



Discussion Paper

Sustainability-Oriented Customer Relationship Management - Current State of Research and Future Research Opportunities

by

Anna-Luisa Müller



Europäische Union
„Investition in Ihre Zukunft“
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regionale Entwicklung

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1 Introduction

A recent and rapidly growing trend in management has been to place the customer at the centre of corporate strategy (Martin 2010), based on the insight that customers are the basis of company profitability (Gupta et al. 2004; Hogan et al. 2002). So-called customer-centric approaches have started to redefine customer relationship management (CRM), stipulating that the ability to sense and respond to customer concerns can increase company profit and is therefore essential to its survival (Crittenden et al. 2011). Current mega-trends such as demographic changes, digitalization and sustainability (Lubin and Esty 2010) influence the mind-set and behaviour of customers. In particular, growing concerns with the scarcity of natural resources, environmental degradation, and social inequalities have led to consumers becoming aware of the impact that current patterns of production, consumption and living are having on future sustainability (Silvius and Schipper 2010). With customers seeking to play a role in the transformation towards more sustainable lifestyles, companies need to respond to these developments, e. g. by cultivating markets that balance profitability with environmental and social responsibility (Graham and Havlick 1999). One of the key driving forces in this movement is the consumer group LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability), which represents an emerging culture advocating personal health and environmental sustainability in the marketplace (Ray and Anderson 2000). Companies hence need to serve the new and constantly evolving needs of the growing number of customers who deeply care about social and environmental issues, who are willing to pay more for sustainable products, and to act as role models in educating wider society towards a better future.

In literature, various approaches have been taken to explore the trends in CRM and sustainability. To date, however, there has been very little research that provides an integrated perspective on the underlying mechanisms that shape sustainability-oriented CRM activities and that analyses how customers and

sustainability interdigitate (Basu and Palazzo 2008). Similarly, research dealing with the comprehensive concept of sustainability-oriented CRM is limited (Ruhwinkel and Wilde 2011). Hence, the aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical foundation for the current state of research on sustainability-oriented CRM, which we define as the holistic integration of economic, environmental, and social sustainability issues, and the core areas of CRM, i.e. marketing, sales, and services. Below, we introduce two research questions that will contribute to a better understanding of the body of knowledge regarding sustainability-oriented CRM:

RQ 1: How can the findings from existing research contribute to the understanding of sustainability-oriented CRM?

RQ 2: Which opportunities for future research can be identified in current research?

To answer these questions, we follow the accepted research process for literature reviews (Cooper and Hedges 1994; Tranfield et al. 2003; Webster and Watson 2002). We believe that the growing number of publications in this field need to be analysed and synthesized to identify research gaps that can be addressed in future research (Webster and Watson 2002). This process typically includes the following phases: (i) problem formulation, (ii) identification of relevant literature, (iii) evaluation of identified literature, (iv) analysis, interpretation, and discussion, and (v) public presentation. Having formulated the problem of interest by raising research question *RQ 1* (phase i), in Section 2, the main criteria for the analysis (i.e. the core areas of CRM and the dimensions of sustainability) are deduced from the theoretical foundations of CRM and sustainability. In Section 3, we elaborate on our evaluation of the literature in order to identify existing CRM research that has focused on sustainability (phases ii and iii). We then compile the key findings regarding sustainability-oriented CRM and analyse the identified literature according to the criteria (phase iv) in Section 4. The results of this process are presented in [table A in the web appendix](#) (phase v). Moreover, the development and current state of related research is analysed with regard to opportunities for future studies in Section 5 (*RQ 2*). In Section 6, we briefly summarize the key findings.

2 Theoretical Foundations

Both CRM and sustainability are multifaceted constructs, whose nature and origin are further elaborated below. We start by defining CRM (2.1) and continue with a detailed explanation of sustainability (2.2). Finally, the definition of sustainability-oriented CRM is presented (2.3).

2.1 Foundations of customer relationship management

The idea of CRM goes back to relationship marketing, which was introduced by Berry (1983), Christopher et al. (1991), Gronroos (2000), and Morgan and Hunt (1994). In the past two decades, marketing has evolved from a product- and transaction-oriented process to a customer- and relationship-oriented approach, with increasing focus on long-term customer relationships, both in research and in practice (Elmuti et al. 2009; Håkansson 1982; Reinartz et al. 2004; Storbacka 1994). With the development of IT and the focus on the customer – basic relationship marketing deals with all stakeholders, not only customers – CRM has emerged from a synthesis of relationship marketing and different research streams within marketing and business information systems. Newly available data, technologies, and organizational forms have contributed to this development (Boulding et al. 2005; Payne and Frow 2006).

There is no single definition of CRM and, hence, the definition depends on the perspective taken. From the relationship perspective, CRM focuses on establishing, maintaining, and enhancing long-term relationships with customers (Jayachandran et al. 2005), and can be defined as “the overall process of building and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior customer value and satisfaction” (Kotler and Armstrong 2004, p. 16). As a business strategy, “CRM is a customer-focused business strategy that aims at increasing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty by offering more responsive and customized services to each customer” (Croteau and Li 2003). It is also a strategic initiative intended to create improved shareholder value via profitable and long-term customer relationships by aligning the activities of sales, marketing, and service departments, and by employing modern IT systems (Goodhue et al. 2002; Payne and Frow 2005). The objective of profitable and long-term customer relationships requires those relationships to be treated as assets or investments that

need to be actively managed in order to maximize corporate value (Gneiser 2010). All CRM activities and decisions must therefore be consistently linked to the goal of maximizing long-term shareholder value (Rao and Bharadwaj 2008). Furthermore, the strategic direction for customer activities needs to be defined (strategic CRM processes), customer information needs to be consolidated and analysed systematically (analytical CRM processes), and the central operational CRM processes in the core areas of CRM, i.e. marketing, sales, and service, have to be synchronized (Leußer et al. 2011). Of all of the central tasks of CRM, the operational CRM processes in the core areas of marketing, sales, and service are of special interest for this paper, as they are the focal points of the customer's relationship with the company.

2.2 Nature and origin of sustainability

There are multiple definitions of sustainability (cf. Hoffman and Bazerman 2007), but the one most commonly used stems from the Brundtland Commission and defines sustainability as a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). The preservation of economic, ecological, and social systems for the benefit of future generations represents the three main “pillars” of sustainability and is known as the “triple bottom line” concept (Elkington 1997). The Center for Sustainable Enterprise (2010) considers the pillars indirectly when defining sustainability as “a way of doing business that creates profit while avoiding harm to people and the planet”. This definition conceptualizes sustainability in terms of the reduction of negative externalities and neglects the creation of positive effects (e.g. improving living conditions). In this article, we follow Elkington (1997) and view sustainability as the triple bottom line of economic profitability, respect for the environment, and social responsibility (Boyd 2001; Johnson 2009). These three dimensions of sustainability can be viewed as the basis for integral market-oriented resources, capabilities, and competitive advantage (Hunt and Morgan 1995; Slater and Narver 1995). The environmental dimension predominantly focuses on preservation of natural resources (Bansal 2005; Hart 1995), while the social dimension describes the need for firms to consider their impact on society and to address issues such as community relations, education support, and charitable contributions (Elkington

1997; Wood 1991). Other topics related to social responsibility include corporate giving and community involvement, as well as the company's position on issues involving women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and disabled individuals (Bhattacharya and Sen 2001). The economic dimension centres on value creation and the financial impact of a firm's sustainability activities (Bansal 2005). These dimensions are connected in different ways and there are various beliefs regarding those connections. Therefore, increased knowledge and awareness of the connections and interactions among these three "pillars" of sustainability, and of all of the issues encompassed by the concept of sustainability, is needed (Hutchin and Sutherland 2008). The interrelatedness of the dimensions also means that terms such as green, environmental, sustainable, ethical, or ecological might be used interchangeably, even though they can have varying connotations for different audiences (Peattie 1995). Generally, "sustainability initiatives run the gamut from changing the façade (advertising and packaging that promotes green products/services) to radical changes in business procedures (marketing focus, where facilities are located, how products/services are delivered), and how employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders are treated throughout the process" (Closs et al. 2011, p. 101). Hence, sustainability-related activities within corporations can be categorised into the following fields: production (i.e. logistics, technical decisions), product (i.e. products or services and their effect throughout their life cycle), and management (Dyllick 2003, p. 241). In the regarded context of sustainability-oriented CRM, we focus on two of these fields, "product" and "management".

2.3 The concept of sustainability-oriented CRM

The basic idea of sustainability-oriented CRM is integrating the economic, environmental, and social sustainability issues in the core areas of CRM, i.e. marketing, sales, and service. Since both trends (CRM and sustainability) are currently shaping business strategies, changing operations, and fostering competition, regarding them in an integrated manner is meaningful. Both building blocks contribute essentially to the comprehensive concept: Sustainability provides the fundamental values and strategy issues that are rarely addressed within CRM, which contributes established processes and structures (Ruhwinkel 2013). Making an allowance for sustainability issues in CRM strategy and in the

CRM processes leads to differentiation from competitors and helps ensure the continuity of business operations, as the ecological and societal limits are considered (Ruhwinkel 2013). Sustainability-oriented CRM, therefore, means considering economic, ecological, and social targets when establishing and maintaining long-term profitable customer relations. More specifically, it is the aim of sustainability-oriented CRM to increase consumer awareness of corporate sustainability issues and to attract and retain sustainability-conscious customers. Being close to customers and understanding their needs through all phases of the relationship requires efficient and effective operational CRM processes in the core areas marketing, sales, and services.

In order to understand sustainability-oriented CRM, it is also crucial to distinguish it from other consumer-focused sustainability issues, such as sustainable consumption (Symposium Sustainable Consumption 1994), customer-centric sustainability (Sheth et al. 2011), market-based sustainability (Hult 2011), market-focused sustainability (Ketchen et al. 2007), and sustainable marketing (van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996). Most of these concepts are marketing-based and refer to the impact of marketing actions on the environmental, personal, and economic well-being of the consumer. In the context of sustainable marketing, “sustainable” refers to the continuity of the business and the duration of the customer relationship (Belz 2001). In addition to these rather broad concepts, there are specific sustainability-oriented customer constructs such as green consumption and socially conscious consumer behaviour. Regarding the ecological dimension, a green consumer is defined as anyone whose purchase behaviour is influenced by environmental concerns (Shrum et al. 1995). Green consumption deals with purchase decisions made by consumers, based at least partly on environmental criteria (Peattie 1995). Green brand image is defined as “a set of perceptions of a brand in a consumer’s mind that is linked to environmental commitments and environmental concerns” (Chen 2010). Green consumer satisfaction describes the fulfilment of some environmental need, goal, or desire that is pleasurable for the customer (Chang and Fong 2010). Socially conscious consumer behaviour (Roberts 2003) is consumer behaviour undertaken with the intention of having a positive (or less negative) effect on other people, and relates to issues such as labour rights and the impacts of businesses on the communities in which they

operate (Pepper et al. 2009). Ethical socially responsible consumer behaviour is, however, defined as “tak(ing) into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption” (Webster 1975). All of these concepts – in contrast to sustainability-oriented CRM – address only individual elements and do not provide a comprehensive perspective on all of the core areas of CRM and all of the dimensions of sustainability.

3 Identification and Description of Relevant Literature

3.1 Identification

Like other literature examinations (e.g. Fifka 2012), the following review uses a multi-dimensional classification to structure the literature. We conducted a focused web search of the online databases Proquest, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) using “sustainable/sustainability” or “environmental”, “green” or “social”, and “customer/consumer” as search terms, as well as title and abstract as search fields. These search terms are relatively broad and were chosen because a more restricted search using the terms “CRM/customer relationship management” and “sustainability/sustainable” led to only a few relevant results. Our search led to 246 core results. As our search procedure still yielded some un-related articles, ranging from those dealing with economic-focused topics such as a “sustainable competitive advantage” or very specialized sustainability-projects in industries such as construction or tourism, we screened the resulting hits for relevance. Our screening involved checking each result to see if its context focused on both customer-company or consumer-company and sustainability (based on the definition of the triple bottom line). We also conducted forward and backward reference searches. The review, therefore, does not only focus on journals from the CRM discipline, but includes, to the degree possible, journals in which studies on sustainability- and customer-related topics have been published (e.g. Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Cleaner Production, and Business Strategy and the Environment). Concerning the research approach, not only empirical approaches but also conceptual articles (theoretical, normative, and prescriptive work) have been included in order to gain a comprehensive perspective on the topic of interest. Furthermore, only studies

published in journals in the English language were considered. These delineations are necessary to be able to manage the large body of literature available. At the same time, it is important to note that this study does not claim to be fully comprehensive. Although every effort has been made to include all existing studies of relevance, it is likely that studies exist of which the authors are not aware. Finally, the scope of articles is limited to the ones published before September 2013. An overview of the 101 studies examined is presented [in the web appendix \(table A\)](#).

3.2 Description of relevant literature

The selected 101 articles can be described in terms of the analysed [characteristics](#), the research approach, the samples examined, and the chronological development (numbers in brackets represent the number and percentage of papers identified).

3.2.1 Characteristics of sustainable consumers

[The research that we reviewed examines the characteristics of sustainable consumers and describes](#) different aspects of customer behaviour (e.g. Faiers et al. (2007); Laroche et al. (2001); Lee (2008); Pedersen and Neergaard (2006); Roberts (1996); Tanner and Kast (2003)). Regarding the ecological dimension of sustainability, there are findings concerning the green consumer, the construct of green consumption, the willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly products, and the individuals' idealism to internalize some of the negative externalities from the production of the green goods they buy (Darnall et al. 2012; Eriksson 2008). Those consumers who are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products are likely to be female, married, and to have at least one child living at home. They place high importance on security and warm relationships with others, and they often consider ecological issues when making a purchase (Laroche et al. 2001). Consumers are thus assumed to take an active part in solving environmental problems, e.g. by choosing environmentally-friendly products and living in ways that are environmentally conscious (Rokka and Uusitalo 2008). Regarding the social dimension of sustainability, research suggests a link between a company's social initiatives and positive consumer responses in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Brown and Dacin 1997; Ellen et al. 2000; Handelmann and Arnold 1999). Examinations of the effects of active

engagement by consumers in social consumption (Briceno and Stagl 2006) finds positive associations between social initiatives and price, perceived quality, corporate attitudes, and purchase intentions. However, research also suggests that consumers will punish firms that are perceived as insincere or manipulative in their social involvement (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006). Henion and Kinnear (1976) and Webster (1975) postulate that consumers concerned about sustainability possess certain psychological characteristics to a significantly higher degree than other consumers (e.g. they are more active and socially involved than the average consumer). In addition, the effects of values and beliefs on the importance of sustainable corporate performance and on the buying behaviour of customers are evaluated, e.g. by Collins et al. (2007).

The results of these studies uncover a multitude of factors that can influence customer behaviour in the context of sustainability. Most of the approaches (42 papers; (42%)) do not deal with a specific differentiation of customer behaviour but rather deal with the comprehensive construct. Our analysis shows that customers' perceptions (15; (15%)), the identification of sustainable customers (8; (8%)), customer satisfaction (5; (5%)), and customers' willingness to pay (4; (4%)), are also important topics of interest. 17 papers (17%) treat other minor topics and 10 (10%) papers cannot be clearly classified into one category. As presented above, we find that *a majority of the articles on the characteristics of sustainable consumers only focus on one of the dimensions of sustainability (Finding 1)*.

3.2.2. Research approach

Most studies examining consumers' perceptions of socially and ecologically responsible behaviour are of an experimental nature (Singh et al. 2008). However, due to the complexity and multidimensional nature of both sustainability and customer projects, the results of these studies (e.g. Brown and Dacin 1997; Handelmann and Arnold 1999; Mohr et al. 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2001) may not represent a real world context. For a comprehensive view on the topic of interest, we also examine conceptual approaches. Some conceptual research has already dealt with similar integrations and the resulting opportunities for research. Cronin et al. (2010) study the integration of marketing, management, and

operations literature, and generate an investigative framework that identifies the various stakeholders potentially impacted by the environmental efforts of a firm. They propose a number of green marketing research opportunities and research questions by grouping the articles into three broad thematic categories (green performance, green strategy, and the green consumer) and relevant sub-categories. Chabowski et al. (2011) indicate that the topics of citizenship, stakeholder theory, corporate performance, and the triple bottom line are integral sustainability research areas. In addition, their results identify five topics required for examining sustainability in marketing contexts: external-internal focus, social-environmental emphasis, legal-ethical-discretionary intent, marketing assets, and financial performance. Our study includes 59 (59%) papers on empirical research and 38 conceptual (38%) approaches. Three papers (3%) combine empirical and conceptual research and one paper (1%) cannot be classified into either of these categories.

3.2.3 Samples examined

Customer- and sustainability-related research is more prominent in some industries and [geographic](#) regions than in others. Based on the findings of Darnall et al. (2012), studies on consumer purchasing decisions are predominantly conducted in the area of organic certified products (Perrini et al. 2009), eco-labelled food (Loureiro et al. 2001), sustainable forest products (Teisl et al. 2002), and energy labelled electrical appliances (Sammer and Wüstenhagen 2006). As there are no agreed upon criteria for what constitutes a green product (Young et al. 2010), the term includes organic (Beckmann 2007) and fair trade products (Galarraga Gallastegui and Markandya 2000), as well as locally grown or produced, unpacked, seasonal, recycled, more durable, and energy efficient products (Darnall et al. 2012). The industries in our sample which focus on customer- and sustainability-related issues include the grocery industry (Anselmsson und Johannsen 2007; Ellen et al. 2000; Klein and Dawar 2004; Megicks et al. 2008), retail (Collins et al. 2007; Oppewal et al. 2006; Tanner and Kast 2003), energy technology (Kaenzig and Wüstenhagen 2008), and pharmaceutical and medical (Lindgreen et al. 2008; Vágási et al. 2003). [In terms of geographic divisions, we find that the vast majority of the examined studies were conducted in Europe \(31 papers; 31%\), followed by the US \(11; 11%\). Only](#)

a few studies were conducted in the Asian Pacific region (8; 8%), South America (2; 2%), and Africa (1; 1%). Most of the conceptual papers (35 paper, 35%) do not look at specific samples and the remaining thirteen papers (13 paper, 13%) cannot be linked to a specific country as they treat e. g. a certain industry or cover a cross-national or even international perspective.

3.2.4 Chronological development of research

Since sustainable business policies and practices are likely to become increasingly important for the survival, growth, and profitability of businesses, many researchers have analysed the chronological development of sustainability-oriented customer research (Varadarajan 1992). Drucker (1974) was one of the first to observe the change from companies being expected to minimize societal and environmental impact to being expected to “produce a good society”. The development of sustainable actions focused at customers can be categorized into three “ages” (Peattie 2001; Hult 2011). In the first age (1970s), ecological marketing was the predominant topic of research, focusing on particular environmental problems such as air pollution and the depletion of oil reserves (Henion and Kinnear 1976; Kassirjian 1971). In the same period, Kotler and Levy (1969) raised the idea of societal marketing, which states that organizations should “determine the wants, needs and interests of the customers by means that sustain or improve the welfare of consumers and society” (Krulis-Randa 1986, p. 13). In the second age (1980s), research shifted towards advocating clean technology, understanding and targeting the “green consumer”, and achieving socio-environmental performance as potential competitive advantages (Elkington and Hailes 1988). Additionally, the raise of the concept of relationship marketing, which deals with relationships between businesses as coalitions of stakeholders and their customers, fell into this area (Polonsky 1995; Murphy et al. 1997). In the third age, sustainable marketing, which focuses on the goal of creating a sustainable economy, is the main topic. The broader emerging consumption concepts have in common that consumers consider not only individual but also common values, ideals, and ideologies (Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004). Generally, even though the development can be described clearly, there is no direct relationship between early (1950s–1980s) sustainability research and research conducted later (1990s and 2000s) (Chabowski 2011; Roberts 1996). *Research*

has found that the behaviour of ecologically and socially conscious consumers has changed over time (Finding 2)

4 Critical Discussion

As the core criteria of analysis, we identified the main building blocks of sustainability-oriented CRM: the dimensions of sustainability and the operational CRM processes in the core areas of marketing, sales, and service. The second building block was chosen as these processes focus on managing contact with the customer for the length of the relationship. Our detailed analysis of sustainability-oriented customer research shows that, within each of these core areas, the topic is treated differently.

4.1 Findings regarding CRM core area Marketing

In general, the goal of marketing is increasing the number of interactions between potential customers and the organization. Marketing can therefore play an important role in developing the inter-functional coordination needed to meet the wants and needs in markets (Hurley and Hult 1998; Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Slater and Narver 2000) and can be the key link between organizations and markets. Furthermore, marketing can represent the main prerequisite in moving toward sustainability, as it is the organization's link to stakeholders and the key component in communicating sustainability efforts (Cronin et al. 2010). We find a dominance of marketing literature (Connelly et al. 2011) because consumption has long resided within the domain of marketing (Belk et al. 1996), and thus marketers have long been concerned about consumption related to sustainability (Crittenden et al. 2011).

The concept of sustainable marketing is defined as “marketing within, and supportive of, sustainable economic development” (van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996, p. 46) and hence focuses on the long-term preservation of companies. Depending on the focused dimension of sustainability, there is also green and societal marketing. Peattie (1995) defines green marketing as the holistic management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying the requirements of customers and society, in a profitable and sustainable way. Social marketing focuses on the contribution of marketing activities to socially desirable

behaviours and goals (Andreasen 1994). Kotler (2000), however, uses the term “societal marketing” to cover both social and ecological responsibilities. The implementation of sustainable marketing begins at the strategic level of a company, and Banerjee (1999) and Wehrmeyer (1999) thereby analyse the greening of strategic marketing with implications for marketing theory and practice. Pujari and Wright (1996) address the application of the strategy, structure, and process framework for organizational and product-level response to environmental imperatives. Menon and Menon (1997) emphasize the need for an entrepreneurial approach in bringing together ecological concerns and marketing strategy objectives. Piercy and Lane (2009) examine the ways in which socially-oriented activities are re-shaping the strategic marketing agenda, the ways in which companies are responding to social imperatives, and the impact of social responsibility on customer value. The ethical perceptions, reasoning, and decision-making processes of marketing managers are further topics of research (Blodgett et al. 2001).

On an operational level, sustainability marketing research deals with a broad range of topics. Barone et al. (2000) find that cause-related marketing, environmentally friendly practices, and/or ethics are factors that lead to active consumer support for sustainability. Focusing on the social dimension, Pelozo and Shang (2011) show the broad range of marketing research which addresses a variety of issues, e.g. the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) measures (Maignan et al. 1999), increased loyalty (Du et al. 2007), customer satisfaction (McDonald and Rundle-Thiele 2008), willingness to pay premium prices (Creyer and Ross 1996), attitudes towards the corporation (Lichtenstein et al. 2004), and decreased attribution of blame in the face of a crisis (Klein and Dawar 2004). According to Maignan and Farrell (2004) marketing communication can enhance customers’ affiliation with the firm based on a shared concern for a specific issue, and can stimulate customer interactions around CSR. With a focus on the ecological dimension, it is the aim of green marketing activities to investigate consumers’ green attitudes and behaviours, to identify the market for green products, and to stratify the green market into different segments based on consumer needs (Chang and Fong 2010). Lee (2008) adds a global perspective by stating that corporations from developed countries will initiate

international green marketing in order to expand their market, increase their sales, and take advantage of the positive image of green brands they have established in their domestic markets. In summary, even with the concept of sustainable marketing and researchers calling for the integration of all dimensions of sustainability into mainstream marketing concepts (McDonagh and Prothero 1997), *the majority of marketing research only focuses on either the social or the ecological dimension of sustainability (Finding 3).*

4.2 Findings regarding CRM core area Sales

Sales can be viewed as the completion of a commercial activity. Sales activities include acquiring new customers, introducing new products, increasing the share of wallet, and cross selling (Gründling 2011) and hence may be difficult to distinguish from marketing activities. Here, we consider all activities primarily aimed at increasing corporate sales. Research regarding the enabling factors for sustainable sales processes concludes that an effective and efficient sales force contributes significantly to the success of sales activities. It is therefore important that sales staff act sustainably by, for example, devoting time to customers, using sustainable channels, and acting credibly (Ruhwinkel 2013).

Furthermore, research analysing the success of sales activities finds that substantial increases in sales could be achieved by certifying their products as sustainable (Harris 2007). Additionally, the brand of a product combined with its physical characteristics influence consumer choice (Megicks et al. 2008). This is in line with the findings of others (e.g. Darnall et al. (2012) and Young et al. (2010)) who research the factors that encourage potential eco-label users to buy green. Eco-labels are defined as product seals that convey information about a product's single environmental attribute, for which the product either qualifies or not (Darnall et al. 2012). They claim that due to the multitude of environmental certifications present in the market, which is very confusing to consumers, there is need for credible eco-labels whereby customers can easily identify genuinely sustainable products (Harris 2007). Darnall et al. (2012) analyse the properties of those customers who are more likely to buy eco-labelled products and find that they either understand more about climate change, feel more empowered to

address these issues related to climate change, or trust government and environmental groups to provide information about climate change.

Nonetheless, sustainability initiatives will not be pursued and sales will not be realised unless customers reward a company's sustainability practices through their purchase decisions (Arrendondo-Tapero et al. 2010). The rationale for this idea is that when customers observe a firm's socially or ecologically responsible behaviour, they will consider that firm a preferred party for transactions. Since consumers' purchases make them the final judges of a corporation's behaviour, it is important to understand the internal characteristics that influence buying behaviour and how they are related to the features of the product or service. According to the framework depicted by Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), there are two key moderators of the response of consumers to sustainability: individual consumer-specific factors (such as support for sustainability issues, or demand for given product social attributes) and company-specific factors (such as the specific sustainability issues a company focuses on). Consumers' behaviour toward a company (e.g. purchasing or boycotting its products) therefore depends on how they view the company (Klein and Dawar 2004), which, in turn, influences their willingness to pay a premium price (Auger et al. 2003; Castaldo et al. 2009). On the revenue side, this means that sustainably responsible firms should be able to attract and retain customers and be able to charge premium prices for their products (Barnett 2007; Castaldo et al. 2009). In addition, Beckmann's (2007) summary of research on consumer perception and response towards CSR suggests that there are positive relationships between a company's CSR activity and consumers' reactions to that company and its products. Bhattacharya and Sen (2001) support the suggestion that a company's efforts in CSR have direct effects on the attractiveness of the company's products, in addition to a positive effect on company evaluations by customers (McDonald et al. 2009; McDonald and Rundle-Thiele 2008).

Many firms believe that "green and good would sell" but not all of them are willing to incorporate sustainability holistically and thoroughly into their operations. However, this would be required for sales to fulfil its function to convert customers from merely being interested in a company's products to

embarking on a loyal and long-lasting relationship. There remains a substantial risk that some corporations only claim to be acting sustainably by adjusting their promotional campaigns and do not actually adjust their operations to adopt sustainable processes. This can lead to what Peattie and Crane (2005) refer to as a “green selling” approach, i.e. a post-hoc identification of environmental features in existing products, thus “prompting a (usually short-term) hop onto the green bandwagon” (p. 361). Research shows that even though research deals with sustainable sales processes *within the core area of sales, the risk remains that the belief that “green and good would sell” could lead to unsustainable practices (Finding 4).*

4.3 Findings regarding CRM core area Services

"Customer service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction – that is, the feeling that a product or service has met customer expectation" (Turban 2002). Service processes include feedback, support, and after-sales. Thus, not only product- or service-related information but also information regarding the operations of a company is transmitted to the customer. Customer service – in combination with product quality and promotion – is therefore one of the most important motivators of consumers when they are looking for ethical and socially responsible solutions (Megicks et al. 2008). Another factor influencing customer decision-making in service contexts is that, in contrast to the measureable and certifiable ecological attributes, the ethical attributes of a product are often a credence attribute (De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). Therefore, customers cannot judge the ethical attributes before, during, or after product use (Valor 2008), as they become part of the augmented product (Crane 2001; McGoldrick and Freestone 2008). Services can counterbalance this intangibility and provide the series of accompanying activities required. From the supplier’s perspective, companies can improve their current level of sustainability and profitability by focusing on services that extend the efficiency and value of their products (Rothenberg 2007). To make services value-generating and fulfilling of customers’ demands (Bansal 2005), the staff involved in the sales process should be trained and motivated to treat every customer equally and fairly (De la Cuesta and Valor 2003).

Wong et al. (2013) developed a model linking two key green service practices – green service delivery and green service support – and show that this construct can contribute to cost reduction and improve company’s performance on environmental factors. The model is grounded in both the natural resource-based view and contingency theory and considers the moderating role of the existing environmental management systems that may affect the performance of green service practices. Of further importance in this context are product services models, which represent a mix of tangible products and intangible services, so that they are jointly capable of fulfilling customer needs (Tukker et al. 2009). Green product services models are those that are innovative and emergent in adding value in improved sustainability or environmental performance over business as usual. Finally, there are only a few approaches focusing on the core area of services. *Existing sustainable service practices aim to provide value to customers throughout their life-cycle. (Finding 5)*

4.4 Overarching findings

When focusing on the core areas of CRM, as suggested by Connelly et al. (2011), we find a dominance of marketing literature. A total of 41 approaches (41%) focus on this core area, while only 22 approaches (22%) address the core area of sales, and three papers (3%) deal with the core area of services. Seven approaches (7%) deal with a combination of marketing and sales aspects and for 20 papers (20%) a clear focus cannot be identified. Only eight approaches (8%) deal with all core areas. Hence, *within current research, the idea of the comprehensive companionship of the customer is rarely present, as only a few papers are based on an approach that considers two or all three core areas of CRM. (Finding 6)*

Furthermore, all approaches treat one or more dimensions of sustainability. The dimensions are predominantly treated separately, with 38 approaches (38%) focusing only on the ecological dimension and 39 papers (39%) solely concentrating on the social dimension. While four approaches (4%) deal with the social and ecological dimensions concurrently, only one paper (1%) deals simultaneously with the ecological and economic dimensions. Only a few papers (19; (19%)) are based on a comprehensive approach that considers all three dimensions. This could be because companies see greater potential in either social

or ecological actions that eventually lead to economic improvement than in purely economic-orientated actions, which result in more references related to the social and ecological dimensions for researchers to examine and analyse. Hence, *it appears that within sustainability-oriented customer research there is only an “either-or”, i.e. a focus on either the social or the ecological dimension of sustainability. (Finding 7)*

Even though there is a common understanding in literature and practice that behind the drive for sustainability lies a growing belief that environmental and social projects foster innovation, cut costs, and open up new markets (Skapinker 2008), there are only a few articles (20, (20 %)) that consider the economic dimension of sustainability. Even more rarely there are papers that deal with the ecological and economic dimension simultaneously (1; (1%)) and that treat the social and economic dimension at the same time (0; (0%)). *There are only a few articles that consider the economic dimension of sustainability. (Finding 8)*

Only a few authors take on the challenge of dealing with all dimensions of sustainability and all areas of CRM in one approach and name their papers accordingly. Ruhwinkel and Wilde (2011), for example, developed an interdisciplinary research concept that describes the current state of the art in research on sustainability (marketing), its development, and possible linkages to the wider fields of CRM and stakeholder management. In contrast, Vágási et al. (2003) evaluate sustainability issues related to the customer relationship. Referring to macroeconomic requirements and management application of the sustainability theory, they analyse its integration into marketing concepts. Additionally, in their paper, “Sustainable CRM for Mobility Services based on SOA architecture”, Wagner vom Berg et al. (2011) present a technological as well as a business model for approaching the problems of multi-modal transportation planning and sustainable mobility with a customer focus.

Despite the broad range of topics covered, current research rarely pursues the integrated perspective (with respect to the individual topics of analysis CRM and sustainability). To fully exploit the potential of the comprehensive research field of sustainability-oriented CRM, there is a need for further research.

5 Identified Opportunities for Future Research

Integrating the economic, ecological, and social sustainability issues and the core areas of CRM (marketing, sales, and service) is complex, and adopting sustainability-oriented CRM practices therefor presents unique challenges. To analyse how to achieve progress in theory and practice, we can draw from the aforementioned findings of sustainability-oriented customer-research. The literature review identified research gaps that should be addressed in future research (Webster and Watson 2002). Table 1 provides a list of these research opportunities, each of which is described in detail.

Table 1: Findings and research opportunities

Finding	Research opportunity
<p>F1: A majority of the articles on the characteristics of sustainable consumers only focus on one of the dimensions of sustainability.</p> <p>F3: The majority of marketing research only focuses on either the social or the ecological dimension of sustainability.</p> <p>F7: Within sustainability-oriented customer research there is only an “either-or”, i.e. a focus on either the social or the ecological dimension of sustainability.</p>	<p>RO1: Examine the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainability in customer-related contexts.</p>
<p>F8: There are only a few articles that consider the economic dimension of sustainability.</p>	<p>RO2: Examine customer-oriented sustainability metrics based on customer metrics.</p>
<p>F4: Within the core area of sales, the risk remains that the belief that “green and good would sell” could lead to unsustainable practices.</p>	<p>RO3: Investigate the credibility and consistency of sustainability initiatives throughout the company.</p>
<p>F2: Research shares the finding that the behaviour of the ecologically and</p>	<p>RO4: Understand the effects of sustainability-oriented CRM initiatives</p>

socially conscious consumers has changed over time.

throughout the entire customer relationship.

F5: Existing sustainable service practices aim to provide value to customers throughout their life-cycle.

F6: Within current research, the idea of the comprehensive companionship of the customer is rarely present, as only a few papers are based on an approach that considers two or all three core areas of CRM.

Research Opportunity RO1: *Examine the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainability in customer-related contexts.* Our research supports the finding of other approaches that there is a tendency to treat the dimensions of sustainability separately. We find this within the overall research area of sustainability-oriented CRM (F7) but it is also apparent when we look at research focusing on the [characteristics of sustainable consumers](#) (F1) and on marketing (F3). However, as “being sustainable” includes all three dimensions, future research should aim at the integration of the dimensions. Most of the current research suggests distinguishing between social, ecological, or economic sustainability issues (Chabowski et al. 2011). But in fact, most sustainability actions can be seen as socially as well as environmentally based constructs (Ellen et al. 2006; Matten and Moon 2008); e.g. CSR can be understood as an environmental or social responsibility. Hence, in corporate decision-making and especially in customer-related contexts, the interconnectedness of the dimensions must be considered. Addressing more than one dimension of sustainability can inevitably lead to conflicts, as targets in one dimension are not necessarily targets in one or all of the other dimensions, and as there are synergetic and rival dependencies between the dimensions. A comprehensive view – bringing the dimensions of sustainability together and viewing them as an integrated construct and thereby not emphasizing the origin of sustainability actions – is hence of importance in customer contexts.

Research Opportunity RO2: *Examine customer-oriented sustainability metrics based on customer metrics.* The economic contribution and the business case are

the main decision criteria for any sustainability action and today, at the business level, sustainability is mainly equated with economic or financial sustainability (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002). Even though it does not appear frequently in the analysed literature (F8), the economic perspective has emerged as an additional organizational incentive to engage in sustainability transformations (Seidel et al 2010). There are approaches in theory and practice that support decision making in this context, e.g. the composite sustainable development index that depicts the performance of companies along all three dimensions of sustainability (Krajnc and Glavic 2005). The findings of value-oriented CRM, which postulate that all CRM activities and decisions have to be consistently linked to the goal of maximizing long-term shareholder value (Rao and Bharadwaj 2008), can contribute reasonably to examining the research areas of sustainability-oriented CRM. Hence, the popular and widely applied customer metrics (e.g. customer lifetime value, customer equity (Berger and Nasr 1998) or Customer Equity Sustainability Ratio (Skiera et al. 2011)) could serve as the basis for determining customer-oriented sustainability metrics which support decision-making in this context.

Research Opportunity RO3: *Investigate the credibility and consistency of sustainability initiatives throughout the company.* Sustainability needs to be reflected throughout the company so that the actions of any part of the company are consistent with the general sustainability policy, and they need to affect all internal business practices (Seidel et al. 2010). Furthermore, sustainability actions should be chosen carefully to reflect the firm's values and domain, which would allow customers to perceive it as socially and environmentally motivated (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006). Some producers have developed a number of strategies to address these concerns and to take advantage of them by publicising the “clean green”, “eco”, “organic”, or “natural” status of their products, even though this may not be true (F4). Marketing and sales approaches vary from the promotion of independently certified products to “green labelling” of products using “green” colour schemes and “green imaging”. Furthermore, sustainability goals strongly influence component selection, materials sourcing, production, packaging, distribution, and recycling decisions (Closs et al. 2011). However, such claims and marketing approaches do not necessarily mean that products are sustainably

produced (Harris 2007). Keeping in mind that awareness of unethical and un-environmental policies and activities would lead consumers to boycott brands (Anselmsson and Johannsen 2007), credibility with customers and other stakeholders is critical to corporate success. Thus, fostering changes in production, trade practices, or consumption are crucial steps in the quest for sustainable development (Tanner and Kast 2003). In order to achieve credibility and consistency, organizations are faced with the challenge of developing internal and external sustainability strategies (Kleindorfer et al. 2005; Cronin et al. 2011). Internal efforts are aimed at e.g. recovering pollution causing outputs, developing substitutes for non-renewable inputs, and redesigning products to reduce material content and energy consumption. Similarly, external strategies are likely to focus on e.g. developing core competences in products, processes, and other life-cycle activities that emphasize long-term sustainability. This is important, as a company interested in establishing its social and environmental legitimacy must respect its own internal goods (Arrendondo-Tapero et al. 2010). These considerations can even be extended to the entire supply chain, as customers and other external stakeholders may not distinguish between the actions of the brand owner and its supply chain partners (Roberts 2003).

Research Opportunity RO4: *Understand the effects of sustainability-oriented CRM initiatives throughout the entire customer relationship.* It is the basic idea of CRM to accompany customers throughout the different phases of the customer life-cycle (acquisition, introduction to products, profiling of customers, growth of customer base, cultivation of loyalty among customers, and termination of customer relationship). As the sustainably conscious customer represents a newly emerging type of customer (F2), the acquisition, retention, development of loyalty, and prevention of termination of this customer group which can act as a role model in educating society towards a better future is of strategic importance. Companies increasingly need to respond to the changing needs of these customers in order to survive in the market. In research to date, there are only first approaches based on the idea of the comprehensive companionship throughout the life-cycle of the sustainable customer (F5, F6). For implementation, it should be considered that customers may respond to sustainability with an array of behaviours (Sen et al. 2006). Responses to even a single initiative vary from

person to person because individuals develop different assessments of such initiatives (Bhattachary et al. 2009; Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Sen et al. 2001). Previous sustainability-oriented customer research has often focused on the role of individual factors, such as knowledge, societal concern, attitudes, norms, and values (e.g. Beckler-Olsen et al. (2006); Collins et al. (2007); Klein and Dawar (2004); Lichtenstein et al. (2004); Schlegelmilch et al. (1996)). In accordance with stakeholder theory, it might be helpful to view the customer also as a citizen, a parent, an employee, a community member, or a member of a global village with a long-term stake in the future of the planet (Smith et al. 2010). By doing so, companies will take into consideration the various needs of individual customers.

The research opportunities presented show that, even though research has already dealt with a multitude of customer- and sustainability-related issues, an integrated perspective considering the interconnectedness of dimensions and the effects of sustainability-oriented CRM initiatives throughout the entire customer relationship is missing.

6 Conclusions and Limitations

Corporations worldwide are being challenged to create new, environmentally sustainable, and socially responsive organizations, while enhancing company value and remaining customer-oriented (Closs et al. 2011). The question of identifying, gaining, and keeping those people who are willing to pay more for environmentally and socially friendly products has been analysed in different research approaches over the last years. Although the comprehensive concept of sustainability-oriented CRM bears great potential for economic, ecological, and social improvement, little research in that field exists. With the goal of describing the development and current state of sustainability-oriented CRM, this paper takes into account the core areas of CRM and the dimensions of sustainability. Furthermore, this approach highlights a number of future research opportunities deriving from the integration of sustainability- and customer-related research. In this context, we focus on identifying relevant publications by means of a literature search.

The first research objective addresses the question of how findings from existing research can contribute to the understanding of sustainability-oriented CRM research. In literature, not only the core areas of CRM (marketing, sales, and services) but also the three dimensions of sustainability (ecological, social, and economic) are rarely treated as comprehensive constructs. Current research treats them separately, and only a few papers are based on a comprehensive triple bottom line or CRM concept, which considers all three dimensions or all core areas and which is required to thoroughly analyse the examined construct. Furthermore, we find a prevalence of marketing literature and a focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability. This could be partially explained by the development of sustainability-oriented customer research that has one of its origins in the field of green marketing. To analyse what enables and empowers sustainability-oriented CRM initiatives and how these can be further advanced and improved, future research opportunities were presented (research question 2). Challenges regarding the management of sustainability- and customer-related topics remain and will need to be addressed as the development of sustainability-oriented CRM continues and research progresses in the coming years. It is our hope that these research results can stimulate and guide future research in this field.

Besides the previously highlighted benefits, this paper offers opportunities for discussion and identifies limitations. First, although we conducted a broad literature search, it is likely that not all relevant articles have been identified, as customer- and sustainability are both multifaceted constructs. Also, the keywords used may not have been a complete list of possible search terms emphasizing sustainability topics. Even though many topics in a sustainability-related customer context provide the basis for our analysis (Hult and Chabowski 2008), there may be other search terms which could identify additional relevant articles. Second, literature was only analysed with regard to the core areas of CRM and the dimensions of sustainability. Thus, our perspective is focused and excludes other approaches to CRM (e.g. functions of CRM or phases of the customer life-cycle). Further research could extend the current body of research by considering other aspects (e.g. customer valuation methods or decision principles in the context of sustainable customers). Furthermore, in the customer context, we focus on

humans and their behaviour as the primary body of analysis. Hence, the following challenge remains: Recent changes in the mind-set of customers towards sustainable consumption can be seen, but such shifts in attitude are difficult to track. While 87% of consumers worry about the environmental and social impacts of their purchases, only 33% buy green products (Bonini and Oppenheim 2008). Hence, green products account for less than 4% of the global product market share (UNEP 2005). Furthermore, only 27% of those who claim to prefer organic production methods actually buy organic (Bellows et al. 2008). There is, therefore, an attitude-behaviour gap (Fisher 1993) and a gap between the professed beliefs of consumers and their actual behaviours (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki 2008).

Despite the limitations outlined above, our approach delivers insights into the assessment of sustainability and may serve as a first step towards integrating sustainability and CRM. We hope that it helps to provide a preliminary overview and a better understanding of the body of knowledge regarding sustainability-oriented CRM.

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