L'APPROCHE RELATIONNELLE EN MARKETING : SON UTILISATION PAR LES ASSOCIÉS DES CABINETS COMPTABLES AVEC LEUR CLIENTÈLE EN AUDIT

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche étudie l'impact de facteurs personnels et situationnels sur l'utilisation d'une approche marketing relationnelle par les associés avec leurs clients en vérification. Les résultats démontrent que selon leur âge, leur nombre de clients et principalement leur intérêt pour l'approche, les associés tendent à utiliser cette approche relationnelle.

Mots clés : vérification, audit, cabinets comptables, marketing, marketing relationnel.

ABSTRACT

This study investigate some personal and situational factors influencing audit partners' use of the long-term based relational marketing approach in their relationships with clients. The results indicate that partners use this approach based on their age, their number of clients, and mainly their level of interest in using the approach.

Keywords: auditing, audit firms, marketing, relational marketing.

1. Introduction

In marketing, two approaches are proposed to understand and study the provider/client relationship. The relational marketing approach (RMA) is concerned with managing the provider/client relationship based on the long-term development of a satisfactory relationship leading to better communications, increased cooperation to meet the client's needs, and planning future exchanges including multiple services (Ricard 1995). Since audit firms provide various services to their clients, marketing approaches can be applied to gain a better understanding of the auditor/client relationship. As a first step in the investigation of RMA, this study aims at determining audit partners' level of use of RMA and identifying determinant personal factors that would encourage them to use RMA. Investigating auditor/client relationships using a marketing approach could indicate the real marketing strategy audit partners implement with their clients. In addition, this study could provide information to determine if practicing audit partners' marketing strategy could be improved, and the impact this would have on the firm's resources. The results of this study could also contribute to developing a more complete theoretical modeling of auditor/client relationships since RMA provides a different perspective that sheds new light on the reasons that may explain why auditors and clients stay together.

We hypothesize that audit partners use RMA in their relationships with clients because of its beneficial consequences. We expect that partners' age and number of audit clients present a negative impact on their use of RMA. Conversely, partners' interest in RMA has a positive influence on their use of this approach. We also predict that partners' sectoral specialization relates to their decision to use RMA. We sent a questionnaire survey to a large number of practicing audit partners to obtain information on their actual marketing strategy in regards to the last client they audited. The results indicate that partners tend to use RMA in their relationships with clients. Partners' age is positively related to their use of RMA. It appears that older partners are less concerned with recruiting new clients. Partners' interest in RMA shows a positive impact on their use of RMA and the best explanatory power among the four factors studied. Partners' number of audit clients has a positive influence on their use of RMA, indicating a potential decrease in using the transactional relationship approach (TRA) to recruit new clients when partners already have a sufficient number of clients. Our results also indicate a non-significant influence of sectoral specialization on partners' use of RMA.

2. Background

Two approaches concerning auditor/client relationships are defined in marketing: the transactional relationship approach (TRA) and the relational marketing approach (RMA). Although there is no agreement on the definition of RMA (Evans and Laskin 1994), it is accepted that RMA objectives are oriented towards the client (not the transaction), including existing and potential clients, in a long-term perspective. TRA is more concerned with obtaining more transactions, with existing or potential clients, for better profitability in a short-term perspective. RMA (1) focuses on a growth strategy through market penetration and multiple services, (2) uses formal and informal communications with clients to increase their satisfaction, (3) increases cooperation with clients to better meet their needs and ultimately act as business partners, (4) is concerned with the planning of actual and future services, and (5) insures that audit personnel have the competency to deliver higher quality service and provide better problem-solving for the client. Criteria for audit personnel's performance evaluation are thus based on customer satisfaction, which is a major goal of RMA (Ricard 1995). On the other hand, TRA (1) looks for a growth strategy based on a larger number of transactions, (2) uses standard communications for a minimal relationship in order to increase short-term profitability, (3) focuses on the service involved in the actual transaction with little or no anticipation of clients' needs, (4) minimizes cooperation, and (5) evaluates audit personnel according to the costs of services provided and the short-term profitability of the transaction. TRA is mostly oriented towards getting new clients for an increase in the volume of transactions. These two marketing approaches are not mutually exclusive. RMA includes all TRA activities, but the reverse is not true. RMA includes all marketing processes, that is: acquisition of new clients, and management and development of relationships with clients. TRA focuses only on the acquisition of new clients, on a short-term basis.

Gronroos (1984) mentions that customer satisfaction is obtained not only by considering the technical quality of a service but also its functional quality, which refers to "how the service is provided to the client". RMA aims at increasing clients' loyalty. Because of greater client stability, auditors generate higher profits by an increase in the volume of transactions, an increase in multiple services (Abdel-Khalik 1990), a decrease in the contested lowballing strategy (Whittington et al. 1995), a decrease in the need to look for new clients which is up to five times more costly than keeping existing clients (Bernstel, 2002), and a better reputation because of greater customer satisfaction (Broadwith and Peters 1995). RMA also implies a mutual trusting relationship between partners and their clients (Crosby et al.

1990). The need for integrity and competency of the audit personnel providing the service is thus dramatically increased since it becomes the foundation of the relationship (e.g., Ricard 1995). This trust would also decrease the relationship's risk for clients (De Brentani and Ragot 1996).

3.   Development of hypotheses

RMA implementation mostly depends on partners' willingness and ability to induce their clients to enter such a relationship (Perrien et al. 1992). Implementing RMA implies organizational changes for audit firms, mostly concerned with human resources management. More competent, better motivated and more stable human resources are necessary (Bitner 1995). Individual performance evaluation would then include qualitative criteria, such as customer satisfaction (Berry et al. 1989) and client turnover rate. In addition, the individuals accountable for direct relationships with clients would have greater decisional power to consolidate the relationship (Perrien et al. 1992). Despite its management costs, because of its favorable consequences, as mentioned earlier, RMA appears to be more appropriate for all partner/client relationships. Even if partners do not know the technical term or definition of RMA (Elbekkali and Pilote 2000), they could use various dimensions inherent in the concept, recognizing the practical advantages of this approach. The first hypothesis is:

> H1:   Audit partners are more likely than not to use the relational marketing approach in their relationships with clients.

It would be inappropriate to categorize all clients in the same group and try to use RMA with all of them (Perrien and Ricard 1995). Partners are directly accountable for managing their clients' portfolios (Hooks et al. 1994). Partners could tailor their marketing approach to each client based on a cost/benefit analysis. Selecting clients for the appropriate use of RMA should be done cautiously (Kalawani and Nayaranda 1995). There are certain factors that would drive partners' choices. For a first investigation of these factors, we limit this study to certain personal or audit situational characteristics that could influence partners' decisions. Partners' age, interest in using RMA, number of audit clients, and audit sectoral specialization could influence their choice of RMA. Ricard (1995) found a negative relationship between managers' age and their use of RMA for managers in the banking sector. More conservative older managers would tend to avoid new marketing approaches and choose a more traditional approach. Similarly, older audit partners would tend to favor a more traditional marketing approach, that is, the transactional relational approach (TRA).

Consequently, we predict a negative relationship between partners' age and their use of RMA. The related hypothesis is:

> H2: Audit partners' age presents a negative relationship to their use of the relational marketing approach with their clients.

Partners are members of audit firms that tend to impose their organizational culture (Webster 1990) using integration of members with similar values to the firm or socialization that modifies members' personal values (Pratt and Beaulieu 1992). On the other hand, partners bring to their firms their own beliefs and values (John and Hiltebeitel 1995). As discussed earlier, partners may have a free choice in implementing their preferred marketing approach. Partners' own preferences about RMA could drive their choice. Partners interested in using RMA would favor this approach in their relationships with clients. Accordingly, we hypothesize a positive relationship between partners' interest in RMA and their use of this marketing approach. The hypothesis is:

> H3: Audit partners' interest in the relational marketing approach presents a positive relationship to their use of this approach with their clients.

Partners with more experience as audit partners would have a more complete client portfolio. More experienced partners have simply had more time than less experienced partners to obtain new clients and regain clients that have changed auditors. In addition, more experienced partners have had more opportunities to get known and develop a reputation among their peers, which allows them to attract new clients or retain existing clients more easily. Accordingly, these more experienced partners have to provide services to a larger number of clients, each of whom requires a minimum amount of their time. The total amount of time available for a partner to provide services is obviously limited. However, from those partners who use it, RMA demands more time to meet its requirements. For example, providing more complete communication with a client and developing multiple services for a client (Ricard 1995) are some RMA activities that require more time. Because of their time limitations and larger number of clients, more experienced partners would be unable to or would tend not to use RMA. Consequently, we predict a negative relationship between partners' number of audit clients and their use of RMA. The related hypothesis is stated as:

> H4: Partners' number of audit clients presents a negative relationship to their use of the relational marketing approach with their clients.

Each client displays characteristics that may impact on its relationship with its audit partner. Clients' activities would influence its business (Palmrose 1988) and audit risk (Brumfield et al. 1983). Clients' development stage would provide more or less opportunities for partners to provide multiple services (Ricard 1995). Also, clients' information technology

would require various competencies or services from their auditors (Dongxin and Armitage 1996). Accordingly, partners choose clients they feel more comfortable working with and develop a specialization among clients because of more affinity or better audit knowledge. Some categories of clients could be more suited to the use of RMA. For example, clients in a specific sector of activities, such as those in ebusiness, would present higher business risks. These clients could drive partners to reject the use of RMA because of the shorter expected relationship. We hypothesize that partners' sectoral specialization would impact on their decision to implement RMA. The last hypothesis is:

> H5:   Audit partners' sectoral specialization influences their use of the relational marketing approach with their clients.

4.   Research methodology

4.1   Measurement

Measurement of all factors is presented in Table 1. Measurement of partners' use of RMA is obtained through single and multidimensional measures. The single measure asks directly for partners' perception of their use of RMA with their last audited client. The question is preceded by a detailed description of RMA to insure that all partners know not only the technical name of the approach but also its marketing characteristics and implications. The question asked refers to the last client partners audited. We assumed that referring to a specific audit would provide better information on partners' real use of RMA (Ricard 1995). The single measure is on an analogical bipolar scale, more precise than a Likert scale (DeVellis 1991), ranging from totally disagree (0) to totally agree (8) (e.g., Judge et al. 1999; Blanchette et al. 2002). We also measure partners' use of RMA using a multi-dimensional construct proposed by Ricard (1995). The four dimensions represent the key elements of the definition of RMA: (1) real length of the relationship, (2) willingness to pursue the relationship, (3) quantity of multiple services, and (4) cooperation[1] between partners and clients (Smith 1997). Real length of the relationship is measured using a single direct question to partners and asking for the actual number of months the relationship has lasted. Two questions, based on partners' perceptions, measure the willingness to pursue the

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[1] Cooperation incorporates various concepts that have been proposed to define RMA: communication between auditors and their clients, frequency of auditors' visits to clients, interdependence between auditors and their clients, and commitment of auditors to their clients (Ganesan 1994; Fontenot and Wilson 1997; Paun 1997; Smith 1997).

relationship. Partners' willingness to pursue the relationship and clients' willingness to pursue the relationship are two different perspectives. We measure what partners perceive is their willingness to pursue the relationship with clients and what partners perceive is the clients' willingness to pursue the relationship with partners. Ricard (1995) measured only managers' willingness to pursue the relationship with clients. We improved on Ricard's instrument by using both perspectives, providing a more complete understanding of the concept. One question is used to measure the quantity of multiple services, which refers to actual and potential services. Cooperation between partners and clients is obtained in a similar manner as the dimension "willingness to pursue the relationship". The first question measures partners' perception of their cooperation with clients. The second question measures partners' perception of clients' cooperation with partners. All of these dimensions are measured on an analogical bipolar scale ranging from totally disagree (0) to totally agree (8). The multi-dimensional construct can be compared to the single measure. Ricard (1995) and Blanchette et al. (2002) used this dichotomous measurement approach to increase the validity of the results.

Place Table 1 here

Four personal characteristics are measured. Partners' age is directly obtained in number of years. Partners' interest in using RMA is evaluated by a direct question asking for partners' perceptions regarding their interest in managing their clients' portfolios using RMA. Partners answered on an analogical bipolar scale similar to those described above. The last three measures are provided directly by partners: their number of audit clients, their number of years of experience as a partner, and their audit sectoral specialization. Finally, demographic information is also obtained on gender and language (French-speaking, English-speaking, other) that have been shown to potentially impact on the variables studied (Ricard 1995).

4.2 Participants

The objective of this study is to gather information on actual practicing audit partners. The largest possible number of practicing partners managing audit clients' portfolios should be questioned. We obtained the cooperation of the Order of Chartered Accountants of Québec (OCAQ) in Canada (Robson 1997). There were 1,044 partners in the initial population. The sample size of participants necessary to achieve statistical power was calculated from Hair et

al. (1995), resulting in 85 partners[2]. Since we used a questionnaire survey, the expected response rate enabled us to determine if the initial population was large enough to achieve the required sample. Similar studies in marketing accounting services had response rates between 24.3% and 35.4% (e.g., Panitz and Bayou 1993). Taking the lowest response rate of 24.3% for our study would represent 253 answers, which is well over the 85 required.

4.3   Questionnaire survey

Because of partners' potential sensitivity to questions about their perceptions concerning their audit firm, we chose a questionnaire survey which is generally considered to be a relatively unobtrusive instrument for gathering sensitive information (Grawitz 1993). A letter of support from the OCAQ President was included with a covering letter and the questionnaire. The covering letter specified that only partners involved in auditing clients should answer the questionnaire. The letter clearly indicated that partners' anonymity was fully guaranteed. Three professors and twelve partners from audit firms pretested the questionnaire. Following their comments, modifications were made. The final questionnaire was mailed to the 1,044 partners. The first mailing generated 193 valid questionnaires. Two weeks after the first mailing, two phone calls were made successively to remind all partners to complete the questionnaire (no information on the study was obtained by phone). We received 70 other valid questionnaires, for a total of 263 valid questionnaires, well above the minimum 85 questionnaires. The response rate is 33.7%, similar to those of previous studies (e.g., Panitz and Bayou 1993). The 70 questionnaires received following phone calls were considered late answers. The results for non-response bias indicate no significant bias (partners' use of RMA: F = 0.37, p = 0.542; partners' interest in RMA: F = 0.75, p = 0.388).

5.   Results

The demographic data indicate that most of the partners are men (91.3%) and French-speaking (73.8%). The analysis of the demographic characteristics shows no significant impact of these factors on any of the variables investigated. Partners' use of RMA was measured combining three multidimensional instruments (see Table 1). We performed analyses on the consistency of these measures. The two-dimensional measure of willingness

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[2] The number of participants was calculated with four independent variables, a R^2 of 0.13, a confidence level of 0.95, and a power of 0.80.

to pursue the relationship has an average of 6.59 (on a scale of 8.00) for partners' perspective and 6.63 (on a scale of 8.00) for clients' perspective. Both of these results are significantly different from the mid-point level of 4.00 (partners' perspective: $t = 28.91$, $p = 0.000$; clients' perspective: $t = 31.94$, $p = 0.000$). Partners present perceptions of very high willingness for both perspectives. Also, there are no differences between perceived willingness from both perspectives ($t = -0.48$, $p = 0.630$). The two-dimensional measure of willingness to pursue the relationship shows a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74. We conclude that the multidimensional measure is valid. We correlated the two-dimensional measure of willingness to pursue the relationship with the real length of the relationship. The results show a low correlation coefficient (Pearson's correlation = 0.26, $p = 0.000$), indicating little relationship between real length of the relationship and willingness to pursue the relationship. It seems that a longer relationship does not mean greater willingness to pursue the relationship. The two-dimensional measure of cooperation between partners and clients presents an average of 6.07 (on a scale of 8.00) for partners' perspective and 5.95 (on a scale of 8.00) for clients' perspective. These results are significantly different from the mid-point level of 4.00 (partners' perspective: $t = 21.11$, $p = 0.000$; clients' perspective: $t = 17.58$, $p = 0.000$). Partners show perceptions of high cooperation for both perspectives. In addition, there are no differences between perceived cooperation from both perspectives ($t = -1.19$, $p = 0.235$). The two-dimensional measure of cooperation between partners and clients provides a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70, validating the measure.

We tested for the four-dimensional measure of partners' use of RMA, including the real length of the relationship, the two-dimensional measure of willingness to pursue the relationship, the quantity of multiple services, and the two-dimensional measure of cooperation between partners and clients. Results indicate a very small Cronbach's alpha of 0.03. We recalculated the consistency of the instrument while step-wise removing one of the dimensions. The best consistency was obtained by dropping the dimension "real length of the relationship" (Cronbach's alpha of 0.72), validating the measure. Accordingly, the final multi-dimensional measure of partners' use of RMA includes only three dimensions: willingness to pursue the relationship, quantity of multiple services, and cooperation between partners and clients. The multidimensional measure of partners' use of RMA was compared to the single measure. Results show a medium correlation coefficient (Pearson's correlation = 0.55, $p = 0.000$). Consequently, we decided that further analyses should be performed using both single and multidimensional measures of partners' use of RMA.

5.1 Hypotheses

Hypothesis H1 predicts greater use of RMA by audit partners. Partners present an average use of RMA of 6.36 (on a scale of 8.00) for the single measure, indicating that partners consider they use RMA a lot more than not. This level of use is significantly different from the midpoint level (4.00) (t = 26.93, p = 0.000). The multidimensional measure presents an average of 6.28 (on a scale of 8.00), also showing a high level of use of RMA by partners. This measure is significantly different from the midpoint level (4.00) (t = 38.04, p = 0.000). Testing for a difference in averages for the single and multidimensional measures produces no significant differences (t = 1.08, p = 0.281). All specific dimensions composing the multi-dimensional measure of use of RMA show partners' greater use of RMA (willingness to pursue the relationship with an average of 6.61, significantly different from 4.00 (t = 34.07, p = 0.000); quantity of multiple services with an average of 6.22, significantly different from 4.00 (t = 22.39, p = 0.000); and cooperation between partners and clients with an average of 6.01, significantly different from 4.00 (t = 21.91, p = 0.000)). We note that all dimensions' averages are significantly different from each other: willingness to pursue the relationship – quantity of multiple services: t = 3.98, p = 0.000; willingness to pursue the relationship – cooperation between partners and clients: t = 7.54, p = 0.000; and quantity of multiple services – cooperation between partners and clients: t = 2.13, p = 0.034. Since all results show partners' greater use of RMA, hypothesis H1 is supported for both measures of RMA use.

Hypothesis H2 predicts a negative relationship between partners' age and their use of RMA. On average, partners are 46.28 years old. The results of linear regression analyses indicate that partners' age has a significant influence on their use of RMA (single measure: β = 0.181, p = 0.003, R^2 = 0.033; multidimensional measure: β = 0.195, p = 0.002, R^2 = 0.038), with a positive relationship and very low explanatory powers. Hypothesis H2 is rejected because of the opposite direction of the relationship. Using a multivariate analysis, we also tested for the impact of partners' age on the dimensions of partners' use of RMA taken collectively. Results (Table 2) indicate that partners' age relates to all dimensions taken collectively (Pillai's Trace F = 7.49, p = 0.000). All dimensions of partners' use of RMA are significantly influenced by partners' age, except for the willingness to pursue the relationship, which is only marginally influenced (F = 3.07, p = 0.081). However, all explanatory powers are rather weak ($R^2 \leq 0.078$).

Place Table 2 here

The third hypothesis states that partners' interest in using RMA positively influences their use of RMA. Partners' interest in RMA has an average of 6.48, significantly different from 4.00 (t = 35.12, p = 0.000). Partners show a high interest in using RMA. The results of the linear regression analyses indicate a positive influence of partners' interest on their use of RMA for the single measure (β = 0.674, p = 0.000), with good explanatory power (R^2 = 0.454), and for the multidimensional measure (β = 0.351, p = 0.000), with lower explanatory power (R^2 = 0.123). Hypothesis H3 is supported. Results of a multivariate analysis for the dimensions of partners' use of RMA taken collectively show that partners' interest in RMA significantly affects the various dimensions of partners' use of RMA (Table 2) (Pillai's Trace F = 8.74, p = 0.000). The separate results for the dimensions of partners' use of RMA show that they are all significantly influenced by the measure of partners' interest in RMA (all F $\geq$ 14.23, all p = 0.000), except for the real length of the relationship, which displays no significant effect (F = 0.55, p = 0.458). However, all explanatory powers are very weak (all $R^2 \leq$ 0.087). These results support our earlier conclusion regarding acceptance of hypothesis H3.

Hypothesis H4 states that partners' number of audit clients has a negative impact on partners' use of RMA. On average, partners have 23.69 clients. The results of linear regressions show a significant positive influence for both measures of partners' use of RMA but with very low explanatory power (single measure: β = 0.126, p = 0.042, R^2 = 0.016; multidimensional measure: β = 0.121, p = 0.049, R^2 = 0.015). Because the results are in the opposite direction, hypothesis H4 is rejected for both measures. Results of a multivariate analysis (Table 2) indicate no significant impact of partners' number of clients on the dimensions defining partners' use of RMA (F = 1.95, p = 0.103). Thus hypothesis H4 is rejected because of non-significant results.

The last hypothesis H5 predicts an impact of partners' sectoral specialization on their use of RMA. Partners mentioned nine sectors of specialization. Most partners specialize in the services (36.4%) and manufacturing (29.1%) sectors[3]. The results of univariate analyses indicate that, for the single measure of partners' use of RMA, the influence is not significant (F = 1.09, p = 0.370), and for the multidimensional measure, the influence is marginally significant (F = 1.78, p = 0.073). We thus reject hypothesis H5. The results of a multivariate

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[3] Other sectors mentioned were construction (8.8%), retailing (6.9%), wholesale (5.0%), transportation (4.2%), communications and public services (3.4%), agriculture and forest (3.1%), and real estate (3.1%).

analysis present a significant impact of partners' sectoral specialization on the dimensions representing partners' use of RMA (Pillai's Trace F = 1.66, p = 0.009). This impact mainly affects the dimensions "willingness to pursue the relationship" (F = 3.82, p = 0.000) and "cooperation between partners and clients" (F = 1.85, p = 0.061). Analyzing the dimensions of partners' use of RMA would lead us to accept the hypothesis.

6. Discussion

This study explores, for the first time, the use of RMA by audit partners. Partners' perceptions show that they have a high interest in using RMA and use it a lot more than not. Even if partners do not seem to be aware of the technical term or definition of RMA (Elbekkali and Pilote 2000), when informed of the specific characteristics and dimensions included in the concept, partners believe they use these dimensions. Consequently, they use RMA. This interest and use show that partners are able to recognize the practical advantages of this marketing approach. Accordingly, from a practical perspective, audit partners would benefit from being thoroughly informed about RMA. Partners should receive theoretical and practical training in using RMA, including its characteristics, implications for partners, firms' resources, clients, implementation process, potential consequences, and requirements concerning appropriate clients.

The improvements made on the measure instruments employed in this study were appropriate. The two RMA dimensions – cooperation between partners and clients, and willingness to pursue the relationship – that were measured according to both partners' and clients' perspectives presented high consistency and validity. We think that a better measurement can be obtained using these instruments since they account for two different perspectives. On average, partners show very high willingness to pursue the relationship and high cooperation with their clients. In addition, partners believe that clients also present a very high level of willingness to pursue the relationship and high cooperation with their auditors. These results indicate that, in general, partners tend to maintain relationships with clients, supporting the position that seeking new clients is more difficult and costly than keeping existing clients (Bernstel, 2002). Future research could investigate if clients' perceptions of their willingness to pursue the relationship and their cooperation with partners are in agreement with partners' perceptions.

The measurement of various dimensions of partners' use of RMA provided a multidimensional instrument. We note that the dimensions retained were those measuring

partners' perceptions: willingness to pursue the relationship, quantity of multiple services, and cooperation between partners and clients. The real length of the relationship, which is the number of months the relationship lasted, was excluded. The four initial dimensions were proposed by Ricard (1995) for managers working in the banking sector. It seems that the appropriate composition of the multidimensional measure is context-dependent. It would be inappropriate for future research to fix these dimensions based on those of different situations. The consistency and validity of the multidimensional measure should be investigated in future studies depending on the particular context. In this study, partners estimate that willingness to pursue the relationship is the most important dimension in their use of RMA (6.61 on a scale of 8.00). Quantity of multiple services is the next most important dimension (6.22), while cooperation between partners and clients is the least important (6.01). However, the difference between the last two dimensions is barely significant (p = 0.034). Willingness to pursue the relationship clearly shows partners' greater use of RMA. In addition, the single and multi-dimensional measures of partners' use of RMA were not highly correlated and sometimes led to different conclusions. These results question the purpose of using these measures, their mutual appropriateness, context dependency and validity. Our conclusions contradict Ricard's (1995) on the use of both measures. We suggest that other dimensions may be investigated to improve the multidimensional measure, such as audit personnel's competency and trust between partners and clients.

The results for hypothesis H1 indicate that partners tend to use RMA a lot more than not in their relationships with clients. Not knowing the technical definition or the dimensions involved in this approach does not prevent partners from implementing most of the dimensions defining RMA. Partners' common sense and experience appear to drive them to use some dimensions of this approach. The beneficial consequences of the approach seem to greatly appeal to audit partners. Again we conclude that partners should improve their knowledge of RMA to benefit fully from all the advantages of this marketing approach.

Hypothesis H2 states that partners' age impacts negatively on their use of RMA. Ricard (1995) found that older managers in the banking sector display less use of RMA because of their conservatism in choosing a marketing approach. We assumed that audit partners would react similarly. Our results contradict Ricard's (1995) findings: we found a positive influence of partners' age on their use of RMA. Older partners tend to use RMA more than younger partners. We do not suggest that older partners are less conservative. We think that the difference in context between banking and audit firms is a more likely explanation for this difference between the studies. Older partners have acquired a more complete portfolio of

clients than younger partners. Older partners may concentrate more of their efforts on that asset while younger partners would have to focus more on acquiring new clients and thus tend to implement TRA. Since it is much more costly to seek new clients than to keep existing clients (Bernstel, 2002), older partners choose the cost-effective approach and implement dimensions of RMA to maintain their clients' portfolio.

The multivariate analysis indicates that three out of four dimensions of partners' use of RMA are significantly influenced by partners' age. Only the willingness to pursue the relationship presents a marginally significant impact. We also notice that the measure instruments, single or multidimensional, provide identical conclusions leading to the rejection of hypothesis H2. However, both measures show relationships with low explanatory powers ($R^2 \leq 0.038$). If partners' age influences all dimensions of their use of RMA, there are other factors that might provide a better explanation of partners' use of RMA. Future research should investigate other factors, such as organizational or market and client-related factors.

The third hypothesis tests for the influence of partners' interest in RMA on their use of RMA. The results show hypothesis H3 is supported with good explanatory power, indicating that no other factors take precedence over partners' interest in using RMA. Consequently, if audit firms would like their partners to implement RMA with their clients, these firms should focus their efforts on developing partners' interest in RMA. Discussions, conferences and training concerning the advantages of this marketing approach may be the best means to achieve this objective. Future research should investigate the appropriateness and efficiency of these means. The multivariate analysis supports the significant influence of partners' interest on their use of RMA. Only the dimension "real length of the relationship" is not significant. It appears that partners' interest in RMA does not affect the real length of the relationship partners have with their clients. Even with little interest in RMA, partners can develop a long-term relationship with their clients. This conclusion supports the affirmation that RMA and TRA are not mutually exclusive. TRA can also lead to long-term relationships. However, all other dimensions, including willingness to pursue the relationship, quantity of multiple services, and cooperation between partners and clients, are highly related to partners' interest in RMA. These dimensions seem to form the basis for using RMA.

Results for hypothesis H4 reject the negative impact of partners' number of clients on their use of RMA. In fact, we found that the number of clients had a positive influence. It seems that partners with a larger number of clients tend to protect this asset and focus on them. They are less concerned or have less time to recruit new clients. Accordingly, these partners would use more RMA. However, the very low explanatory powers imply that other

factors could provide a better explanation of partners' use of RMA. The multivariate analysis generates different conclusions, indicating a non-significant influence for the number of clients. When analyzed collectively, the dimensions of partners' use of RMA show different conclusions than the single or multidimensional measures. The importance of the choice of an appropriate measure is again underlined.

For the last hypothesis (H5) tested, we obtained different conclusions depending on the measure analyzed. The single measure of partners' use of RMA leads to a rejection of the impact of partners' sectoral specialization because of non-significant results. The multi-dimensional measure of the use of RMA provides marginally significant results which lead to the non-rejection of hypothesis H5. Finally, the multivariate analysis performed based on the collective dimensions of partners' use of RMA results in a significant impact of partners' sectoral specialization on their use of RMA. However, only the dimension "willingness to pursue the relationship" is found to be significantly influenced by partners' sectoral specialization. The dimension "cooperation between partners and clients" shows a marginally significant influence while the other two dimensions are not significantly impacted. These different conclusions depending on the measure chosen are in agreement with and extend our previous discussion on the choice of an appropriate measure.

Generally, from the multivariate analyses, we can identify one dimension that is significantly influenced by all the factors investigated, that is, partners' willingness to pursue the relationship. This is contrasted to the dimension "real length of the relationship" which is not significantly influenced by any of the factors (except for age). These remarks support the previous analysis regarding the measure's consistency that excluded the dimension "real length of the relationship" from the multidimensional measure of partners' use of RMA. We also notice that all factors display at best low explanatory powers, except for partners' interest in RMA. There must be other factors that would provide a better explanation of partners' high use of RMA. Factors related to the audit firm, such as its size and decision structure, audit budget time and audit personnel management, ethical culture, and other partners' influence, could be investigated. There are also factors related to clients, such as size, business risk, industry or sector, development potential, and financial situation, which could explain partners' choice of RMA. In addition, competition in the audit market and the origin of the audit could influence partners' choices. Future research should explore these factors to provide a better understanding of partner/client relationships.

7. Conclusion

This study explores audit partners' use of the relational marketing approach with their audit clients. While previous studies examined changes of auditors, we investigate the reasons that explain why auditors and clients stay together. We hypothesize that partners tend to use RMA more often than not and that some partners' personal and situational characteristics influence their use of RMA: age and number of clients would show negative impacts on partners' use of RMA, partners' interest in RMA would display a positive influence on their use of RMA, and their sectoral specialization would also have an impact on the use of RMA. From a questionnaire survey, we used various measures to gather information to test the hypotheses.

Our results show that partners tend to use RMA a lot in their relationships with clients. Contrary to expectations, partners' age is positively related to their use of RMA. Older partners are less concerned with recruiting new clients and focus on their existing clients by using RMA. Partners' interest in RMA shows the best explanatory power among the four factors studied. As expected, we found that it had a positive impact on partners' use of RMA. Contrary to expectations, partners' number of audit clients had a positive influence on their use of RMA, indicating a potential decrease in using TRA to recruit new clients when partners already have a large number of clients. Our results also indicate a not-significant influence of sectoral specialization on partners' use of RMA. Finally, we conclude that the choice of a measure instrument is context-dependent and critical for drawing valid conclusions. Further research should explore other factors related to audit firms, clients, and audit market to provide a better explanation of partners' use of RMA.

This study has some limitations. The population chosen – auditors from a French-speaking Canadian province – may jeopardize the generalizability of the results; other populations should be investigated. The use of a structured questionnaire survey limits the detail that other methodological approaches may have provided, such as direct interviews. Also, although RMA is a long-term strategy, no longitudinal information was obtained to study the potential evolution of partners in regard to RMA.

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Table 1
Measurement of factors

Factors	Measurement
Partners' personal factors	
Age	Number of years
Number of audit clients	Number
Sectoral specialization	Identified by partners
Partners' interest in RMA	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
Partners' use of Relational Marketing Approach	
Single measure (Ricard, 1995)	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
Multidimensional measure (4 dimensions) (Ricard, 1995)	
• Real length of the relationship	Number of months
• Willingness to pursue the relationship (2 dimensions)	
• Perspective from clients	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
• Perspective from partners	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
• Quantity of multiple services	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
• Cooperation between partners and clients (2 dimensions)	
• Perspective from clients	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
• Perspective from partners	Analogical scale, 0 to 8
Demographic characteristics	
Gender	Women, men
Language	French, English, Other

Table 2
Results for hypotheses

Variables		Multivariate analysis				
		Pillai's Trace		Dependent variables		
Independent	Dependent	F	p	F	p	R^2 adj.
Age (H2)	Global	7.49	0.000**			
	Real length of the relationship			22.88	0.000**	0.078
	Willingness to pursue the relationship			3.07	0.081*	0.008
	Quantity of multiple services			8.12	0.005**	0.027
	Cooperation between partners and clients			6.60	0.011**	0.021
Partners' interest in RMA (H3)	Global	8.74	0.000**			
	Real length of the relationship			0.55	0.458	-0.002
	Willingness to pursue the relationship			14.23	0.000**	0.048
	Quantity of multiple services			22.05	0.000**	0.075
	Cooperation between partners and clients			25.68	0.000**	0.087
Partners' number of clients (H4)	Global	1.95	0.103			
	Real length of the relationship			2.30	0.131	0.005
	Willingness to pursue the relationship			6.79	0.010**	0.022
	Quantity of multiple services			1.13	0.288	0.001
	Cooperation between partners and clients			3.47	0.064*	0.009
Partners' sectoral specialization (H5)	Global	1.66	0.009**			
	Real length of the relationship			0.94	0.494	-0.002
	Willingness to pursue the relationship			3.82	0.000**	0.089
	Quantity of multiple services			1.00	0.438	0.000
	Cooperation between partners and clients			1.85	0.061*	0.028

* Significant at 0.10, ** Significant at 0.05.