

Activity Theory Approach to Customer Relationship Management and Customer Satisfaction in Retail Industry

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the link between Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and customer satisfaction in retail companies, using Activity Theory as a framework. Following Engeström's Activity Theory, this research analyzes how CRM systems help increase customer satisfaction and loyalty by acting as tools for communication between retailers and their customers. The study examines how implementing CRM systems has helped a small retail organization improve and manage its customer relationships. According to the findings, when CRM is joined with suitable structures, training and technology in a company, customer satisfaction benefits greatly. The Activity Theory model clearly explains the cooperation between customers, employees, customer data, satisfaction benchmarks, systems, regulations, job roles and the industry climate, leading to happy and loyal customers. The report shows that businesses need to combine technology, procedures and employees to achieve and sustain good results with customers.

Keywords: Engeström Framework, Loyalty Programs, Data Warehousing, Customer Retention, Service Quality, Organizational Performance.

INTRODUCTION:

Nowadays, competition in retail is intense, and customer satisfaction often determines whether a business thrives or fails. With numerous shopping options and higher customer expectations today, retailers must develop effective strategies to engage and retain their customers (Pambudi, Widayanti, & Edastama, 2021). Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is now crucial for retail businesses to nurture customer relationships, enhance operational efficiency, and boost their profit margin.

In the 1920s, Russian psychologists Vygotsky and Leontiev introduced *Activity Theory* as a framework for understanding both human actions and their motivations in complex situations (Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007). It has attracted research attention in information systems by enabling the examination of how people, tools, and organizations interact. Using Activity Theory with CRM systems clarifies the mediating role of technology in the relationship between companies and their customers, influencing levels of satisfaction and the loyalty of these customers (Matsuoka, 2022). This work aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by examining how Activity Theory explains the impact of CRM systems on customer satisfaction in the retail sector.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to accomplish its major objectives of determining Customer Relationship Management practices and their impact on customer satisfaction. The specific objectives are;

- To examine if there is any positive relationship between customer and CRM.
- To determine the role played by the CRM in the retail industry to produce satisfied customers.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between CRM the Customer Satisfaction?
- In the retail industry, is the CRM and Customer Satisfaction Positively related?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity Theory

The progress in applying activity theory to Information Systems is primarily due to the significant contributions of Bonnie Nardi and Kari Kuutti. He claimed that Activity Theory can explain events but that it is not very good at making predictions. It aims to demonstrate that consciousness and activity cannot be separated; activity theorists argue that consciousness is an integral part of daily life, not a separate mental action. In the view of Khan et al., (2022), an activity is an action taken to achieve an aim, and the goals of an activity are what define it.

Making an outcome makes it possible for an action to occur. An object may exist in the world, yet it may not be something that someone can physically touch. A computer is a way for someone to connect with their environment. Ngo & Nguyen (2016) pointed out that the subject-object relationship can be examined at the levels of activities, actions, and operations.

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To achieve the same goals, individuals or groups may need to take a range of actions. Imron & Ariyanti (2023) commented on customer support engineers and what actionable artifacts they needed by applying both Engeström's Activity Theory and an artifact hierarchy. They studied how Engeström's Theory applies to work done by groups using computers. The paper mainly focused on Engeström's Activity Theory model to shape and interpret the findings. Kumar et al., (2022) discussed Activity Theory as a means to analyze how humans and groups function within the world. The authors' paper explores how Activity Theory can be applied in real-world settings. Researchers and studies have developed the Activity Theory, showing that it effectively outlines how activities supported by technology are structured, developed, and take place, and can even be applied in practice (Domanska-Szaruga & Senkus, 2012).

Concepts of CRM

In their study, Pambudi, Widayanti, and Edastama (2021) demonstrate that CRM helps customers stay loyal, feel satisfied, and improve the business's financial results, whether in the short or long term. Customer Relationship Management aims to please customers by using people, processes, and technology. The author also examined how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) helps customers remain loyal to hotels. He explained that a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system increases the probability that customers will use their services again. In the view of Guerola-Navarro et al., (2021), SMEs that use CRM and improve their IT ability, manage customer contacts well, and focus on customer service are more likely to satisfy customers. Using CRM helps customers feel more satisfied, according to his results. Rodriguez & Honeycutt (2011) claim that CRMs can help companies please customers by enhancing both tech support and the way people communicate.

He pointed out it is primarily the role of customer representatives to communicate with customers. According to Pavel Bachmann and Kateřina Kantorová (2016), almost all the firms analyzed now use CRM as part of their marketing strategy. As Gazi et al., (2024) noted, real CRM depends on offering customers high levels of service, value, and convenience. Using CRM has a positive impact on customer needs, loyalty, and emotions (Rane, Choudhary, & Rane, 2023). Connecting CRM with marketing can motivate customers to remain loyal, allowing companies to earn more profit with reduced costs. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) was strongly linked to customer loyalty in the analysis done by Ogbadu and Usman (2012). According to his paper, effective Customer Relationship Management (CRM) helps a company gain new

customers and dramatically increases profits. Using Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools, companies aim to improve their customer interactions. The data about customers is analyzed and utilized to help the company achieve its objectives. Sending targeted marketing to customers is possible for many companies by using automated CRM systems and the information they gather. As explained by Parahiyanti et al., (2023) in their peer-reviewed article, effectively managing CRM helps businesses build customer loyalty and generate profits for years. Any individual must address technology, process, people, and technology in a balanced way to succeed with CRM.

Concepts of Customer Satisfaction

Ibojo & Asabi (2015) believes that a company's ability to satisfy customers is the most crucial factor in retaining customers. In addition, how satisfied customers significantly affect their willingness to continue using a company. Ogunnaike, Tairat & Emmanuel (2024) believed that satisfaction is a general feeling that happens when our expectations and realities balance. According to Matsuoka (2022), satisfying a customer can make them a loyal one. It was believed that a content client would repurchase within a specified time interval.

Concepts of the Retail Industry

To make a profit, retail means offering consumer goods or services through many distribution channels to customers. Verma & Verma (2013) points out that Customer Relationship Management (CRM) plays a significant role in the retail industry. Because of CRM, the retail sector can discover what customers like and need and can guide its strategy accordingly.

METHODS

This case study focuses on a small-sized retail industry, utilizing Activity Theory as the primary analytical framework to understand the use of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. Activity Theory is beneficial for identifying how human actions evolve into operations as users gain experience. It enables researchers to study users, tools, and activities in a structured and contextual manner.

In this study, we aim to investigate the impact of the CRM system on customer satisfaction and employee interaction in a retail environment. We examine the system from multiple user perspectives: employees using the CRM system, customers interacting with it directly or indirectly, and the organization managing it. The purpose is to identify how well the CRM meets user needs, how feedback is gathered, and how each activity contributes to building customer satisfaction.

Findings

Application of Activity Theory to CRM in Retail

To explore these dynamics, Engeström's Activity Theory framework is applied, which includes eight key components:

- **Activity:** What is being done?

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- **Objects:** Why is the activity taking place?
- **Subjects:** Who is involved in the activity?
- **Tools:** What resources or systems are used?
- **Rules and Regulations** – Are there formal guidelines or procedures?
- **Division of Labor** – How are responsibilities distributed?
- **Community** – What is the larger context or organization involved?
- **Outcomes** – What are the intended results?

The following Table maps the core components of Activity Theory to the CRM system in a retail environment:

Table 1: Engestrom Activity Theory Model

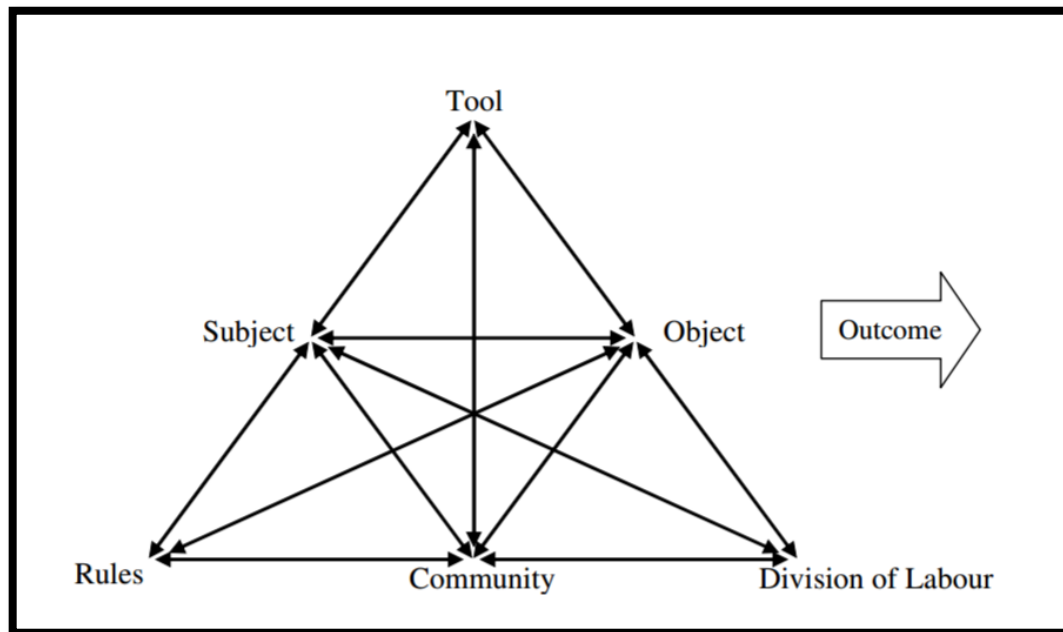
Component	Description
Activity	1. Customer makes a purchase in-store or online. 2. Their data is stored. 3. Employees use CRM to engage them via multiple channels. 4. CRM is used to improve satisfaction and retention.
Objects	CRM system: used to manage customer data, communication, and engagement.
Subjects	Customers: the users whose data is stored and who are engaged through the CRM.
Tools	Email, Mail Order system, Loyalty Program software which are used to interact with customers.
Rules and Regulations	Guidelines for CRM use: data privacy policies, integration standards, customization protocols.
Division of Labor	Employees: sales reps, customer service agents, and marketing staff use CRM for specific functions.
Community	The retail industry includes internal staff, management, and external customers.
Outcomes	Satisfied customers who are loyal, engaged, and more likely to return or recommend.

Purpose of the Activity: The primary purpose of using the CRM system is to convert one-time buyers into loyal and satisfied customers. By systematically collecting and analyzing customer data, retail businesses can personalize communication, resolve issues efficiently, and increase engagement through tools such as email campaigns and loyalty programs (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014).

CRM System in Focus: The study does not focus on a specific CRM brand. Still, it analyzes a generic, industry-standard CRM system that includes modules for customer information, communication history, loyalty tracking, and feedback mechanisms (Lam, Cheung & Lau, 2013).

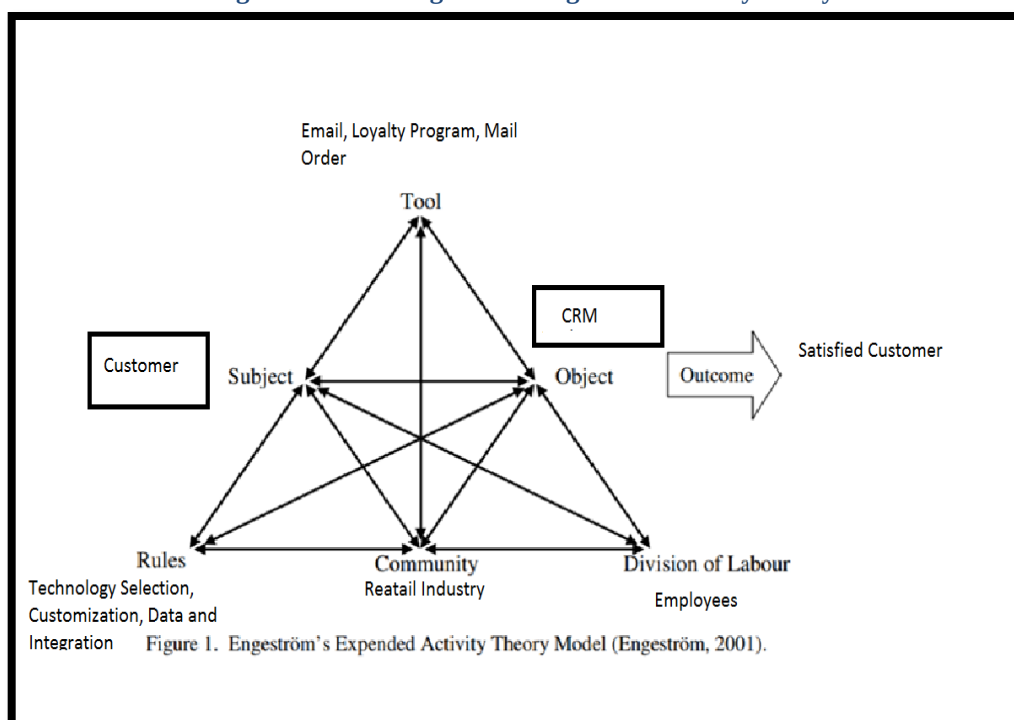
Instruments and Their Location: The CRM system itself is the primary instrument. It exists as a software platform hosted within the organization’s IT infrastructure. Still, its tools (e.g., emails, promotional messages, feedback forms) may interact with customers outside the application, often through email or SMS (Chia-Jen, 2013).

Figure 1: Representation Activity Theory Model



(Source: Chia-Jen, 2013)

Figure 2: New Designed the Engestrom Activity theory



(Source: Self-created)

The components of the above Activity Theory model are explained here:

Subject: The subject is about what customers do or the steps they go through as customers. Retailers, on the other hand, must simultaneously attempt to attract new customers and retain loyal ones. Some people we call customers are new customers, loyal customers, discount customers, impulse customers, wandering customers, and need-based customers. Nunes & Drèze (2006) have defined the customer's lifecycle as comprising four parts: engage, transact, fulfill, and service, known as ETFs.

Objects: According to Irshad, Amjad, and Janjua (2015), customers' data is available to retailers due to loyalty programs, mail orders, and the Internet. Using data warehousing and mining, retailers can analyze consumer behavior and use that information to improve their business. In addition to CRM Systems, this allows retailers to examine customer purchasing trends and ensure that each client is valued by their business. For him, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) means guiding the front office (Marketing, Sales, and Customer Service) and the back office (Accounting, Production, and Logistics) in working together with customers and

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) aims to foster customer loyalty, which in turn helps provide satisfaction (Bachmann & Kantorová, 2016). The research question in this paper will be addressed through an examination grounded in Activity Theory. The focus is on Customers, and CRM is what is being examined. Using CRM with Rules, Community, Division of Labor, and tools enables the company to achieve its objective of satisfied customers.

Tools: With Information Technology, CRM can handle data on customer behaviors, help analyze their purchase patterns, design models to predict purchases, classify customers into different segments, and deliver what each customer needs. Rodriguez & Honeycutt (2011) suggest that by using IT, companies can gain a comprehensive understanding of their customers, learn from past experiences, and utilize that information to enhance future sales. Data warehouse technology, ERP, and the impact of the Internet are seen as the main infrastructures for CRM, as well as the tools mentioned in this paper. Email, mail order, and loyalty programs are considered a few of the tools used in CRM (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014).

- **Data Warehouse:** Business decisions are guided by a data warehouse, which collects data from all parts of the company (Ngo & Nguyen, 2016). By bringing together data from Human Resources, Sales and Marketing, Finance, Accounting, and Production departments, as well as various databases and operational systems, a data warehouse enables businesses to make informed, critical decisions.
- **ERP:** All departments within a single industry, as well as external suppliers, are integrated thanks to Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software. In contrast, ERP is primarily used for back-office tasks, while CRM encompasses both front- and back-office activities, focusing on customer relations and loyalty programs. Every company should carefully consider and analyze the value of integrating ERP before implementing CRM (Ogunnaike et al., 2014). In addition, ERP links suppliers and customers together, making CRM a solution designed to help the company build relationships with customers and improve customer management.
- **Impact of the Internet:** As per the explanations of Bachmann & Kantorová. 2016, a recent report indicates websites can develop enduring relationships with online customers through services that cannot be found in traditional ways. Some of the services made available by the Internet include online ordering, clickstream tracking, and website personalization. Mithas, Krishnan, and Fornell (2005) provided an illustration showing that, with the help of technology, two million frequent customers log in to the American

Airlines site and have a unique encounter each visit. It helps create more effective programs for managing customer relationships.

- **E-mail and Mail Order:** All customer data is collected, and a relationship is built through email and mail order using a CRM. It enhances relationships with customers, keeps loyal customers by offering better service, and recognizes top customers, serving them at a higher level.
- **Loyalty Program:** Yu & Ramanathan (2013) recommended that the first step to a successful loyalty program is to think about what people hope to achieve with it. Sometimes, loyalty programs lead customers to stick with a company longer, which marketers describe as barriers preventing them from leaving. Loyalty programs have become increasingly popular over the past decade, primarily because they provide valuable insights into customer behavior (Khong & Yao, 2011). Loyalty programs aim to retain customers as repeat customers over the long term. A loyalty card, rewards card, points card, advantage card, or club card is a type of card, often similar to a credit card or debit card, that allows a member to identify themselves in a loyalty program. Loyalty card programs are found by Khan et al., (2022) to have a significant effect on building loyalty. Loyalty programs are effective strategies that companies use to retain their customers for an extended period.

Rules and Regulations

- Choosing the right technology brings all the customers' contact points with the company into one place, so that they can understand each customer in real-time, can sell when they are prepared and know what to propose and how to attract them (Nunes & Drèze, 2006).
- Customizing a CRM to fit company needs is best practice. It is important to customize the tools because here they are adapted to fit the business rules that achieve real outcomes. If the chosen technology cannot be adapted to meet the business rules, the adoption will struggle and results will be poor.
- According to Kumar et al., (2022), CRM gathers all customer data in a single area, unifies various processes within the company and aggregates different CRM activities from other executives, business divisions and groups.
- Division of labor means an employee working in the retail industry. It is indicated by Imron & Ariyanti (2023), that a good business environment, qualified employees, strategy in operations and organization performance are all linked in the retail industry. Pambudi, Widayanti, & Edastama (2021) suggested in their paper that employees in the retail industry

should take charge, respond to customers, provide creative answers, communicate their knowledge and work with managers to help the organization become successful.

Community

In this case, the community is the “retail industry.” At a retail outlet, many options are available to shoppers, so they can choose where to buy something. For shoppers, the price of the item stands out from the very beginning, while service comes next when visiting a retail store (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021). They have more control over price than over customer service, which is the most critical and challenging aspect of doing business. It is not the same for every type of retail industry. The industry has adopted Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems to help with customer service.

Managing relationships with customers is essential, and CRM makes a huge difference here. It helps to combine different databases and sales force automation programs to join sales and marketing teams, making it easier to target customers. The retail industry typically views CRM as a tool for one-to-one communication with customers, leaving other tasks to sales and service teams, call centers, or the marketing team. Gazi et al., (2024) believe that CRM serves as a “key” to understanding customers and reaching a competitive advantage by better tracking and servicing them. Many researchers over time agree that a CRM system attaches the interaction between retail sales, marketing, and customer support services with the retail business processes, including finance, logistics, and personnel via the internet, emails, sales of goods, direct mail, telemarketing, call centers, advertising, fax, pagers (Collins, Shukla & Redmiles, 2002).

They are part of the company’s touchpoint system, and a specialized Information System handles each system. Thanks to CRM, touchpoints and information systems combine, thereby strengthening the relationship between the front and back office. According to Rane, Choudhary, and Rane (2023), when all the elements of CRM are brought together, customers typically feel satisfied with the final result. Having customers, tools, division of labor, and rules in the community support the creation of happy customers.

Outcomes

According to Parahiyanti et al., (2023), a relationship exists between customer satisfaction, service quality, and loyalty programs. He demonstrates that customer satisfaction is wholly/partly responsible for the link between service quality and customer loyalty. In addition, Matsuoka (2022) noted that customer satisfaction is now one of the highest priorities. Whenever a firm, especially a retail organization, aims for a long-term customer relationship, it considers customer satisfaction to be its top priority. In retail, since dealing with customers is so important, being satisfied by customers is now a significant factor for success in the industry.

Khan et al., (2022) focused on the role of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in both customer knowledge and satisfaction. PDF & cocreators analyzed archival data for U.S. firms and found that those who use CRM applications have improved knowledge and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction, as explained by Kumar et al., (2022), typically leads to fewer customer complaints and increased loyalty and customer frequency.

This paper demonstrates that a customer becomes satisfied when all the parts of the process are working (ERP, Mail Order, Loyalty Programs), forming a connected system through employees, managers, and industry standards. If all these things are integrated well, it makes the customer happy and content.

Integrating Subjects, Objects, Tools, Division of Labor, Rules and the Outcomes

Tracking how customers behave, as well as their preferences and evolving needs, is the primary reason retailers utilize CRM applications. Imron & Ariyanti (2023) stated that managing and using market information enables companies to design and provide superior products and services. If a customer begins a buying process, sales and promotion managers will mildly gather the customer’s details into a computer database. The effort on CRM does not stop now. A CRM is set up by either utilizing an existing technology or by creating a customized solution unique to the organization.

At the end of every month, the CRM manager will review the customer information and set up a loyalty plan. They will then send emails or make calls to assist customers after they have made a purchase and update them on new products or services. Since the customer will continue to purchase from the same business, it means the brand is keeping its customers happy and loyal. According to Pambudi, Widayanti, and Edastama (2021), customer satisfaction plays a crucial role in linking CRM with various aspects, including customer knowledge management, relationship quality, and tailoring services to meet customer needs. They explained through analysis and different examples that CRM and Customer Satisfaction are significant.

Generally we can see that every customer is assigned a reference number, which is logged in the company’s CRM system (Rane, Choudhary, & Rane, 2023). CRM and mail order study the customer’s buying routine and through different promotional offer they aim to maintain the relationship with the customer. For an example: discount coupons on birthdays, anniversaries and special occasions . Retailers are keeping their customers through different deals and advice.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates the utility of Activity Theory in studying CRM in retail settings. It is evident from the study that implementing CRM helps increase customer satisfaction when viewed as a comprehensive organizational strategy, not just as a technology. This

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model helps identify the crucial connections between different parts of the system that influence customer satisfaction. The research indicates that carefully integrating technology, employees, effective policies, and the community environment is crucial for CRM success. The linking of subjects, objects, tools, division of labor, rules, and community in retail CRM makes customers feel more satisfied and loyal. It advocates for a broader view than simply the technical features that many traditional CRM systems provide. The methodology included in the study also helps improve both academic research and real-world work in CRM implementations.

Implications

The results of this study are significant for understanding and implementing CRM systems in retail businesses. Applying Activity Theory to CRM analysis from a theoretical perspective demonstrates its adaptability in exploring complex systems. This study confirms that Engeström's eight-component model effectively analyzes the various ways in which technology, people, and companies are interconnected in the retail industry. It helps explain how we can study and improve how products are advertised in commercial settings.

For retail professionals, the study highlights the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to CRM. It shows that achieving high customer satisfaction requires more than just advanced technology; it also requires various organizational components to be well-coordinated. Retailers need to recognize that CRM operates within a broader activity system encompassing people, activities, organizational rules, and the community setting. This means that meaningful CRM plans consider human aspects, workplace culture, and process consistency more than just the technology involved.

It also highlighted that working with and using data across different systems is crucial in retail today. Being aware of data warehousing, ERP systems, and loyalty programs as vital components of CRM provides retailers with practical tips for better engaging their customers. Businesses can rely on these results to inform their decisions on which technologies to purchase and where to prioritize them.

The focus on the division of labor part of the study implies that training staff well and ensuring their roles are clearly understood is critical for CRM to function effectively. Managers must ensure that all employees understand their roles in customer management and are well-prepared to fulfill them. The program also emphasizes that understanding the rules and changes within the industry is crucial for developing effective CRM strategies.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Future work may expand on this framework by examining its application in various retail sectors, larger businesses, or with the aid of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning technologies in CRM. The

research suggests that companies employing this comprehensive CRM approach generally achieve sustained growth, thanks to their improved connections with customers and increased customer satisfaction levels.

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