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Business Partnership as an Element of Building Customer Value

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The main aim of the article is to try to characterise the impact of a business partnership on creating value (CVA – customer value added), based on mutual collaboration in the supply chain. The study looks at the aspect of creating added value through activities that create benefits to supply chain partners, playing an important role in creating customer loyalty, and what follows – the competitiveness of the company.

Research Design & Methods: The study used the desk research method in the field of statistical data analysis, the comparative analysis method and the method of critical analysis of literature on the subject. To obtain the primary data, a survey technique was used, the research tool of which was a research questionnaire distributed electronically (CASI) in the form of a survey

questionnaire. The survey method was supplemented by the method of telephone interviews (CATI) and face-to-face interviews (CAPI).

Findings: The research shows that establishing partnerships, especially with customers, is broadly reflected in the benefits that all entities forming a common supply chain obtain. These benefits have not only a social dimension through building partnerships, but also an economic one. As research shows, participation in a partnership has a direct impact on building long-term customer satisfaction, which naturally translates into benefits for the entire supply chain. When deciding to create partnerships with customers, enterprises try to minimise the risk of failure, and their greatest fears do not concern the aspects of the internal environment, but the economic and social situation of the world.

Implications/Recommendations: Currently, the creation of a business partnership within the framework of cooperation is becoming the basis for building the competitiveness of enterprises in the market. The effects of such cooperation are to a large extent synergy effects, leading to the development and growth of potential based on the cooperation of entities co-creating supply chains, including: suppliers, customers, manufacturers and intermediaries. In the near future, taking into account the difficult conditions of competing in a complex and dynamic socio-political environment, it will be extremely important for enterprises to intensify activities to build long-term partnerships based on trust and mutual benefits with contractors (suppliers, customers, cooperators). In this situation, business partnership will be an effective tool in the fight for customers, and at the same time it will be conducive to building the company's competitiveness in a turbulent market.

Contribution: The contribution of our research to the current scientific discourse consists of identifying the basic relationships between building partnerships in the supply chain and creating added value for the customer, which in the perspective of the volatility of the environment allows enterprises to achieve relative economic stability. This gives managers responsible for strategic decisions some guidance on how to efficiently balance the economic goals of the company and social and environmental goals related to customer satisfaction.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: partner relationship, business collaboration, added value, management.

JEL Classification: L22, L24, M21.

1. Introduction

Currently, we can observe a large increase in aggressiveness between competitors, caused by the dynamisation of the environment and by socio-political changes. Additionally, the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally complicates the already difficult and very limited market relationships (Sadowski *et al.*, 2021). That is why, the matter of partnership in the supply chain in times of increasing uncertainty is of particular importance. In addition, to reduce costs and risk reduction, companies strengthen their collaboration in order to increase

the ability to be competitive, merge complementary competences or acquire knowledge necessary to understand contemporary processes (Trojanowski & Kazibudski, 2021). That is why one of the key factors shaping the business value of a company is the ability to collaborate with other entities in a partnership, focus on key competences and develop relationships with suppliers and customers (Giannakis-Bompolis & Boutsouki, 2014; Navimipour & Soltani, 2016). The ongoing interaction between the environment and the organisation makes its effectiveness dependent on the efficiency of the entire supply chain, including partnership relations between all links in this chain (Richardson, Quinet & Kitajima, 2021). Partnership collaboration between these links allows for the creation of standards that are fundamental to integration. Joint efforts of multiple entities towards the commonly shared aim of satisfying market needs have a great impact on the market value of the company, which is dependent on its capital structure and on the capitalisation of the expected profits (Gruca & Rego, 2005; Peng *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the value of the enterprise depends on the expected income of the economic unit, the size of which is influenced by such factors as: the position of the company in the market, the number and quality of customers, relations with suppliers and partners, innovative or adaptive abilities, etc. Achieving the required competitiveness levels is possible, provided that an appropriate strategy is implemented that will help build long-term, trust-based relationships with the surrounding environment and particularly with customers (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The starting point of this approach is to understand the mechanisms that control customer behaviour and the environmental factors. Following that, one also needs to understand the extent of the ability of the company to influence these factors, shape them, to create cooperation-based value. The next step is to ensure customer care, as well as individual tailoring of products. Their above-average usability should provide customers with maximum satisfaction. That, in turn, will lead to an increase in customer loyalty (Lamrhari *et al.*, 2022). These activities lead not only to gaining a competitive advantage, but also become the foundation for long-term partner cooperation with customers based on mutual benefit, including customer value proposition (CVP) (Rintamäki & Saarijärvi, 2021).

In the literature review, there is only a small number of studies discussing the impact of business partnership on creating added value for both the customer and the business in the form of mutual benefits gained from collaboration in the supply chain. This gap should be supplemented by viewing each partnership in the context of the very factors that allow the entities involved to be partners. The discrepancy in the perception of what this partnership is supposed to be makes all parties expect different things from collaboration at each stage of building the supply chain. Indicating the key objective factors and benefits of a given partnership in the supply chain will help to confront the internal perception of what this partnership is with the actual scale of involvement of everyone engaged in implementing it.

The aim of the article is to analyse and evaluate the impact of a business partnership on creating partnership-based value (CVA – customer value added) in the supply chain. The study considers the aspect of creating added value throughout the entire partnership period. The conclusion process was based on the English-language sources on the subject and own study carried out in a group of production, trade and service companies forming supply chain business partnerships in the Łódź region (Łódzkie voivodeship, Poland). The final considerations and valuable conclusions from the study may help identify key areas of value (CVA) creation in the supply chain, which significantly affect the development and competitiveness of a company in the market.

2. Partner Cooperation and Relationships in the Supply Chain – Theoretical Background

Creating a business partnership covering entire supply chains is apparent not only in business practice but also widely described in world literature (Bowersox, Closs & Cooper, 2010; Daugherty, 2011; Brauholtz-Speight *et al.*, 2020; Eggert, Ulaga & Gehring, 2020; Sheth, 2020). This is because modern companies that operate on their own can rarely compete on an equal footing with businesses that base their functioning on multi-stage cooperation with partners in the supply chain. Such cooperation brings, most of all, synergistic effects leading to the development and growth of potential that stems from cooperation of entities that co-create the supply chains (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). This includes suppliers, customers, producers, and intermediaries. In many scientific publications it is emphasised that building partnerships based on mutual relationships is the basis for creating added value, measured by the sum of benefits obtained by customers and entities interacting with them (Peng *et al.*, 2015). However, the selection of the type of relationship in the supply chain is conditioned primarily by the actual purpose of partnership and the analysed type can be joining forces to increase the ability to compete (for better margins and greater market share for coalition members) (Doz & Hamel, 2006). To achieve the intended benefits, partnerships should be founded on several factors, leading to success. Points of action in this area should be continuous and with growing maturity in mind, to guarantee long-term benefits that create economies of scale for all entities involved in partnerships in the supply chain.

Although partnerships are not considered a universal remedy for all contacts between businesses, worldwide experience shows that they can often bring the desired results (Danese & Romano, 2011; Cheng & Carrillo, 2012; Mariani *et al.*, 2022). The most crucial objective of entities cooperating in the supply chain is to achieve high efficiency of individual entities and their combined networks. This should happen as a result of coordination and integration of all activities and

processes throughout the supply chain. However, the level of partnership depends on the accurate identification of customer needs and preferences (Dash, Bruning & Acharya, 2009; Suh *et al.*, 2019). More and more product homogeneity is observed in the market, customers are more aware and more demanding. Hence, the critical condition for partner integration is that one must build unique and inimitable relationships between the business and other entities, especially with customers. Long-term customer relations are currently among the most important areas of interest for companies that want to develop and be competitive in the market (Hilton *et al.*, 2020).

Nowadays, the redistribution of funds and the thinning of the buyer's wallet mean that any funds allocated to building a business partnership are used more efficiently when they focus on the behaviour of all existing customers. This approach is aimed at shaping the additional value of the company measured by the level of its competitive advantage and the stream of benefits flowing to the customer (Itani, Kassar & Loureiro, 2019). This thesis is confirmed by the results of studies that compare the effects of companies that focus specifically on creating partner bonds with customers to the results reported by companies doing only transactional exchange (Eggert, Ulaga & Gehring, 2020; Hochstein *et al.*, 2020). Research has shown that companies maintaining partner bonds note six times higher profitability (Temporal & Trott, 2000) than those operating as single entities. This approach is also reflected in economic development, where the creation of new products takes place with the participation of the customer, which results in better and more complete satisfaction of their needs and preferences.

The allocation of funds to purchase products naturally creates customer value (Walsh, Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2008; Guo, Xiao & Tang, 2009; Eggert *et al.*, 2018; Sheth, 2020). The argument in favour of a business partnership is that customers understand and receive value in a variety of ways. Since the same value may be perceived differently by individual customers, it is subjective and expressed in how they assess the benefits they see in the offered product. The total value that the customer receives is the difference between the total value provided, reduced by the costs incurred by the customer. Both costs and benefits are characterised by several intangible features, such as: like or dislike, trust or lack of trust. That is why the key factor in the creation of added value is the mechanism of how it is created. The creation process is a series of dynamic, interrelated processes that optimise the entire logistics chain while creating value factors. In literature around the globe, we can come across a statement that the phenomenon of value creation, illustrated by a business model, usually takes place in a value network, which may include suppliers, partners, distribution channels and coalitions that expand the resources of an organisation (Normann & Ramirez, 1993; Karami & Madlener, 2021). It follows that the so-called external strategies, which include CR, RQ and

ECR, have the greatest share in creating this value. These strategies contribute to creating the value of a relationship, improving its quality or shortening the time of order fulfilment, which entails the opportunity to reduce the costs incurred by a single link. One should not ignore the fact that creating value for customers allows for obtaining value for the company. This makes organisations establish partnerships with their customers by implementing and applying management strategies (Wongsansukcharoen, 2022).

Effective delivery of benefits to customers requires skillful management (CRM – customer relationship management). In business, it is viewed as a combination of customer experience and customer engagement creating a joint mutually supportive concept by forming long-term relationships (Grewal *et al.*, 2017; Sigala, 2018; Hilton *et al.*, 2020). However, the concept of CRM is subject to constant development and modification. Businesses, based on their experiences and practical implementations of diverse types of CRM applications, try to improve relationship management by adding aspects or modules that they find relevant (Guerola-Navarro *et al.*, 2021). The knowledge obtained in this way is frequently limited to transactional exchange detail, which in most cases does not allow for the creation of long-term relationships with customers, and consequently generates additional costs affecting the total cost of service (Gil-Gomez *et al.*, 2020).

The way of acquiring and using appropriate knowledge about customer preferences becomes the key element in creating a partnership. Knowledge acquisition involves two types of activities: transmission and absorption. Transmission is the way of taking knowledge from the environment and passing it on to the recipient, while the absorption of knowledge, or in other words acceptance, is the assimilation and appropriate use of what we learn. The knowledge and skills used in the efficient creation of CVA are a specific result of the measurement of the value creation process, the aim of which is to offer measurable benefits to the customer, defining the value and price of the product. These benefits can be presented as the sum of the desired attributes: service and product quality, customer satisfaction, customer usefulness, price, time and cost optimisation, reliability, or timeliness of flows throughout the supply chain (Zhang *et al.*, 2013; McColl-Kennedy, 2015). Thus, the key criteria for selecting the right customers are their value and profitability, including the income they generate and the cost of providing a service to them. Companies operating in globally integrated markets, where the primary task is to increase customer profitability, should rely on the concept of value based management (Firk, Richter & Wolff, 2021). In activities undertaken within this concept, the most important thing for companies is to focus on the fundamental elements, that is intangible assets; goodwill (Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Killins, Ngo & Wang, 2021) – knowledge, experience, reputation of the company, intellectual capital, non-financial resources, hidden resources, etc. These assets, acquired, created, and controlled

by the company, determine the possibility of gaining a competitive advantage in the supply chain. Therefore, the basic principle of managing relationships in the supply chain is adapting the company's offer to customer expectations, which in turn leads to forming effective relationships with them (Zhang *et al.*, 2016). The essence of an effective relationship is measuring the outcomes of collaboration and monitoring key performance indicators of suppliers and customers within the supply chain (Eggert, Ulaga & Gehring, 2020; Prohl-Schwenke & Kleinaltenkamp, 2021). The main purpose of such measurement is to determine the extent of mutual benefits gained by both parties from the implementation of joint actions within the entire supply chain. Due to the need for the cooperation of all participants in the supply chain, it is necessary to move from individual measurements towards measuring entire processes holistically (Hervani *et al.*, 2022).

The aspect of partnership-based cooperation in the supply chain in an era of increasing uncertainty and dynamic changes in the market is one of particular importance, and so: Aside from cost and risk reduction that a partnership brings, companies collaborate closely to increase competitive advantage, merge their complementary competences, or acquire knowledge to gain new advantages (Lostakova & Pecinova, 2014). This collaboration is dictated primarily by the high level of customer volatility, their requirements, and expectations in relation to purchased products. In such circumstances, companies focus primarily on transactional activities and strong price fights, which dominates the process of building long-term partnerships within the supply chain. On the other hand, due to the economic slowdown, customers mostly expect lower costs and being able to buy products at an optimal price. They also expect actions from the company that aim to ensure their transactional security.

3. Research Methodology

Economic practice shows that a confrontational attitude of partners within the supply chain does not create a favourable atmosphere for the integration of partnership-related processes. This is because the actual full integration is determined by developing individual links on specific levels of cooperation for all partners. The actual goal of the entire supply chain operation should be long-term partnership with the customer, dependent on to what extent that partnership is internally integrated. Supply chains that operate faster and more efficiently achieve this goal successfully, gaining a competitive advantage. Managers responsible for actions leading to the achievement of the company's financial goals face a challenging task. This difficulty lies in finding a balance between economic, social, and environmental goals of the company (Trojanowski, 2020). That is why forming business partnerships allows companies to reduce costs while maintaining a high quality of services provided. To confirm this argument, selected results of a study are

presented below, conducted in companies operating in the Łódź region, which is perceived as a highly competitive and attractive investment area in Poland.

The choice of the Łódź region, located in the centre of Poland, is not coincidental. It has been made due to the specificity and location of the Łódź region, and its primary conditions exemplified by: traditional know-how, access to specific natural resources, rapid growth in demand for certain goods or services, high human capital, educated staff, and specific knowledge, all of which place this area at the forefront of regions with high innovation potential in Poland.

The main goal of the study was an attempt to determine the benefit of the CVA – that customers and companies gain by creating business partnerships with entities forming a common supply chain, the so-called partnership value (Dobiegała-Korona, 2015). Given the growing pressure of the environment, the focus was put on the aspect of creating innovative solutions in the potential partnership area as a factor affecting the competitiveness of a company. In addition, the basic dependencies between cooperation in the supply chain and creating added value for the customer (CVA) were indicated, which allows companies to achieve relative economic stability in a volatile environment. The tool for statistical calculations was IBM SPSS Statistics 29. When analysing responses to questions, in which it was necessary to determine the strength of the relationship, a measure of the dependence of features based on the values of the chi-square statistic, namely Cramér's *V* coefficient, was used for nominal variables predominating in the study.

Table 1. Sample Structure in Cross-section of the Studied Enterprise Characteristics, *N* = 74 (in %)

Period of Operation in Market ^a		Enterprise Capital		The Nature of Business Activities ^b	
Up to 5 years	13.5	Foreign	17.5	Trade	31.1
6–10 years	59.4	Polish	64.8	Service	33.8
Over 10 years	27.1	Mixed	17.7	Production	35.1

^a Due to the asymmetric distribution of enterprises, from the point of view of this variable, further analyses were divided into two categories: period of operation up to 10 years and over 10 years; ^b the nature of the enterprise's activities concerned its leading business profile.

Source: the authors, based on research.

The selection of the sample for the study was deliberate. Based on the data obtained from public administration sources available through websites and enterprise databases, a list of 364 companies (manufacturing, trade, and service) operating in the Łódź region was created. Responses were received from 79 entities; 5 questionnaires were rejected due to incomplete data. After formal and substantive verification, 74 enterprises were qualified for the analysis (production 35.1%, trade 31.1%

and service 33.8%), so the obtained return rate was 20.3%. The survey was conducted among private entities belonging to the sector of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs). As explanatory variables, three characteristics of enterprises were considered in the analysis: how long they have operated in the market, the origin of their capital and their main activity profile (see Table 1). Due to the small size of the sample, the obtained results cannot be generalised to the entire population, being only an illustrative element of the discussed subject.

The study was conducted at the turn of 2021 and 2022, using the desk research method for statistical data analysis, the comparative analysis method, and the method of critical analysis of the literature on the subject. To obtain primary data, a survey was used, where the research tool was a research questionnaire distributed electronically (computer assisted self-interviewing) in the form of a survey. The survey technique was supplemented by computer-assisted telephone interviewing and computer aided personal interview methods.

4. Research Results

Because of the cluster structure of the modern supply chain, manifested by initiating numerous interactions with other entities that operate in the market, and by impact of these chains on shaping functions and processes in companies, a specific type of cooperation appears in market economy: the so-called network supply chains (Colicchia & Strozzi, 2012; Baryannis *et al.*, 2019). They emerge because companies can gain above-average benefits thanks to partnership cooperation with customers along the entire supply chain (Fig. 1). This form of cooperation in the face of tough competition gives the opportunity to meet the needs of end buyers and effectively oppose competitors.

Over 70% of surveyed companies pointed to the desire to improve their customer service quality levels as the main reason for entering partnership with their customers. This answer dominated among manufacturing and service companies operating for over 5 years. Such a response confirms the contemporary customer-centric orientation, the most important goal of which is efficient and professional customer service related to providing added value (CVA). For nearly the same proportion of the respondents, an important goal in establishing a partnership, next to reduction of operating costs, was the wish to include customer's needs at the product design stage. This stems from the fact that most companies, to reduce production costs and maximise adaptation to customer preferences, use a number of methods that optimise product creation and design, such as quality function deployment or failure mode and effect analysis. The lowest number of respondents declared that their goal in partnerships was the micro-segmentation of markets (nearly 10%) and participation in social programmes addressed to the customer (only 7% of respondents). Irrespective of their business profile and capital, compa-

nies would unanimously admit that the quality of customer service plays a key role in building trust in partnership relations.

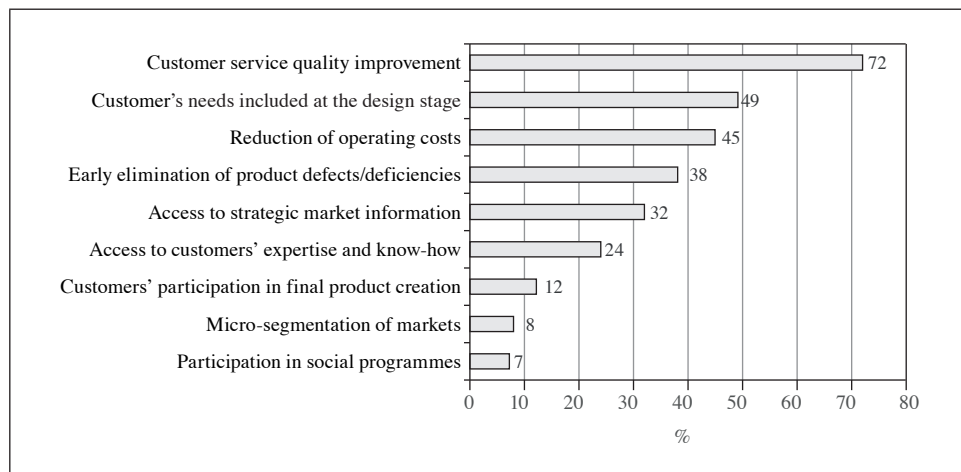


Fig. 1. Aims of Establishing Partnerships with Customers in the Supply Chain, $N = 74$

Source: the authors, based on research.

The next stage was the analysis of the relationship between the three most frequently indicated factors influencing the development of relationships with customers in the supply chain and the type of business activity of the surveyed enterprises.

The correlation analysis, conducted using the Cramér's V correlation coefficient, confirmed that there is a strong and statistically significant relationship between the type of activity conducted and the improvement of service quality (Cramér's $V = 0.612$; p -value = 0.000). All manufacturing companies indicated improvement of customer service quality as a key factor in building relationships with customers, while in the case of trading (30.4%) and service companies (72%) the role of this factor turned out to be much less important (Fig. 2).

Similar findings were provided by the analysis of the relationship between the type of business activity and the role of customer's need included at the design stage for the surveyed companies. This factor was most often indicated as important for manufacturing companies (73.1%). Slightly over half of the service companies considered this factor significant for their business, and only one in five trade companies considered this factor as important (Fig. 3). It confirmed the existence of a clear and statistically significant relationship (Cramér's $V = 0.422$; p -value = 0.001).

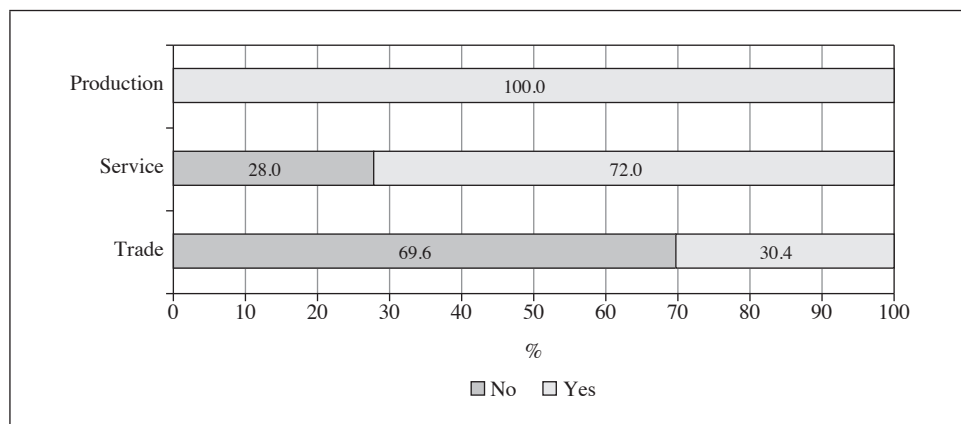


Fig. 2. The Relationship between Customer Service Quality Improvement and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Enterprises

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

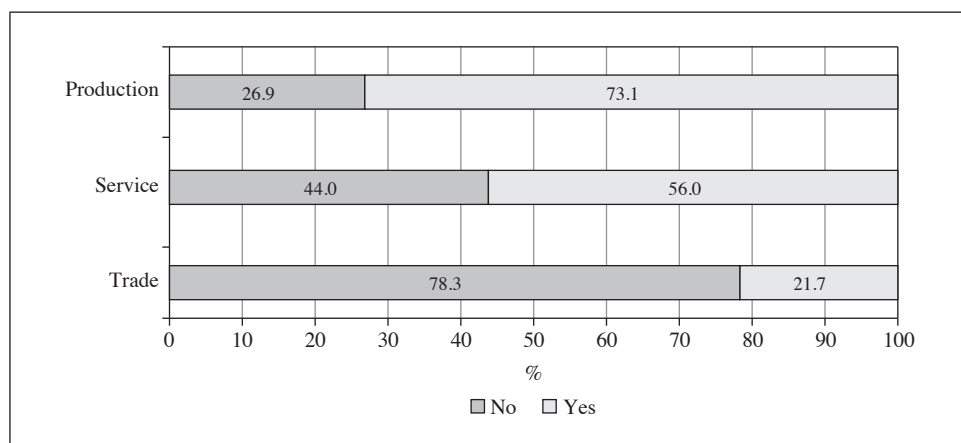


Fig. 3. The Relationship between Customer's Needs Included at the Design Stage and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Companies

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

The third most highly scored feature in the group of surveyed companies was the reduction of operating costs. Correlation analysis also confirmed that there is a clear and statistically significant relationship between the type of activity and the reduction of operating costs (Cramér's $V = 0.357$; p -value = 0.009). The detailed distribution of responses is shown in Figure 4.

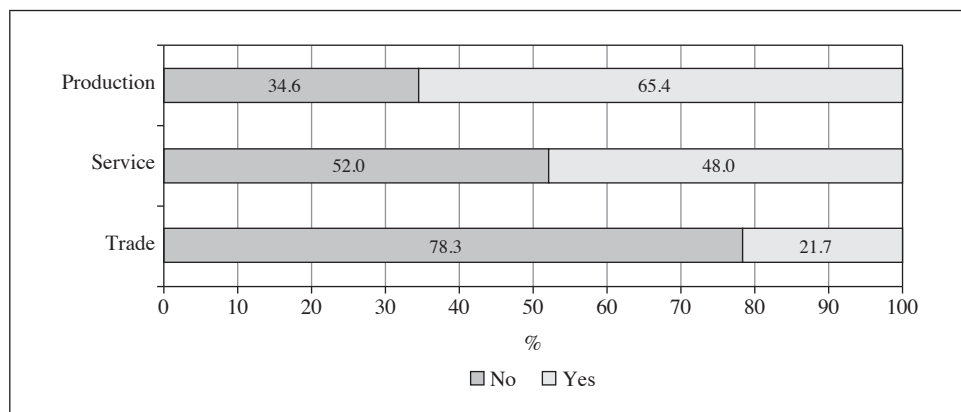


Fig. 4. The Relationship between Reduction of Operating Costs and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Companies

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

The customer value concept focuses on the customer and is designed to provide them with added value resulting from partnerships with companies throughout the entire supply chain. Customer's participation in a partnership is conceptualised as an interaction and connection between customers and entities that form a shared supply chain, and not only as ordinary activities related to market transactions. This stems from the fact that nowadays customer satisfaction plays a vital role in the way companies think and strategise marketing. This way, all benefits gained by customers are the result of the benefits obtained by all partners in the network supply chain (Fig. 5).

The greatest benefit for almost 75% of the surveyed companies creating partner relationships in the supply chain was the optimisation of logistics costs related primarily to transport and storage. This response came mostly by manufacturing companies with low and medium experience in the market. For more than half of the respondents, shortening the order fulfilment cycle was a measurable benefit obtained from their partnerships. Over 40% of the surveyed commercial companies improved their competitive position in the market thanks to their partner cooperation in the supply chain, while over 35% of services, trade and production companies have reduced their inventories and improved timeliness indicators. It is worth paying attention to the fact that only slightly more than 10% of all respondents indicated the improvement of the accuracy of their sales forecast as a benefit they obtain thanks to cooperation in the supply chain. Such a response rate is no surprise when we consider the dynamics of changes and market uncertainty, especially in the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

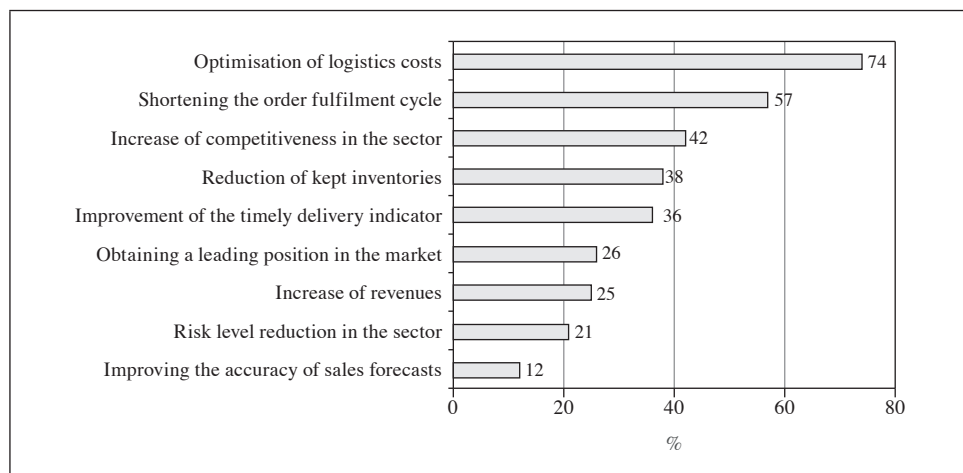


Fig. 5. Supply Chain Partnership Benefits Obtained by Organisations, $N = 74$

Source: the authors, based on research.

Additionally, a correlation analysis was conducted between the type of business activity and the three most frequently indicated factors related to supply chain partnership benefits. Only for the optimisation of logistics costs is the correlation strong and statistically significant (Cramér's $V = 0.567$; p -value = 0.000). The distribution of relative frequencies for this factor is presented in Figure 6.

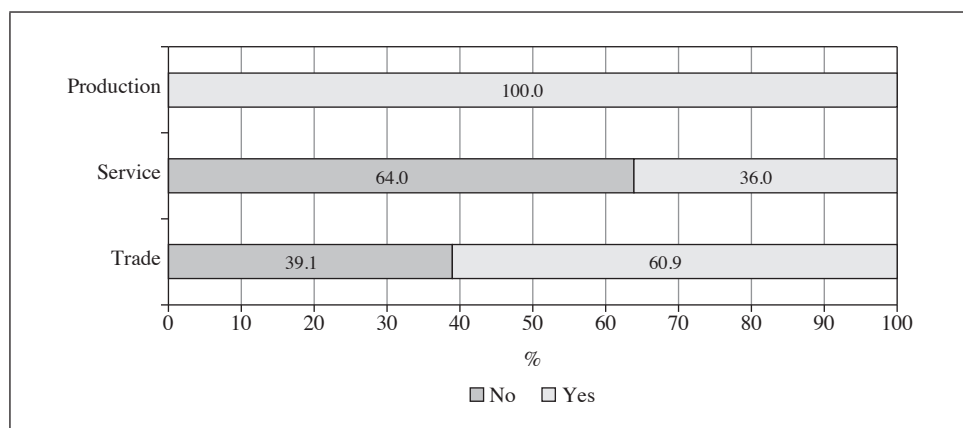


Fig. 6. The Relationship between Optimisation of Logistics Costs and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Enterprises

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

Another form of benefit that companies obtain from creating partnerships in the supply chain is the added value that they receive from collaborating directly with the customer. This is related to the fact that most enterprises are very motivated to encourage customers to create partnerships in the supply chain, considered to be a key tool to increase their competitiveness (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). The obtained value not only strengthens the company's brand in the market but also provides grounds for long-term development and future profits from the model based on cooperation (Fig. 7).

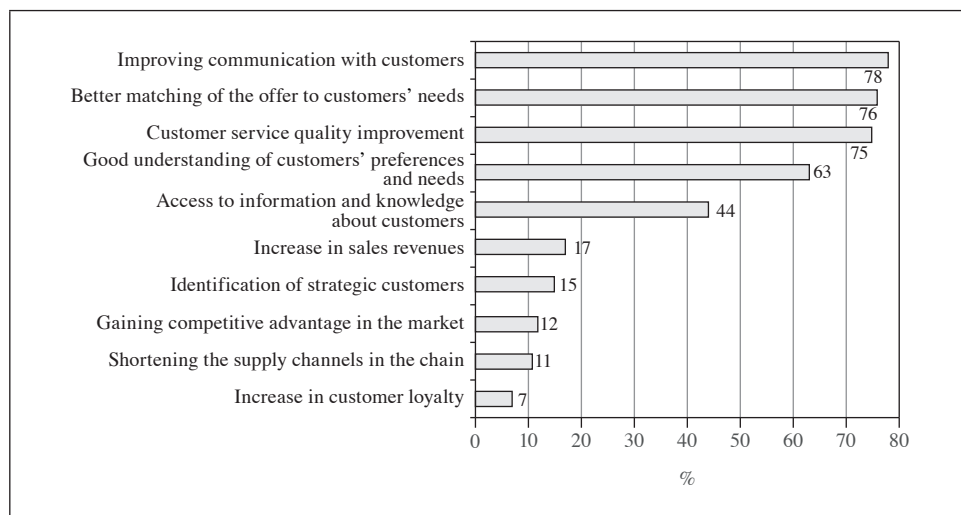


Fig. 7. Benefits Organisations Obtain from Partnering with Customers, $N = 74$

Source: the authors, based on research.

As the results of the study show, the most important benefits of partner cooperation with customers include improved communication and better adaptation of the offer to the client's needs, as well as an increase in the quality of customer service (over 3/4 of respondents indicated that was the case for them regardless of the nature of the activity and the period of operation). The grounds behind such choice of responses can be related to international research that states numerous times that professional customer service, and the resulting customer satisfaction brings economic benefits to the company, manifested in the competitive position in the supply chain (Yi *et al.*, 2021). In turn, companies were least affected by the increase in customer loyalty. This change, in the opinion of all respondents, was insignificant and only less than 10% of them indicated this factor (as before, regardless of the activity type and the period).

As mentioned before, the key benefits gained from partnership with customers turned out to be in the following areas: communication with customers, better matching of the offer to customer's needs and improvement of customer service quality. For these three areas, a correlation analysis proved that the only clear and statistically significant relationship (Cramér's $V = 0.325$; p -value = 0.020) occurs between matching the offer to the customer's needs and the type of business activity (Fig. 8).

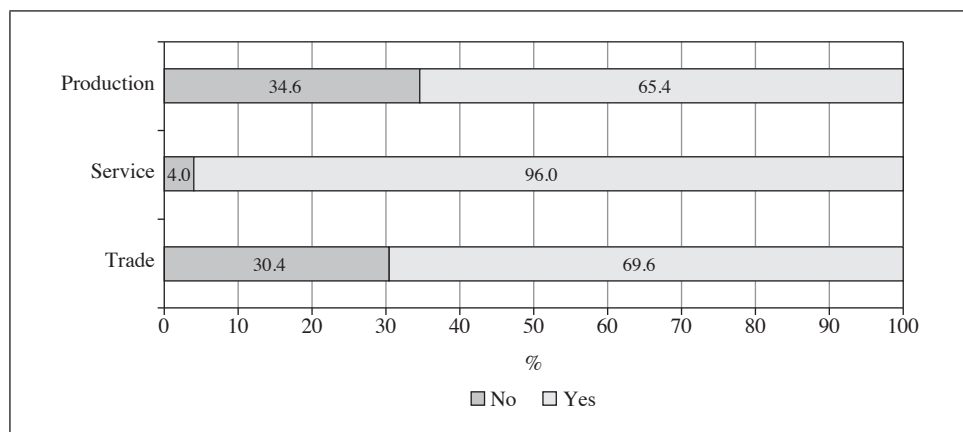


Fig. 8. The Relationship between Better Matching of the Offer to the Customer's Needs and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Enterprises

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

Undoubtedly, creating partner relationships significantly improves the functioning of the entire organisation. This is particularly relevant for building mutual relations with the customer because they are the ultimate verifier of the company's level of development. Providing added value (CVA) to the customer is related not only to the actions of the organisation itself, but also to the cooperation throughout the entire supply chain. Offering measurable benefits to customers positively affects the customer's relationships in the supply chain and strengthens the ties of business collaboration (Fig. 9).

The main benefit obtained by customers creating partnerships with companies in the supply chain was, from the company's perspective, comprehensive customer care in service processes – as indicated by over 65% of respondents – this answer was most often given by service companies operating in the market for more than 10 years. Over 60% of respondents stated that the elimination of unnecessary action points in the service process and a consistent and uniform system of marketing information, as well as the free flow of information (indicated by above 50% of

enterprises, primarily commercial and service), adds value to partnerships in the supply chain. In the opinion of less than 10% of respondents, operating in the market for less than 5 years, the diversification of product distribution channels is the least experienced by customers. This might be the effect of reducing the number of points of goods distribution resulting from limited mobility of people as well as nationwide lockdowns currently implemented worldwide (Sadowski *et al.*, 2021).

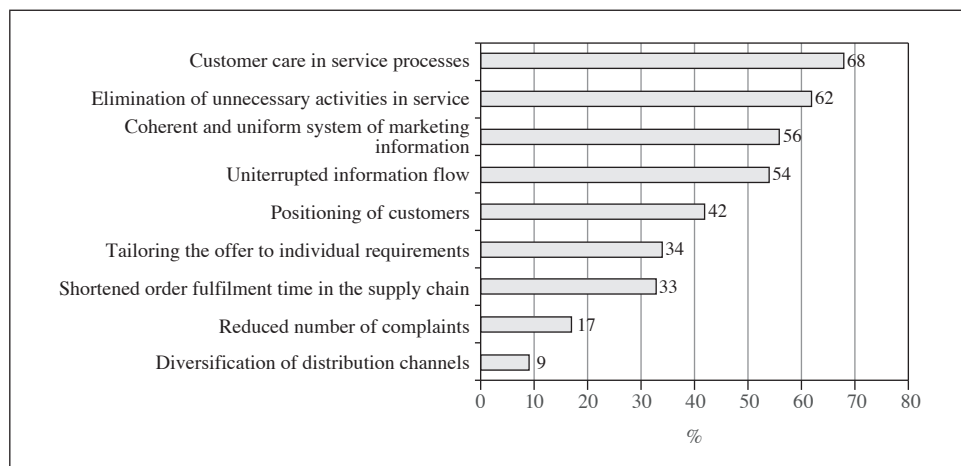


Fig. 9. Customer Value Added from Company Partnerships, $N = 74$

Source: the authors, based on research.

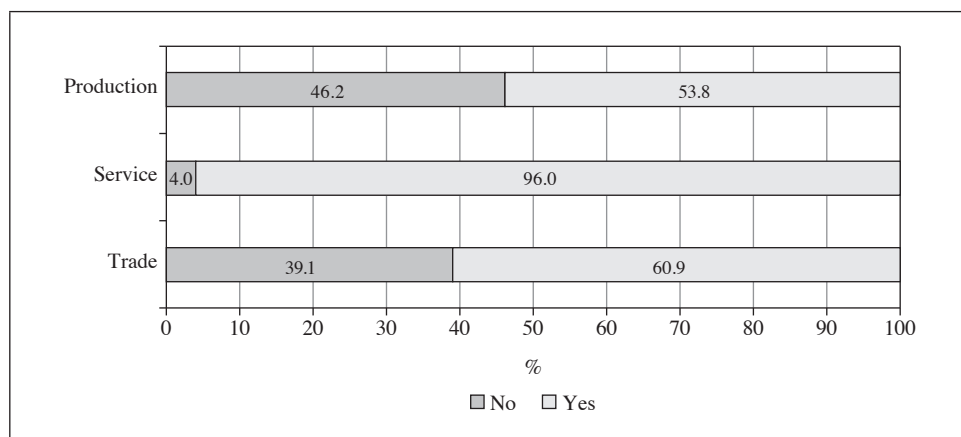


Fig. 10. The Relationship between Customer Care in Service Processes and the Type of Business Activity of the Surveyed Enterprises

Source: the authors, based on the conducted survey.

Additionally, a correlation analysis was conducted, which showed that there is a strong and statistically significant relationship between customer care in service processes and the type of business activity of enterprises (Cramér's $V = 0.407$; p -value = 0.001). The distribution of relative frequencies for the discussed factor is presented in Figure 10.

5. Considerations and Conclusion

The constantly changing market conditions, accompanied by the global economic crisis and recession in recent years, made it necessary to link entities into networks of values to respond faster and more flexibly to customer needs. In the scientific space, there are studies on customer participation, their social and structural ties, customer values and satisfaction (Carlson *et al.*, 2019; Robbert, Straus & Roth, 2019). In total, most of them include the subject of customers and their satisfaction obtained from participation in transaction processes created by enterprises, but they do not fully illustrate the customer's participation, their values and cooperation in an integrated partner chain (Yi *et al.*, 2021). Given the mixed results and complexity of integration practices, the relationship between supplier integration and value capture in an integrated supply chain is not straightforward. Therefore, there is a growing need for research that considers the synergy effect (Li *et al.*, 2022; Chavez *et al.*, 2023). Compared with supplier integration, customer integration provides benefits to the enterprise in a more efficient and straightforward way because in such a case the supply chains become customer-centric and aim to provide better added value to the customer (Huo *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the need to maintain and manage customer loyalty has led to the need to further strengthen relationships, not only between suppliers and customers but also between all entities that form a common supply chain (Lostakova & Pecinova, 2014). This phenomenon is confirmed by the results of the study, in which over 3/4 of the surveyed companies indicated the desire to improve the quality of customer service as the main reason for establishing collaboration with customers. Most often, but not only, such a response was given by companies with a relatively short presence in the market. This results from the fact that companies entering modern markets struggle with many difficulties related to ensuring the continuity of supply chains. A number of difficulties, including disrupted supply chains, market volatility and dynamics, geopolitical policy and lack of customer loyalty, mean that partnerships created with other entities are more economically stable and provide an opportunity to stay in the market. Because in virtually every company, regardless of its duration in the market, capital size or the nature of its business, the priority is to meet the needs and expectations of customers and to provide the customer with added value (CVA), which is the sum of various above-average benefits that the customer obtains by entering into a partnership in the supply chain.

The correlation analysis confirmed that the goals of establishing partnerships with customers in the supply chain and their importance for the given entities differ depending on the type of business activity. All manufacturing companies and 3/4 of service companies indicated that improving the quality of customer service is the key factor as the goal of establishing partnerships with customers. A completely different situation was observed in the case of commercial companies for which this factor was much less important. The greatest benefits resulting from cooperation with customers are gained by service companies, which, thanks to this cooperation, improve communication with customers and are able to better adapt the service offer to their needs.

Value added is an issue that is difficult to define, as it is an abstract concept, referring to customer preferences. That is why an essential tool in identifying the needs and preferences of customers is appropriate, systematic research. Companies that systematically conduct research on business partnerships will not only gain multidimensional knowledge about their customers and partners but will succeed by gaining a long-term competitive advantage in the market. The basic axiom in value co-creation is to improve the well-being of customers and their ecosystems, by focusing on mutual benefits for both the supplier and the end user as a stakeholder in the chain (Sheth, 2020). As numerous studies show, participation in a partnership has a direct impact on building long-term customer satisfaction, which naturally translates into benefits for the entire company. These benefits are also visible in the results of our own study, where for most companies, optimising logistics costs related to transport and storage, or shortening the order fulfilment cycle was a measurable benefit obtained from their partnership. Over 40% of the surveyed trading companies improved their competitive position in the market, while over 35% of all companies reduced inventories and improved timeliness indicators. Thus, mutual value co-creation occurs when both suppliers and customers collaborate and allocate complementary resources and capabilities, which may be informal or formal. Value co-creation extends the scope of collaboration beyond immediate improvements in quality, price, and service to end users (Sheth, 2020). As evidenced by numerous postulates, participation in a partnership has a direct impact on building long-term customer satisfaction, which naturally translates into benefits for the entire chain. Thus, given the issues of customer complexity and unpredictability, their participation in the partnership is considered a critical success factor for the entire supply chain.

To sum up the conditions for shaping partnerships and offering added value to customers (CVA), one should assume that the surveyed companies establish partnerships primarily with the socio-structural aspect in mind (Fernandes & Pinto, 2019). Research results confirm this, showing that the value of cooperation translates broadly into benefits achieved by all entities in the supply chain. The most important

benefits of partnership cooperation with customers for a large part of the surveyed companies include improved communication and better adjustment of the offer to the customer's needs, as well as an increase in the quality of their service. These benefits do not only have a social dimension that comes from establishing partnerships, but also an economic aspect. The added value (CVA), manifested as customer care, faster service or a consolidated market offer that the customers receive, depends on the activities of partners throughout the supply chain. An important activity of companies towards the customer is efficient communication with them and appropriate tailoring of the offer to their needs. Other important benefits declared by respondents include the speed of response and reliability. In addition, professionalisation of service quality, attention to the level of quality throughout the post-transaction process and creation of mutual trust have a positive impact on increasing customer retention and loyalty to companies. At present, it is extremely important, given the difficult conditions of competing in a complex and dynamic environment. On the other hand, it favours the establishment of long-term, mutually beneficial, and trust-based (loyalty) relationships with contractors (suppliers, recipients, cooperators). As we can see, in this situation, business partnership becomes an effective tool in the fight for customers, and at the same time helps to build the company's competitiveness in a turbulent market.

However, the conducted survey has some limitations that indicate directions for future research. First, the study was conducted on sparse cross-sectional data obtained from a small sample with a narrow territorial scope (Łódź region) and concerned only the SME sector. This does not reflect the entire research population, and in the future in-depth research should be conducted covering a larger research sample with a wider cross-section of features, located throughout the country. This will help reduce statistical error and will allow for determining the cause-effect relationships of partnership relations. The research also does not show a synergistic effect focusing on different directions of external integration between the supplier and the customer. Future research should focus on the problem of obtaining a synergistic effect, which would be the impact of the supply chain in the process of internal integration, which is its domain. To further illustrate the validity of creating partnership relations with customers, resulting from the intensification of added value for all entities creating them, the influence of individual entities and their impact on the creation of added value in the entire supply chain should be examined.

Authors' Contribution

The authors' individual contribution is as follows: Each contributed a third.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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