

## **THE INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT LEVEL OF SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT TOWARDS CONSUMER RELATIONAL RESPONSE BEHAVIORS**

Tara Farina SRIHADI\*

David SETIAWAN

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to empirically test the relationship between consumer personal involvement and perceived relational benefit in different industries that poses different level of customer contact. Examination on the influence of perceived relational benefit towards consumer relational response behavior was also conducted. The study used descriptive causal research design. Based on a sample of 225 customers of three different types of services, using MANOVA and multiple regression analysis, the study found that confidence is the most important benefit that consumers consider in building long term relationship with the service provider. Consumers of high contact services perceived social benefit as the second most important, whereas consumers of moderate contact and low contact services perceived special treatment benefits as the second most important in building long term relationship with the service provider. The study also found that confidence benefit is the predictor of consumer relational response behaviors in high contact, moderate contact and low contact services. Level of consumers' involvement with the service differentiates consumers' perceived relational benefits in high contact and moderate contact services, whereas consumers perceive the same relational benefit in low contact services regardless the level of consumers' involvement with the service.

**Keywords:** relational response behaviors; perceived relational benefits; services marketing

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, service companies need to understand consumers' behavior related to different marketing activities and to build and maintain a good lasting relationship with customers. Companies need to deliver superior customer value and satisfaction in order to build customer loyalty. Furthermore companies also need to understand factors that influence consumers' decision process in choosing a service provider. This can be done through relationship marketing. For the past two decades, relationship marketing has undertaken greater importance than ever before. Cultivating and nurturing a long-lasting, mutually-beneficial relationship is fast becoming one of the most important agendas in the minds of most companies' marketing department. Customer retention is perceived as key in securing long-term sustainable profitability. Understanding these factors enables service firms to segment consumers in the marketplace and provide effective marketing strategies that build upon customer relationships (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985).

Jakarta is the capital city and the biggest city in Indonesia, with a population of more than 10 million. Gross domestic product income number per capita on Indonesian living in Jakarta is the highest in the country. Jakarta has the largest number of middle to higher income earners and is considered to be a developed market for high-end retail shopping and consumer spending (Lee, 2013). Household demographics and lifestyle trends of Indonesian urban people who live in Jakarta are changing. Middle to higher income earner cluster is wealthier, trendier and more brand conscious. They spend more on discretionary goods and services, and are able to afford a middle-class lifestyle. They are more adventurous in trying new concepts, products, and services, and are willing to pay higher price for better quality of goods and services that will reflect their social status. Examples of services that are widely consumed by

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\* Bina Nusantara University, Jl. Hang Lekir I No. 6, Senayan 10270, Indonesia Tara Farina Srihadi. Tel.: +62-816-114-9767. E-mail address: tarafarina@gmail.com

middle to high income earners in Jakarta are hairdresser service, travel agent service and dry cleaner services.

The growth of service sector in Indonesia from confirms the importance of service retailers' contribution in supporting the country's economy, with 10 percent contribution to country's GDP in 2012. Taking into account changes in demographics and lifestyle patterns of consumers, it becomes necessary for retailers to know customers' preferences in using services and to know factors that would influence customers' choice of service provider. Customer retention is a key to sustainable growth, especially in service industries, where having a close relationship is essential in maintaining old customers and transforming new customers into repeat purchasers.

The objective of this research is to identify the impact of customer personal involvement on perceived relational benefits and relational response behaviors. For this study, the author selected three service industries: hairdresser, travel agent, and dry cleaning. Each service industry represents a different level of customer involvement. Hairdresser services involve tangible actions directed to people's bodies and require high interaction with service personnel, hence the service is considered as high contact customized. Travel agent services involved intangible actions directed to people's intangible possession where the interaction between customers and service personnel during service process is considered lower. Customers' travel purposes varies, hence travel agent service is classified as moderate contact customized. Dry cleaning services involved tangible actions directed to people's physical possessions, where the interaction between customers and service personnel during service process is limited. Hence dry clean service is classified as low contact non-personalized.

Through this research, the researcher would like to point out to the service industry practitioners in Indonesia, that (1) relationship marketing can actually be used to improve consumers relational response behaviors – namely: loyalty, word-of-mouth, satisfaction – and (2) different level of customer involvement and perceived benefits can influence relational response behaviors in the Indonesian service industry.

## **1. Literature Review**

### *1.1. Service Characteristics*

Services are characterized by inseparability and heterogeneity. Inseparability in services means that there must be simultaneous production of services by service provider and consumption of services by customer at the time the services are delivered (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002). Heterogeneity in services refers to differences in service delivery that customers received from service providers. Customers may perceive differences in the process and the outcome of a particular service when it is performed by a different service provider, at different time or at different location. As an example, customers may experience different quality of service performed when they get a haircut from different hairdressers, or when service is delivered at different time or at different location. These service characteristics create opportunities for service providers to tailor the service offers to fulfill customers' need and to meet customers' expectation. Services that require higher degree of personal face-to-face interactions between customers and service provider will exhibit more relational benefits to customers than services that require less personal face-to-face interactions between customers and service provider. Therefore hypotheses related to these characteristics are:

*H1a: Services requiring greater (less) face-to-face personal interaction are more (less) likely to exhibit relational benefits to consumers.*

*H1b. Service providers that offer a more (less) customized service are more (less) likely to exhibit relational benefits to consumers.*

### *1.2. Perceived Relational Benefits*

According to Gwinner, Gremler & Bitner (1998) perceived relational benefits are benefits that customers received as a result of having a long-term relationship with a service provider. Relational benefits are confidence benefits that customers experience beyond the core service provided by the service provider, which is formed through reduced anxiety and higher comfort from knowing what to expect from a service encounter. The benefit can be classified into three types of benefit: (1) confidence, (2) social and (3) special treatment (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002).

A long term relationship between customers and a service provider can be built if both customers and the service provider recognize the benefits or positive outcomes resulting from the relationship (Dimitriadis, 2010). By having a long term relationship with a service provider customer becomes more familiar with service performance of the provider and would gain more knowledge about the service as well as the provider. This will reduce customer's apprehension of any risk that customer may perceived from such service (Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995).

Another benefit that a customer gains from having a long term relationship with a service provider is customer will be recognized by employees of the provider, which may lead to building friendships with the employees and the service provider. Customers may also receive special treatments from a service provider as a result of having a long term relationship with them. Special treatments can be in any forms that give economic value to customers or customizations that will enhance the core service given to customers (Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Hence:

*H2a. Confidence, social, and special treatment benefits positively influence customer loyalty with the service provider.*

*H2b. Confidence, social, and special treatment benefits positively influence customer word-of-mouth with the service provider.*

*H2c. Confidence, social, and special treatment benefits positively influence customer satisfaction with the service provider.*

### *1.3. Personal Involvement*

Since there must be simultaneous production and consumption of service, customer may have direct involvement on the delivery of the service. Customer involvement may vary between enduring activity/interest involvement, situational activity/interest involvement, enduring product involvement, situational advertising involvement and situational purchase/decision involvement. Personal interactions between a service provider and its customers during a service encounter will add an interpersonal dimension to the relationship (Liljander & Strandvik, 1995). Customers of high involvement services have higher expectation that the service provider involve them in giving solutions to their problems and higher expectation of the benefits that the service providers will give them (Varki and Wong, 2003). According to Park and Mittal (1985 in Kinard and Capella, 2006) involvement is a "goal-directed arousal capacity". Involvement occurs when there is a goal-directed stimulus to realize a perceived need or goal and involvement will not occur without needs. Zaichkowsky (1985, p. 342)

defined involvement as a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values, and interests". Therefore the hypotheses are:

*H3a. High (low) involvement consumers are more (less) likely to perceive relational benefits from a hairdresser.*

*H3b. High (low) involvement consumers are more (less) likely to perceive relational benefits from a travel agent.*

*H3c. High (low) involvement consumers are more (less) likely to perceive relational benefits from a dry cleaner.*

#### *1.4. Relational Response Behaviors*

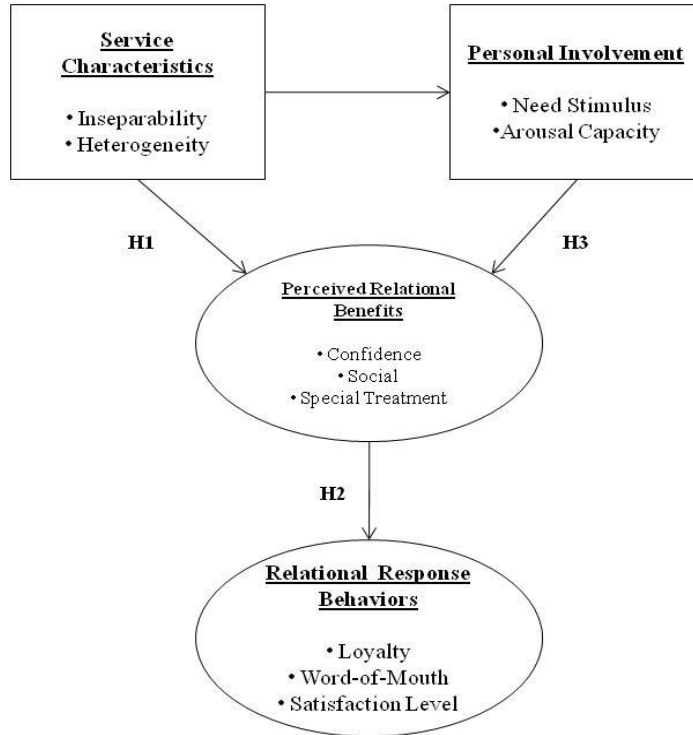
Relational response behaviors consist of three main aspects: (1) loyalty, (2) word-of-mouth, and (3) satisfaction level. Loyalty has both an attitudinal and behavioral dimension (Dick and Basu, 1994). It is assumed that customers who are behaviorally loyal to a firm will display more favorable attitudes towards the firm compared than to the firm's competitors. However, there are some instances where behavioral loyalty does not necessarily reflect attitudinal loyalty due to the presence of other factors that prevent customers from defecting (Aldlaigan & Buttle, 2005; Liljander & Roos, 2002; Reinartz & Kumar, 2002 in Leverin & Liljander, 2006). Behavioral loyalty focuses only on outcomes of loyalty, namely repeat purchase; whereas attitudinal loyalty focuses on the cognitive basis of loyalty and differentiates purchases driven by a strong attitude from purchases due to situational constraints. Attitudinally loyal customers are committed to a brand or company and they make repeat purchases based on a strong bond with the firm. Word-of-mouth (WOM) can be defined as any communication about a service firm's offerings (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1988; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Harrison-Walker, 2001 in Ng, David & Dagger, 2011). Word-of-mouth is of paramount importance for service providers whose offerings are largely intangible, and experience or credence-based. In these instances, there is a certain degree of reliance on the suggestions or advice from others who have prior experience of the services (Kinard & Capella, 2006). Furthermore, consumers often trust each other more than they trust communication from firms, thus emphasizing the importance of word-of-mouth (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996 in Ng, David, & Dagger, 2011). Satisfaction is an attitude-like judgment following a consumption experience. At the time customers decided to buy a service, they have some predictions on the level of service that will be performed by a service provider and have expectations on the outcome of service consumption. During the service encounter customers make evaluations on the service performance and compare it with their predicted service performance. Customers will be satisfied when the service performance meets their expectations (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011).

## **2. Method**

Our study is a replication of a previous study that was conducted by Kinard & Capella (2006). We adopted the proposed model (Figure 1) and tested it on Indonesian customers. The model consists of two latent variables, which are perceived relational benefits and relational response behaviors. In the original study, the model is tested on two types of services, namely high contact customized service (hairdresser) and moderate contact standardized service (fast food restaurant). In this study the influence of perceived relational benefits towards relational response behaviors is tested on three service categories that have different service characteristics (hairdressers, travel agent and dry cleaners). Hairdresser represents high contact customized service, travel agent represents moderate contact customized service and

dry cleaner represents low contact non-personalized service. Respondents of each service category were asked to evaluate the involvement that they had with the service provider.

**Figure 1.** The influence of service characteristics and service involvement on perceived relational benefits



Source: Kinard & Capella, 2006

## Sampling

This study was conducted in December 2012. Sampling technique used in this study was convenient judgment sampling. Target population of this study is consumers of hairdresser, travel agent and dry cleaner services who live in Jakarta. Data collection method was using structured questionnaires that were distributed using direct intercept interview. Data from a total of 225 respondents were collected comprising of 75 hairdresser business customers, 75 travel agent business customers and 75 dry cleaner business customers. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the respondents.

## Measure

Perceived relational benefit was measured using confidence benefit, social benefit and special treatment benefit as proposed by Gwinner et al. (1998). Each of the benefits was measured by three items. Relational response behaviors were measured by customer loyalty, word-of-mouth and customer satisfaction. Each factor of relational response behaviors were measured by four items. Consumer involvement is measured using 8 items that were adopted and modified from the study of Zaichkowsky (1994). All measurement items for perceived relational benefit, relational response behavior and consumer involvement were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

## Reliability and Validity

Reliability of all constructs was individually measured using Cronbach's Alpha to check internal consistencies of items in measuring the constructs. Alpha value greater than 0.6 indicates a good reliability of the instrument (Sekaran and Bougie, 2009). Confirmatory

Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to verify construct validity of the scale. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) value greater than 0.5 and factor loading values greater than 0.5 indicates that the measurement scale is adequate and indicates good construct validity (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). As shown in Table 2, reliability and sampling adequacy for all constructs are good enough.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of respondent (n = 225)

Characteristics	%
Gender	
Female	49%
Male	51%
Age	
20-24 years	44%
25-29 years	32%
30-34 years	14%
> 34 years	10%
Education	
High School graduate	36%
College graduate	4%
University graduate	60%

**Table 2.** Factor loading, Cronbach's Alpha and KMO

Variable	Number of Item	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO
Confidence	3	Trust service provider	0.898	0.947	0.765
		Service performed correctly	0.924		
		Knowing what to expect	0.889		
Social	3	Recognized by service provider's employees	0.774	0.906	0.728
		Develop friendship with service provider	0.880		
		Familiar with service provider employees	0.873		
Special Treatment	2	Discount deals	0.872	0.852	0.500
		Better price	0.872		
Loyalty	3	Commitment to continuing a relationship with service provider	0.940	0.933	0.770
		Feeling loyal to service provider	0.947		
		Intention to use service provider again	0.943		
Word-of-Mouth	4	Recommendation for someone who seeks my advice	0.874	0.929	0.829
		Say positive things to others	0.939		
		Recommendation to others	0.946		
		Tell others about positive experiences with service provider	0.884		
Satisfaction Level	4	Pleasant services	0.914	0.934	0.860
		Satisfying services	0.915		
		Happy with the provided service	0.947		
		Future visit would be a wise choice	0.884		
Involvement	6	Involvement is needed	0.792	0.930	0.911
		Involvement is essential	0.783		
		Involvement is important	0.796		
		Concern with involvement	0.797		
		Involvement matters to me	0.799		
		Involvement is significant	0.653		

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Service characteristics on perceived relational benefits

The influence of service characteristics towards perceived relational benefits is analyzed using MANOVA. Composite means of each service type is treated as independent variable and composite means of each benefit type is treated as dependent variable. Table 3 shows the means for each benefit type and F-values and p-values of the analysis.

**Table 3.** Perceived Relational Benefits across three types of services

Service type	Relational benefits (n=225)		
	Confidence benefits	Social benefits	Special treatment benefits
Hairdresser (n = 75)	5.15	3.96	3.74
Travel agent (n = 75)	5.06	3.72	4.32
Dry cleaner (n = 75)	5.09	3.71	4.32
F-value	0.14	0.75	6.52
p-value	0.87	0.48	0.002

Note: The means of each type of relational benefit are measured by a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

The result of this analysis shows that consumers of the three different service characteristics (hairdresser, travel agent and dry cleaner) have the same perceptions on confidence benefit and social benefit (p-values = 0.87 and 0.48 respectively) and have different perceptions on special treatment benefits (p-values = 0.02). Confidence benefits is perceived the most important by consumers of travel agent and dry cleaner. Social benefits is considered as the least important benefits resulting from a long term relationship with the service provider. Consumers of hairdresser also perceive confidence benefits as the most important benefits resulting from a long term relationship with the service provider, followed by social benefits and special treatment benefits as the least important them.

Hairdresser services require greater face-to-face personal interaction with consumers than services provided by travel agents and dry cleaner. Composite mean scores for confident benefits and social benefits for hairdresser (5.15 and 3.96) are higher than composite mean scores for confident benefits and social benefits for travel agent and dry cleaner (5.06 and 3.72; 5.09 and 3.71). This shows that consumers of hairdresser have higher perception on confidence benefits and social benefits than consumers of travel agent and dry cleaner services. On the other hand, composite means for special treatment benefits for hairdresser (3.74) is lower than composite mean scores for travel agent and dry cleaner (4.32 and 4.32). This shows that consumers of travel agent and dry cleaner services have higher perception on special treatment benefit than consumers of hairdresser service. This suggests that services that required more face-to-face personal interaction and give more customized services are not necessarily exhibit relational benefits to consumers. Therefore hypotheses H1a and H1b are not supported.

#### Perceived relational benefits on relational response behaviors

The influence of perceived relational benefits towards relational response behaviors of different services is analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis. The composite means of each type of relational benefits were regressed on each composite means of relational response behaviors. Table 4 shows regression coefficients for perceived relational benefits in predicting relational response behaviors.

The result of the regression analysis shows that confidence benefit is the predictor of consumer relational response behaviors in high contact customized, moderate contact customized and low contact non-personal services. This finding is consistent with Kinard & Capella (2006). Special treatment benefit, that actually intended to enhance services by giving extra value and appeal to consumers, failed to influence consumers relational response behaviors in all three types of services. This finding is consistent with Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002). Social benefit only influences relational response behaviors of high contact service consumers. Hence based on this result, H2a is supported for all type of services. H2b is



supported only for high contact services, whereas H2c is not supported for all type of services.

**Table 4.** Regression coefficients for perceived relational benefits in predicting relational response behaviors

	Hairdresser (n = 75)			Travel agent (n = 75)			Dry cleaner (n = 75)		
	Loyalty	WOM	Satisfaction	Loyalty	WOM	Satisfaction	Loyalty	WOM	Satisfaction
Confidence	0.711 (0.000)	0.560 (0.000)	0.732 (0.000)	0.630 (0.000)	0.574 (0.000)	0.781 (0.000)	0.553 (0.000)	0.335 (0.024)	0.644 (0.000)
Social	0.247 (0.009)	0.540 (0.000)	0.354 (0.000)	0.191 (0.046)	0.346 (0.000)	0.170 (0.063)	0.141 (0.098)	0.173 (0.167)	0.040 (0.770)
Special treatment	0.138 (0.143)	-0.049 (0.608)	-0.044 (0.602)	0.228 (0.060)	0.071 (0.471)	0.161 (0.163)	0.095 (0.376)	0.214 (0.178)	0.047 (0.786)

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported, ( ) indicates p-values for the regression coefficients.

### 3.2. Personal involvement on perceived relational benefits

The influence of consumer personal involvement towards perceived relational benefits is analyzed using MANOVA. Summated means of personal involvement items are calculated across the three service types, and are treated as independent variables. Composite means of each benefit type are treated as dependent variables. Table 5 shows the influence of consumers' personal involvement towards perceived relational benefits.

The result of this analysis shows that there is significant difference of perceived relational benefits between high involvement and low involvement consumers. Hair dresser consumers and travel agent consumers who are categorized into high involvement group have higher perception on relational benefits than consumers who are categorized into low involvement group. Based on the F-values and p-values for dry cleaner service, confident benefits and social benefits are perceived the same for both high involvement and low involvement groups of consumers. However, dry cleaner consumers who are categorized into high involvement group have higher perception on special treatment benefit than consumers who are categorized into low involvement group. These findings show that H3 is supported for high contact and moderate contact services, and only partially supported for low contact service.

**Table 5.** Influence of personal involvement towards perceived relational benefits

	Hairdresser (n = 75)			Travel agent (n = 75)			Dry cleaner (n = 75)		
	Benefits			Benefits			Benefits		
	Confident	Social	Special treatment	Confident	Social	Special treatment	Confident	Social	Special treatment
High Involvement	5.93	4.88	4.19	5.86	4.48	4.65	5.34	4.01	4.60
Low Involvement	4.39	3.07	3.30	4.36	3.15	4.00	4.79	3.44	4.06
F-value	62.93	53.06	13.45	61.51	20.77	6.50	3.97	2.87	4.41
p-value	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.05	0.09	0.04

Note: The means of each type of relational benefit are measured by a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

## Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that consumers perceived confidence benefit when they purchase services from high contact customized (hair dresser), moderate contact customized (travel agent) and low contact non-personalized (dry cleaner) service provider. Consumers perceived confidence as the most important benefit that they will gain from consuming the services. In high contact customized service such as hairdresser, consumers perceive social benefit as the second most important. This is inline with the changing in Indonesian urban cluster demographic and lifestyle, where they consume better quality of services that reflect

their social status and that will boost their confidence. Service providers try to enhance their services by offering special treatments to win customers. On the other hand consumers have a set of expectations on service performance and its result when they purchase a particular service.

In high contact customized service (e.g. hairdresser), consumers do not consider special treatment such as discount price or better deal as the benefit, because they are willing to pay premium price to have a better appearance and to boost their confidence. In moderate contact customized service (e.g. travel agent) and low contact non-personalized service (e.g. dry cleaner) consumers perceive special treatments as the second most important benefit. In moderate and low contact services, consumers have less interaction with the service providers. Therefore the noticeable benefit that consumers will value is the special treatment that gives economic value. Although special treatment benefits will not necessarily make consumers to be loyal to the service providers, consumers would choose service providers that offer special treatments.

The results of this study also suggest that consumers' relational response behavior in the three different types of service providers is triggered solely by confident benefit. Special treatment benefit is proven to be an insignificant predictor of consumers' relational benefit. Therefore it is important for service providers to build consumers' confidence in order to generate positive influence on loyalty, word-of-mouth and satisfaction level. Offering special treatments to consumers apparently is not an effective marketing activity that will generate positive influence on loyalty, word-of-mouth and satisfaction level.

Finally the results of this study also suggest that consumers obtain higher perceived relational benefits when they are highly involved with high contact customized service (hair dresser) and moderate contact customized service (travel agent). In low contact non-personalized service (dry cleaner), consumers perceive the same relational benefits regardless of their degree of involvement with the service.

#### Managerial implications

Based on the findings of this study, it is important for service companies in Indonesia to focus on building consumers' confidence in managing the business. For example service provider should hire personnel that are knowledgeable and have qualified skills to deliver the services. Personnel should be able to act as consultants to consumers to give the best possible solution to satisfy consumers' needs. Personnel that have qualified skills will be able to produce good quality of service result that would build consumer confidence and deliver satisfaction. Service companies should also provide service environment that support building consumer confidence. For Indonesian consumers, confidence benefit is apparently the most important aspect required to build customer loyalty. Special treatments offer to consumers is not an effective way to retain loyal customers.

For consumers of moderate contact customized service (e.g. travel agent) and low contact non-personalized service (e.g. dry cleaner), special treatments that give economic value are considered to be the important benefit that consumers seek when they deal with a service company. Therefore, although special treatments benefit will not necessarily make consumers become loyal to a service provider, this benefit is required to help consumers choosing the service companies during consumers' decision making process. Therefore service provider for moderate contact customized and low contact non-personalized should also offer attractive programs in their marketing activities such as price discount, product bundle pricing and sales promotional programs.

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