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### Relationship marketing from the perspective of employees (Comparison analysis)

#### **Abstract**

*The aim of the study is to answer the question how the attitude of the company's employees has changed in terms of assessing building proper relationships with business partners in relation to suppliers, recipients, customers and other entities with which the companies/organizations cooperate. Moreover, it is important to demonstrate a change in perception in the assessment of activities conducive to building good relationships. The article presents various approaches to relationship marketing as well as its application and significance for the functioning of enterprises in various areas. The results of empirical research from two research periods conducted among respondents working in various enterprises and organizations in the Lubuskie voivodship have been presented. The subjectivity of employees in shaping relations with business partners has been demonstrated.*

**Keywords:** relationship marketing, enterprise, environment, suppliers, recipients, customers, employees

**JEL classification:** L 140, L 220

**Paper type:** Research paper

#### **Introduction**

Business entities facing the challenges posed by globalization processes are looking for new sources of competitiveness. They can be seen not only

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in the competitive advantage of a product, quality or timely implementation of activities. It is not without significance to look into the depth of the enterprise, to listen to the voice of employees, also in relation to building relationships with the environment, especially the closer environment. Relationship marketing becomes a response to the growing demand for improving the competitiveness of not only individual enterprises, but also cooperating economic entities. Enterprises, being in the field of constant interactions with their business partners, focus on building a platform of understanding with external stakeholders. The relationships that are created by enterprises with suppliers, recipients, customers as well as other economic entities may undergo constant transformations, changes resulting from the dynamics of the markets. It is worth getting to know the opinions of company employees on the conditions shaping these relations, taking into account various research periods, because such a perspective may shed new light on the further development of solutions in this area in practice. There is now a significant amount of relationship marketing research, much of which focuses on company – client partnerships, with less work on a wider range of stakeholders.

The aim of the study is to answer the question how the attitude of the company's employees has changed in terms of assessing building proper relationships with business partners in relation to suppliers, recipients, customers and other entities with which the companies/organizations cooperate. Moreover, it is important to demonstrate a change in perception in the assessment of activities conducive to building good relationships. The article presents various approaches to relationship marketing as well as its application and significance for the functioning of enterprises in various areas.

The study was prepared on the basis of the results of empirical research conducted in June 2016 on a group of 200 respondents and in the period from October to December 2018 also on a group of 200 respondents working in various enterprises and organizations in the Lubuskie voivodeship.

## **1. Concepts of relationship marketing and its area of application, meaning in practice**

Relationship marketing grew out of two trends in marketing orientation, i.e. industrial and service orientation. The representatives of the first include, among the others, A. Payne, D. Ballantyne, and M. Christopher. In the second one we can find representatives such as: E. Gummesson, Ch. Grönroos, L.L. Berry (Kowalska-Musiał, 2007).

In the opinion of Payne, it can be understood as “a market-driven, customer-oriented, overall management concept, partly based

on a return to the roots of marketing and the original marketing concept” (Payne et al., 1999).

According to Grönroos (2015), relationship marketing is “to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers (and other parties) so that the objectives regarding economic and other variables of all parties are met. This is achieved through a mutual making and fulfilment of promises”. A similar approach is represented by Rashid (2017), who believes that it is “about establishing, maintaining, strengthening and commercializing relationships with customers by delivering on promises” (Rashid, 2017). Now, we can see relationship marketing as an approach to develop “a long term association with customers, measure the satisfaction level and develop effective programs to retain the customer with the company” (Gupta & Sahu, 2012).

A slightly different approach to relationship marketing in terms of definition was adopted by Palmatier (2008), who believes that relationship marketing (RM) is “the process of identifying, developing, maintaining, and terminating relational exchanges with the purpose of enhancing performance” (p.3). Achieving long-term profitability through the use of relationship marketing is based on taking actions built on the level of trust between the interested parties and leads to sustainable development in the market and the goals of the involved parties can be achieved (Nyadzayo, Khajehzadeh, 2016).

As emphasized by Sheth (2017, p. 5), in relationship marketing, one should strive to “share in the heart” of customers and “take projects together” with them.

Grönroos (2017) lists what types of aspects should be taken into account by the company that will implement relationship marketing. These include various types of issues related to: the customer’s perception of quality (e.g. the perception of interactions with company employees, investments in customer support systems) and covering customer processes and resources, for example, information on how to handle them.

Customer relationship management is currently significantly supported by highly advanced interactive technologies based on IT solutions. Customer databases enable direct communication management and integrated use of information transmission channels. It covers clients, including the provision of services to them (Nugroho et al., 2019) as well as recruitment processes, influencing suppliers and processes taking place inside enterprises (Dibb & Simkin, 2004).

Solutions covering industry 4.0 are becoming a challenge to apply relationship marketing. Thanks to them, there are new opportunities to meet the individual needs of customers, including the comprehensive organization of activities not only in sales (Dukić et al., 2017).

The relationships that are formed between the company and customers are based on the level of trust, competent provision of high-quality market offer and better satisfaction of needs and preferences. In the minds of customers, there is a belief that the enterprise – partner shares their values (Hunt et al., 2006). Co-creation of value takes place in the business-to-business (B2B) relationship and concerns contacts between business entities and business-to-consumer (B2C) consumers (Grönroos 2011; Watanabe 2020). This is favoured by the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CRS) solutions by enterprises (Luu, 2019). Taking such actions is an important area of the company's activity (Gummesson, 2008).

Relationship marketing is also analysed in the context of issues related to sustainable development, including a multidimensional approach to the dynamics of building international partnerships (Păduraru et al., 2016).

Taking care of relations between enterprises and their clients turns into a dimension of relations, strategically important for companies, at the level of contacts between the clients themselves (Ramani & Kumar, 2008). It is important to develop communication programs that increase trust in the service provider and foster the maintenance of long-term relationships (Balaji et al., 2016).

In the area of interest in the subject of relationship marketing, there are also issues related to the quality of relationships and building customer loyalty (Fullerton, 2005). This is supported by the implementation of CRM (Customer relationship management) systems, which can be "interpreted as a bridge between the organization and its customers" (Czopek & Kazusek, 2020, p. 34).

When analysing the approach of J. L. Neumann and C. G. Laimer (2019), it should be stated that relationship marketing also includes issues related to the competitive advantage between entities related to each other by dependencies based on networks and strategic alliances.

When developing strategies to improve relational benefits, managers can focus more on establishing (or enhancing) trust benefits and social benefits that significantly impact the perceived value and quality of relationships, which contribute to enhancing customer loyalty (Gremler et al., 2020). Relational resources influence the decisions and behaviour of customers through: cooperation, relationship loyalty and empathic behaviour on the part of company employees (Palmatier, 2008).

Major changes in the relationship between an enterprise and its consumers have occurred with the era of digitization. Enterprises, thanks to the use of social media, can exchange information, engage end recipients and build their trust, as well as receive feedback from them, which takes place on-line. Through these activities, "relationship marketing is viewed as a technology affordance of digital technology" (Sedalo, Boateng & Kosiba, 2021, p. 2).

The implementation of social media in the area of shaping interactions with clients gives additional opportunities to develop and emphasize social commitment (Zaif & Cerchia, 2019).

Increasing the level of orientation of the company in the study of company-client relations requires compliance with the recommendations regarding internal marketing and the implementation of a fully subjective approach to employees. Relationship marketing also includes processes taking place within the enterprise (Keller et al., 2006). Their goal is oriented, among other things, to the creation and improvement of relations between the company and its customers and the development of profitable cooperation with all interested stakeholders (Ciobanu & Lucasea, 2016). Clients evaluate employee behaviour in the context of relationship marketing as well as company policies and procedures.

## 2. Research method

The study used empirical research conducted on a group of 200 people employed in the Lubuskie voivodeship in June 2016 and they constituted a significant part of the research carried out that year. In order to conduct a comparative analysis, the results of empirical research carried out in 2018 in the period from October to December on a group of 200 respondents from the given area were also presented. The research was carried out with the help of a tool which is a questionnaire. It contained questions constituting the basis for presenting the characteristics of the studied population. The following elements of the description of respondents were distinguished: gender, age, length of employment in the enterprise/organization. The characteristics of the surveyed population are presented in Table 1. Moreover, the enterprises/organizations in which the respondents are employed were characterized on the basis of the respondents' answers. It is shown in Table 2.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the studied population – research results from June 2016 and from October to December 2018**

Description		In percentage terms (in %) Research period - June 2016	In percentage terms (in %) Research period - October – December 2018
<b>Gender of respondents</b>	women	55,5	54,0
	men	44,5	46,0
<b>Age structure of the respondents</b>	Up to 20 years old	2,0	4,0
	From 21 to 30 years old	57,5	52,5
	From 31 to 40 years old	21,0	19,5
	From 41 to 50 years old	13,0	18,0

	From 51 to 60 years old	6,5	5,5
	Over 60 years old	----	0,5

**cd. Table 1.**

<b>Work experience in the company/organization</b>	Less than 1 year	26,0	22,5
	From 1 to 5 years	41,0	46,5
	From 6 to 10 years	16,0	12,5
	From 11 to 15 years	4,0	8,5
	From 16 to 20 years	6,5	2,5
	Over 20 years	6,5	7,5

Source: own study based on the survey research

Among the respondents constituting the basis for the comparative analysis from 2016, there were 55,5% of women and 44,5% of men. The most numerous group (57,5%) were people aged 21 to 30. Then, 21,0% are respondents aged 31 to 40, 13,0% are people aged 41 to 50 and 6,5% are employees aged 51 to 60, 2,0% are persons up to 20 years old. Taking into account the length of employment in the enterprise/organization, the dominant group was people employed in the period from 1 to 5 years (41,0% of respondents). 26,0% have work experience for up to 1 year, 16,0% are people working for 6 to 10 years. People with 16-20 years and over 20 years of experience constituted a group of 6,5% of the respondents. The respondents with 11 to 15 years of employment accounted for 4,0% of the surveyed.

In the second analysed research period, the number of women also dominated, they constituted 54,0% of the respondents. In terms of the age structure of the respondents, the largest group were also people aged 21 to 30 (52,5% of respondents). Taking into account the work experience in the company/organization, people employed from 1 to 5 years predominated (46,5% of respondents), 22,5% of the surveyed population are employees with work experience up to 1 year, 12,5% are people working for 6 up to 10 years. People with 11 to 15 years of experience constituted a group of 8,5% of the respondents. Next are people employed over 20 years – 7,5% of the respondents. The smallest group was represented by employees with a period of employment from 16 to 20 years (2,5% of the respondents).

On the basis of the presented data, it can be concluded that there are grounds for a comparative analysis of the respondents from the two periods considered.

**Table 2. Characteristics of enterprises/organizations in which the respondents are employed – research results from June 2016 and from October to December 2018**

Description		In percentage terms (in %) Research period – June 2016	In percentage terms (in %) Research period - October December 2018
<b>The period of operation of the enterprise/organization on the market</b>	Up to 5 years	16,5	8,5
	From 6 to 10 years	17,5	12,5
	From 11 to 15 years	15,0	13,5
	From 16 to 20 years	10,0	11,0
	Over 20 years	41,0	54,5
<b>The geographical scope of the enterprise/organization's activity</b>	Local market	28,5	25,5
	Regional market	20,0	13,0
	Domestic market	30,5	37,5
	International market	43,5	51,0
<b>Type of the enterprise/organization's activity</b>	production	33,0	38,5
	trade	24,5	30,5
	services	39,0	47,0
	others	12,5	7,0
<b>Legal form</b>	State-owned enterprise	27,5	30,0
	Private enterprise	68,5	65,5
	Other form	4,0	4,5
<b>Capital ownership</b>	Polish capital	56,5	65,0
	Foreign capital	21,0	20,5
	Mixed capital with a predominance of foreign	18,0	7,5
	Mixed capital with a predominance of Polish	4,5	6,0
	Equal share of Polish and foreign capital	----	1,0
<b>Size of the enterprise/organization</b>	Micro (less than 10 employees)	18,0	11,5
	Small (10 to 49 employees)	23,0	12,0
	Medium (from 50 to 249 employees)	28,0	29,5
	Large (more than 249 employees)	31,0	47,0

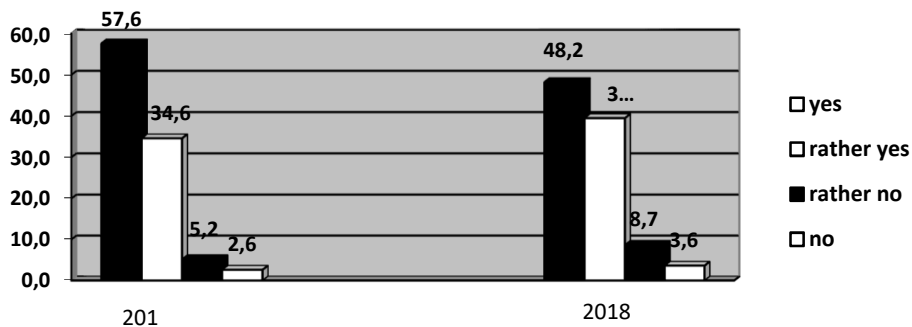
Source: own study based on the survey research

The surveyed employees were employed in business entities whose period of operation on the market was varied. The most numerous group were those that existed for more than 20 years – 41,0% and 54,5% of the entities discussed, respectively. The geographic scope was varied. Most of the surveyed entities are private enterprises. In terms of capital ownership, Polish capital dominated. Most people work in large entities employing more than 249 employees.

### 3. Results and discussion

The respondents commented on whether the management staff and other employees of the company/organization care about building proper relationships with suppliers. This has been presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Respondents' opinion on the care for building proper relationships with suppliers by the management and other employees of the enterprise/organization [%]**



Source: own study based on the survey research

When analysing the answers of the respondents, it should be stated that in the first research period more people chose the answer yes than in the second. Moreover, there is an advantage of negative responses (rather no or no) in 2018, it is 12,3% in total, while in 2016 it is 7,8%. It is a clear signal for enterprises to consider what could be the causes of the current state of affairs.

The respondents also specified whether the management staff and other employees of the company/organization care about building proper relations with recipients. This is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Respondents' opinion on the care for building proper relations with recipients by the management and other employees of the enterprise/organization [%]**

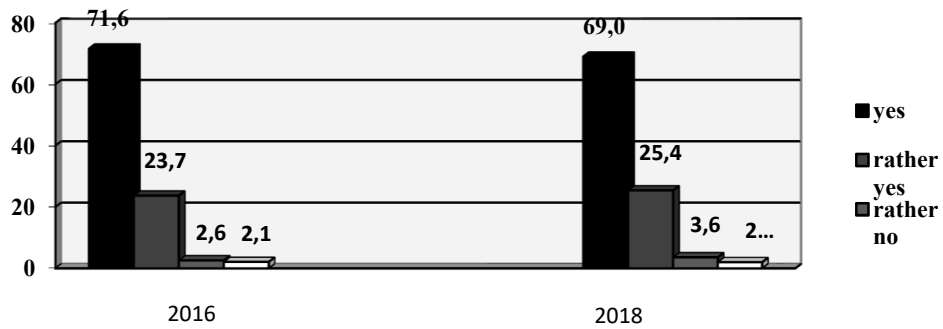


Source: own study based on the survey research

With regard to relations with recipients, an increase in the number of yes responses was recorded in the second research period. The answers no and rather no are the same.

Figure 3 shows how employees perceive building appropriate relationships with customers.

**Figure 3. Respondents' opinion on the care for building appropriate relations with customers by the management and other employees of the enterprise/organization [%]**

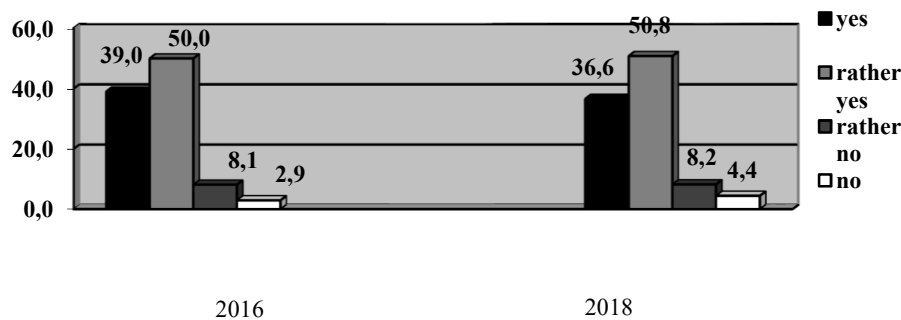


Source: own study based on the survey research

As far as customer relations are concerned, the results obtained are very similar in both analysed periods.

Figure 4 shows how employees perceive the care for building appropriate relationships by the management and other employees of the enterprise/organization with other enterprises/organizations/institutions with which the enterprise cooperates.

**Fig. 4. Respondents' opinion on the care for building by the management staff and other employees of the enterprise/organization appropriate relations with other enterprises/organizations/institutions with which the enterprise cooperates [%]**

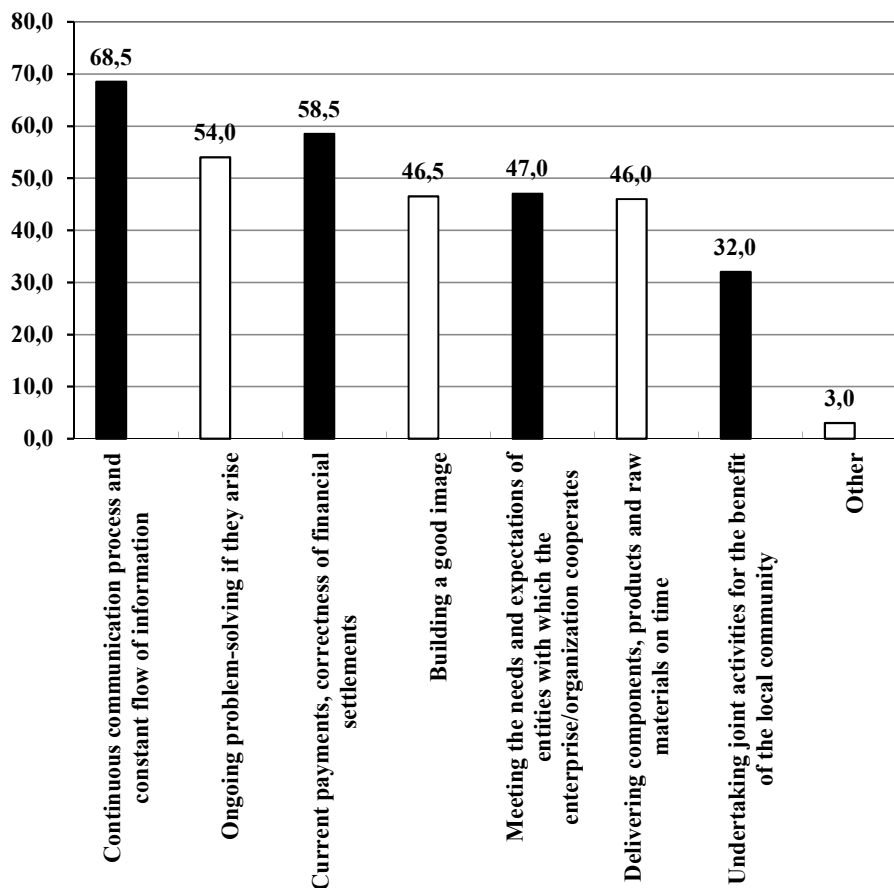


Source: own study based on the survey research

In terms of relations with the last group of stakeholders, very similar results were also recorded.

The respondents commented on what types of activities undertaken by employees of the company/organization are conducive to building appropriate relationships with: suppliers, recipients, customers and other companies/organizations/institutions with which the company cooperates. This has been presented in Figures 5 and 6.

**Figure 5. Actions taken by employees of an enterprise/organization favouring building appropriate relations with: suppliers, recipients, customers and other enterprises/organizations/institutions with which the enterprise cooperates – data from 2016 [%]**

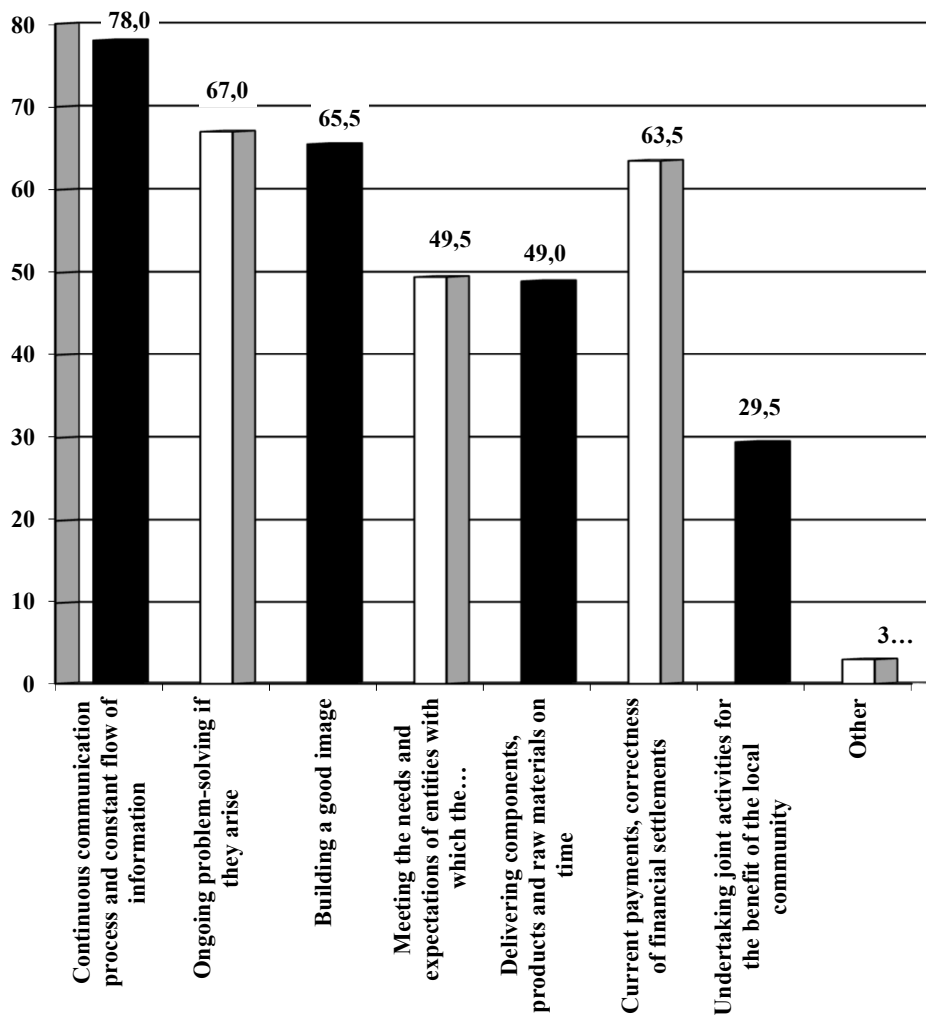


Source: own study based on the survey research

Based on the analysis of the conducted research on the first period considered, it can be concluded that the vast majority of respondents attach great importance to the process of communicating with business partners. Financial issues related to the day-to-day payments are on the second place. The third factor indicated is the ongoing solution of emerging problems together with an external partner. Building a good image requires, among other things, meeting the needs and expectations of entities with which the company/organization cooperates (these two factors occupy a very similar number of employees' indications). A similar number of indications is also taken by: delivering components, products and raw materials on time.

Then, the respondents recognized that they noticed undertaking joint activities for the benefit of the local community with business partners. A small percentage of respondents pointed to other activities, including the price effect.

**Figure 6. Actions taken by employees of an enterprise/organization favouring building appropriate relationships with: suppliers, recipients, customers and other enterprises/organizations/institutions with which the enterprise cooperates – research from 2018 [%]**



Source: own study based on the survey research

In the second analysed research period, it was also found that the respondents attach great importance to the process of communicating with business partners. A similar value in percentage terms is assumed by such factors as: solving emerging problems with which a given entity cooperates, financial issues and building a good image. Further positions are occupied by: delivering components, products and raw materials on time, meeting the needs and expectations of other entities and undertaking joint activities for the benefit of the local community with business partners. According to J. Guan, T. R. Lee, C. Otero-Neira, G. Svensson, and N.M. Høgevold (2021, p. 1) „Practitioners in B2B settings need to focus on joint actions as well as joint interests, and vice versa, as the economic and non-economic satisfaction of a business relationship complement each other”.

In the light of the conducted research, it should be stated that employees positively assess the company's relations with its stakeholders. It should be especially emphasized that there are aspects of the functioning of the surveyed entities in terms of communication processes, which, as known, is a good platform for building relationships. It is important that this tendency continued in the analysed periods. The respondents demonstrated an increase in the activity of the surveyed entities in the field of problem solving. Furthermore, image-building activities increased by almost 20%.

“Enhancement to the relationship through increased benefits” (Padgett, Hopkins & Williams, 2020, p.13) will certainly contribute to the success on the market by enterprises in its many dimensions, and will increase their resource potential and will contribute to the multiplication of the broadly understood common good. Managers should be aware that in practice there may be “the ripple effect of one business relationship on a connected network” (Ojansivu, Laari-Salmela, & Hermes, 2022, p. 193) of mutual interactions. If it is directed towards positive action, the more benefits are achieved by economic actors and entire communities, not only in the local sense.

The presented research is part of the area of issues related to shaping the quality of relations with business partners and with a group of final recipients, i.e. clients. This quality of relationships is one of the key elements helping companies to develop and maintain lasting relationships with customers. The conceptualization of research in this area is particularly important due to the fact that, according to F. B. Naoui and I. Zaiem (2020), there are discrepancies noticed in the literature on the subject.

Let the opinion of V. Johanesová and J. Vaňová (2020) be a voice in the discussion on the role of employees in the implementation of the relationship marketing strategy. They are of the opinion that: “Above all, company must be able to communicate this strategy to its staff,

and ensure that the relationship marketing strategy is fully embraced and the organization fully aligned to it in order for the business to face the multitude of challenges for the future, and thereby develop their competitiveness” (Johanesová, Vaňová, 2020, p. 34).

Undertaking research in the field of perceiving relationship marketing from the perspective of employees is an important topic, which can be proved by the fact that: “Employees’ market orientation behaviour (MOB) is crucial for a firm to respond to market changes and attain its business performance goal. Moreover, a firm must exercise the internal marketing mechanism (IMM) to prepare employees for providing superior service to satisfy internal and external customers’ needs” (Li, Ko & Wu, 2021, p.1).

#### **4. Conclusions**

As a result of the conducted empirical research, taking into account the recommendations of relationship marketing, it should be stated that company employees demonstrate their awareness of their role in building relationships with stakeholders. Whether this tendency will continue depends on the management staff and the conviction that the strategic assumptions of the enterprise require systematic actions in the field of interaction with the environment. Certainly, the exchange of knowledge, constant flow of information and comprehensiveness of activities in the field of relationship management will strengthen the competitive position of enterprises on the market. The research results presented in the article may be valuable guidelines for enterprises. Moreover, they are consistent with the research results of S. Papakonstantinidis, P. Kwiatek & R. Baltezarevic (2021, p. 321), which indicate that “that to obtain short-term (e.g., sales) and long-term (e.g., propensity to recommend) results, companies should design customer relationships focusing on humans”.

Quo vadis enterprise, do you open up to the environment? This is a question that every middle-level manager and top management should ask themselves.

There are still many areas to be developed in terms of undertaking joint activities for the local community. Sometimes, “bottom-up” intervention can do a lot, especially in times of crisis. The cooperation of enterprises with stakeholders provides the basis for generating “synergistic knowledge”. The high level of employees’ perception in terms of the environment and processes taking place inside the company affects not only the given entity as a whole, as a uniform organism, but may also become a further driver of positive changes.

Market-oriented behaviour of employees is crucial for the company to respond to changes in the market, achieve the goal of business efficiency and build lasting relationships with the environment.

Currently, the author conducts research in the field of further in-depth analysis of employees' perception of activities undertaken by economic entities in the field of relationship marketing. Moreover, it is possible to consider the issue of research on joint identification and development of market niches by business partners.

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