finding suggests that most of the firms were satisfied with their suppliers (mean=4.2330). Further One sample *t-test* was carried out to see the statistical significance. The result suggests that firms are satisfied with their suppliers ( $t(205) = 5.199, sig > 0.050$ ).

## 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Supplier relationship management has become a key strategic area in the present time frame. Effort was made hereby to understand and report various practices exercised by Indian manufacturing firms to manage relationship with supplier(s). Based on the findings, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Majority of the firm surveyed have continuous relationship with their supplier(s) though for short period of time. The further probing suggests that short period usually lasts for three to five years. It seems that the continuous evaluation of supplier's performance is followed by them. Majority of the respondents said that the contractual agreement is in place however in order to look for supplier they adopt various approaches ranging from database to bid/tender invitation. As far as various criteria for the selection of supplier is concerned delivery performance and quality performance is the most preferred criteria while personal relationship is the least preferred criteria. Number of sub-processes was also identified to manage relationship with supplier. Here majority said that they do indulge in such processes. The present study also reports various practices to procure supply. Earlier supplier involvement is also ensured at early stage in the

product development cycle. Further analysis suggests that they frequently involve supplier during that stage. In order to evaluate supplier's performance, quality ratings and complaint handling are the most preferred criteria while average cost per requisition is the least preferred criteria. The present study also reports that the most of the respondents are satisfied with their suppliers however they do terminate relationships frequently. The present study helps in gaining insight about various practices exercised by Indian manufacturing firms regarding supplier relationship management. The study reports the same which was not much evident in the literature reviewed hence indicating the contribution made by the study.

The nature of study is primarily exploratory wherein researchers tried to report various approaches/practices with respect to supplier relationship management; however no effort was made to make any hypothesis/assumptions and subsequent validation of the same. It thus suggests one of the possible limitations of the study however it does throw light on the current relationship management practices adapted by select Indian manufacturing firms. Apparently researchers have mainly utilized descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to some extent. The study provides various research implications for further probing. It would be interesting to find out various determinants as drivers to successful relationship and different outcomes of such relationships. As supplier(s) is/are one of the key player(s) in supply chain or value delivery network, one of the insightful research could be establishing antecedents of successful supplier relationship where the resultant outcome is customer value creation. Finally, the study can be further replicated by taking different industries/sectors into consideration.

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