

## The Impact of Relationship Marketing on Brand Equity with Special Reference to Cinnamon Red Hotel in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract-***This study is based on the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity with special reference to Cinnamon Red hotel in Sri Lanka. The exploratory research highlighted the link between relationship marketing and brand equity of Cinnamon Red hotel as the researcher determined that the front line staffs are really important in this context. The first two objectives were aimed to obtain a deeper theoretical understanding on the concepts of relationship marketing and brand equity. The third objective aimed to analyse the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity. The mixed method was adopted as the research methodology to make better contradictions of the findings. The quantitative analysis was based on the questionnaire method, where the researcher has randomly distributed questionnaires to 60 consumers of Cinnamon Red Hotel within the hotel premises. Additionally, the qualitative analysis was conducted through interviews where 10 consumers of the hotel were interviewed. Firstly, the quantitative analysis explained that relationship marketing has a positive relationship with brand equity. Secondly, from the qualitative analysis it was found that the consumers feel more trust and committed towards the hotel due to relationship marketing. Thus, the consumers that trust and committed towards the hotel are motivated to spread the word of good mouth to others and also to come back to the hotel which will lead to strengthen the brand equity of Cinnamon Red Hotel. Ultimately, based on the data analysis, the research concluded that relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand equity. Furthermore, this study can be considered important in the hotel sector in order to prioritize the strategies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.*

**Key Words** – Brand Equity, Relationship Marketing, Hotel Industry, Sri Lanka

### I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka which is referred as the pearl of the Indian Ocean is a heart touching destination for tourists. The tourism sector of the country is booming as the government is motivated to expand the Sri Lankan tourism sector. As per the statistics, the number of

tourists arrival in Sri Lanka for 2014 was recorded as 1,527,153 which is an increase of 19.8 percent compared to 1,274,593 tourists arrived in 2013 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2014). Therefore, as the nation is experiencing a boom in the tourism sector, the hotel industry is also expanding as the hotel industry is a key for tourism. Hence, the researcher will implement this study on the three star hotels in Sri Lanka. Thus, the three star hotel industry of Sri Lanka consists of many hotels as less capital is required to set up a three star hotel compared to four stars and five star hotels (Bowen, 2001). Additionally, more three stars are in the process of entering to the industry which results to increase the competition. Therefore, the three star hotels industry is very competitive in Sri Lanka. Due to high competitiveness, it is important for hotels to establish strong brand equity to obtain the customers' attention (Aaker, 1991). According to Gummesson (1987), relationship marketing is considered as a useful strategy to enhance competitive advantage. Thereby it is justified that both relationship marketing and brand equity are keys for achieving competitive advantage. In this line of thought, this research is conducted to determine the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity in three star hotels in Sri Lanka with special reference to Cinnamon Red Hotel.

Out of all the three star hotels, this research is implemented to Cinnamon Red hotel. Cinnamon Red hotel is a three star hotel that is established in Colombo which is the commercial capital of Sri Lanka. The researcher conducted an exploratory research to determine the link between relationship marketing and brand equity for Cinnamon Red hotel. In this case, since the current hotel industry is competitive and as Cinnamon Red hotel is new to the market, many people are not aware about the brand. Therefore, it is crucial for Cinnamon Red hotel to strengthen its brand equity in order to survive in the competitive market place. As a hotel is a service business, relationship marketing plays a major role. In order to attract the customers towards the brand, the front line staff should serve the customers well and thereby the effort should be to create a positive attitude within the customers. With this regard, the

exploratory research highlighted the link between relationship marketing and brand equity of Cinnamon Red hotel as the researcher determined that the front line staffs is really important in this context”

The researcher has constructed three objectives for this study. It is essential to obtain a good understanding about core concepts of the research. Therefore, the first two objectives are aimed at obtaining the theoretical knowledge about the concepts of relationship marketing and brand equity. The final objective of this study was to analyse the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity.

Furthermore the concepts of relationship marketing and brand equity are considered as popular concepts in the marketing literature. In the marketing literature despite the fact that many researchers have done in-depth studies about these two concepts separately, the studies conducted to analyse the impact of these two areas to each other is limited. Therefore, the real impact of relationship marketing on brand equity is still unknown. As a result, the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity still remains as a question to be answered. Thereby, this research is aiming to answer this question and address the research gap.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Relationship marketing

The concept of relationship marketing was initially defined by Berry (1983) as the process of attracting, establishing, and maintaining strong long term profitable customer relationships. Later a more thorough definition was introduced by Gronroos (1994, pp:327), where relationship marketing was defined as the process of *“establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met, and this done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises.”*

Relationship marketing was introduced as opposed to the traditional marketing concept of transactional marketing. Therefore, in order to understand the concept of relationship marketing better, it is suggested to compare relationship marketing with transaction marketing. Initially, according to Christopher *et al.* (1991) transaction marketing is where the organization’s focus is to attract customers and thereby perform a particular transaction at the point of sale. On the other hand, Webster (1992) stated that relationship marketing is the focus of converting transaction customers in to long term business partners. According to Webster (1992), relationship marketing is adopted to create a positive mentality in the minds of the consumers where they will

get the feeling of belongings for the organisation. Thus, Gronroos (1994) stated that while transaction marketing is a short term approach, relationship marketing is a long term approach that concentrates on long term customer life time value. In the same line of thought, Rust *et al.* (2011) stated that organisations must shift their focus to achieve long term customer relationships, in order to increase customer life time value in this competitive environment. Rust *et al.* (2011) argued that this activity requires the organisation to reinvent its marketing department from transaction marketing orientation to relationship marketing orientation. Additionally, in a study Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe (2012) stated that ultimate objective of relationship marketing is to convert the short term transaction customers into long term profitable customer relationships.

Furthermore, Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined relationship marketing in terms of trust and commitment, where they stated that in order to develop long term customer relationships, the organisation must win the trust of the consumers and thereby the customers commitment towards the organisation should increase. This is done by the mutual fulfillment of the promises. Thus Morgan and Hunt (1994) stated that the concept of trust exists when one party has the confidence over another party in terms of integrity and reliability. According to them, the degree to which the exchange partners trust each other is important to understand the strength of marketing relationships. On the other hand, Morgan and Hunt (1994, pp:23) defined the term commitment as *“an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it, that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely.”* The ultimate finding of Morgan and Hunt (1994) was that when the organisation is able to win the trust of the customer, then correspondently the customer’s commitment towards the organisation will increase and thereby the relationship between the customer and the organisation will be established. Therefore, trust and commitment are considered as two key principles in relationship marketing.

### B. Brand equity

In the competitive market environment where many competitors are operating, it is important for the organisation to develop strong brand equity in the market place. According to Simon and Sullivan (1993) there are two major reasons for organisations to study the concept of brand equity. First is the financially based motivation where the organisation estimates the value of the brand for accounting and merger or acquisition

purposes. However, the accountant's definition of brand equity is different from the marketing perspective. According to Wood (2002) the concept of brand equity was initiated in the marketing literature in order to visualize the relationship between the customers and the brands. In other words, to understand the degree at which the customers perceive a particular brand (Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995). Thus, in the marketing perspective brand equity has been defined by majority of the authors in different ways. However, Lederer and Hill (2001) stated that in the marketing literature there is no agreement on the definition of brand equity.

Initially, Leuthesser (1988) initiated a broader definition for brand equity as the set of associations and behaviour of the brand's customers, channel members and parent organisation that allows the brand to generate higher volumes and margins. Thus, Aaker (1991) constructed a definition for brand equity as the set of brand assets that are linked to a brand, and these assets can add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to the firm's customers.

In this study, the researcher has used the brand equity model constructed by Aaker (1991) which is accepted by many scholars. According to Aaker (1991), brand equity has five stems, they are, brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets. Aaker (1991) argued out of the five components, brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty has a more direct impact on brand equity than other priority assets.

#### C. *The relationship between Relationship Marketing and Brand Equity*

Firstly, it is important to understand whether relationship marketing has an effect on brand awareness. With regard to Morgan and Hunt (1994), when the consumer trusts a brand, then it implies that the consumer is committed towards the brand which establishes a customer relationship. In this line of thought, in a study, Anderson (2005) stated that by creating strong relationships with the customers, the organisation will be able to increase brand awareness as brands that the customers trust are the brands that drive to the minds of the customers quickly. This is because the trusted brands will always be on the top of the list when consumers make a purchase. Therefore, the literature suggests that relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand awareness.

Secondly, it is important to understand the effect of relationship marketing on brand loyalty and brand associations. In a study done by Jesri *et al.* (2013) they found out that commitment and trust has a positive

impact on brand loyalty. This is because, when the organisation is able to win the trust of the customers, then the customers will feel that the organisation is more reliable and thus a positive attitude will be established in the mindset of the customers towards the organisation. This will motivate the customers to be committed to make repurchases and spread the word of good mouth to others which enhances brand loyalty. According to Berman (2005), the spread of word mouth and repurchase behaviour result to increase brand loyalty. Thus according to Keller (2003) the key for the increase in brand associations is also resulted by the increase in the spread of the good mouth.

Thirdly, according to Aaker and Jacobson (1994) a service organisation should create a greater perceived quality for the consumers in order to develop long term customer relationships. This is because, in the competitive industry, the consumers will need a reason to purchase a particular brand continuously. Thus, the organisation should create this urgency by providing a greater perceived quality. Stock and Wayne (2005) stated that in order to increase perceived quality all the employees of the organisation must be committed to develop relationships with the customers. According to Katzenback and Santamaria (2001), in order to increase relationship marketing, it is important to fire up the front line employees to serve the customers well. In the same line of thought, Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe (2013) stated that when the front line employees are relationship orientated, it will create the positive mentalities which enable the employees to provide a higher perceived value for the customers.

Furthermore, in a study Wolter (2009) has found out that when the organisation is able to increase its relationship marketing, it results to increase each of the components of the brand equity model. Firstly, when the customers trust and are committed towards a brand, then they will be motivated to repurchase the product and spread the word of good mouth to others, which increases brand awareness, brand loyalty, and brand associations. Secondly, when the staffs of the organisation are relationship marketing orientated, they will be motivated and committed to serve the customers well and deliver a greater value to the customers as relationship marketing makes the front line staff understand that the customer is the king. This will enhance the perceived quality of the brand. Therefore, Wolter (2009) stated that relationship marketing and brand equity has a positive relationship.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Conceptual framework

This study is conducted with the core purpose of determining the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity. In this study, the researcher will measure relationship marketing in terms of commitment and trust as commitment and trust are recognized as two essential keys for relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, in order to measure relationship marketing, the Commitment and trust model of relationship marketing suggested by Morgan and Hunt (1994) is used.

On the other hand, the researcher will use brand equity model of Aaker (1991) in order to measure the brand equity. Based on the literature review, Wolter (2009) stated that relationship marketing has positive relationship with brand equity. Therefore based on the literature review, the following conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 and the hypothesis are constructed by the researcher.

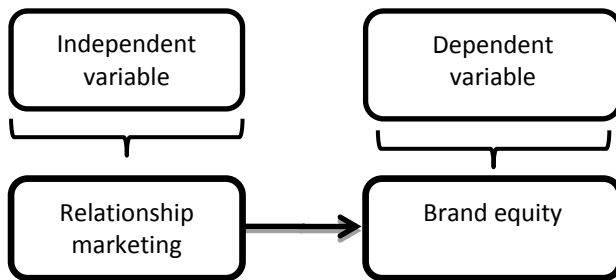


Figure 1: Conceptual framework  
Source: Author developed from the literature

*Hypothesis: There is a positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity.*

#### B. Sampling procedure

Thus, as this study is focused on analysing the impact of relationship marketing on Cinnamon Red hotel's brand equity, it is important to determine the consumer's perspective of the Hotel, and thereby the population of this study is the consumers of Cinnamon Red hotel. However, in research it is difficult to survey the entire population as it is costly and time consuming. Thereby, the researcher has determined a sample size of 60 consumers. The researcher distributed the questionnaires to 60 consumers randomly within the hotel premises. In addition, to the questionnaire the researcher also interviewed 10 consumers in order to obtain deeper and accurate information and thereby make contradictions with the quantitative analysis.

#### C. Research Onion

Moving on to the research methodology, the researcher used the research onion model as shown in Figure 2.

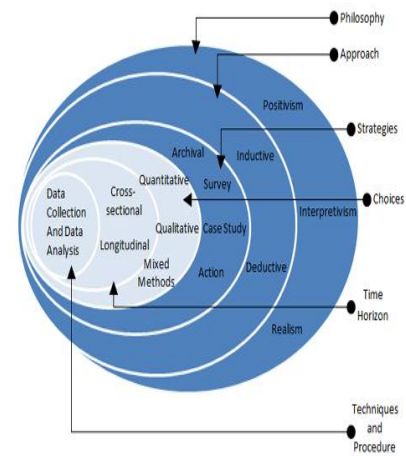


Figure 2: Research Onion  
Source: Saunders *et al.* (2009)

Initially, the research philosophy implies the way in which the research views the world (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The chosen philosophy will enable the researcher to develop the research strategy and the methods used as a part of the strategy. In this study the researcher is following the "positivism" method as the research philosophy. Secondly, the deductive research approach has been used by the researcher where existing theories and concepts have been gathered to analyse the research gaps. Thirdly, the research strategy which is used in this study is the survey method where the researcher collects data through a questionnaire and interview. In the survey the researcher will distribute the questionnaire to 60 consumers randomly within the premises of Cinnamon Red Hotel and interview 10 consumers in order to gain deeper insights of information about the hotel. Fourthly, this study is implemented based on the mixed method where the researcher will conduct the questionnaire method and interviews. Finally, the time horizon of this study is cross sectional as this study will be conducted only at one point of time.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

#### A. Quantitative analysis

In the quantitative analysis, the researcher used the questionnaire method in order to collect responses from 60 consumers to measure the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity. Thus the sorted results of the questionnaire were then entered in to the IBM SPSS (ver. 20) software to generate the quantitative analysis of this study.

### 1) Reliability test

Table 1: Reliability Test

Variable name	Cronbach's Alpha	N.O of Items Valid
Relationship Marketing	.879	10
Brand equity	.884	14

Source: Survey data (2015)

The reliability of the data is essential because ultimately any research should be trustworthy if the research is to be successful. In the reliability test, the major concern should be made for understanding the Cronbach's Alpha which is used to measure the internal consistency of the data. According to Walsh (1995), the Cronbach's Alpha should be greater than 60 percent. Walsh (1995) argued that if the Cronbach's Alpha is greater 60 percent, it explains that the internal consistency of the variables is reliable. Firstly, the Cronbach's Alpha of relationship marketing is indicated in the Table 1 as 0.879 which means that the internal consistency of the relationship marketing variable is 87.9 percent reliable. Secondly, the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.884 states that the internal consistency of the brand equity variable is 88.4 percent reliable. Therefore, according the Table 1, it is justified that this research is reliable.

### 2) Correlations

Table 2: Correlations

		BA	CRM
Relationship marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.793*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Cause Related Marketing	Pearson Correlation	.793**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

Source: Survey data (2015)

Initially, the Pearson correlation analyse the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity. In Table 2, the Pearson correlation is indicated as 0.793 which is a positive value. This states that when relationship marketing increases by 1, brand equity will increase by 0.793. Therefore, the Pearson correlation shows that relationship marketing and brand equity has a positive relationship. The next important section is the two tailed significance. According to Landau and

Everitt(2004) the relationship between two variables are regarded as significant only when the two tailed significance value is less than 0.005. Therefore, based onTable 2, as the statistical significance is 0.000,it implies that there is a significant positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity.

### 3) Linear regression

Table 3. Linear regression

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.793	0.628	.0622	.2580913

- Predictors: (Constant), Relationship Marketing
- Dependent Variable : Brand Equity

Source: Survey data (2015)

After collecting the data from the questionnaire, the linear regression was run on the system and the outcome is shown in the Table 3. In this study, as the IBM SPSS statistics (ver. 20) software is used to analyse the data, the model fit of the study will be analysed by taking the adjusted R-square value in to account. Thus, Table 3 indicates the Adjusted R Square value as 0.622 which can be also expressed as 62.2 percent. The Adjusted R Square value indicates the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity compared to other factors. In this study the Adjusted R Square implies that 62.2 percent of the total variance of brand equity is explained by relationship marketing activities. This shows that relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand equity.

### B. Qualitative analysis

Based on the qualitative analysis, through the interviews the researcher understood that when the consumers feel that Cinnamon Red hotel is relationship marketing orientated, there is a feeling of trust and commitment developed towards the hotel. The hotel should provide a better perceived quality for the consumers in order to win the trust and commitment of the consumers towards the hotel. It was found out that the increase in trust and committed towards Cinnamon Red hotel is the point where the relationship between the consumer and hotel is established. Thus, this relationship will motivate the consumers to spread the word of good mouth to others and also to come back to the hotel again which will strengthen the brand equity. On the other hand, the consumers who stated that Cinnamon Red hotel is less relationship marketing orientated does not have a feeling of trust or commitment towards the hotel. When there is

no trust or commitment, there is no relationship built between the consumer and the hotel. Thereby, the consumer rates the perceived quality of the hotel lower. As a result, the consumer is not motivated to come back to the hotel and in worse the consumer may spread the word of bad mouth to others that will decline Cinnamon Red's brand equity. Therefore, based on the qualitative analysis, the results of interview show a positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

From the literature review, the author developed a hypothesis as "Relationship marketing has a positive relationship with brand equity." On the other hand, the data analysis has satisfied the hypothesis proposed by the author. In the quantitative analysis, firstly according to the Correlation analysis, the Pearson correlation was indicated as 0.793. This implies that when relationship marketing increases by 1, the brand equity will increase by 0.793. In addition, the two tailed significance is 0.000 which is less than 0.005 which indicates that the positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity is significant at 99 percentage of confidence interval (Landau and Everitt, 2004). According to the regression test, the adjusted R Square is 62.2 percent which states that total variance of brand equity is explained by 62.2 percent of relationship marketing. Therefore based on the quantitative analysis, it can be stated that there is a significant positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity.

Secondly, from the interviews, it was found that the consumers who believed that Cinnamon Red hotel is relationship marketing oriented, stated that they have the feeling of trust and commitment towards the hotel as the hotel provides quality service and value. Thus, the development of trust and commitment towards the hotel is the key for developing the relationship between the consumer and the hotel (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The consumers who have good relationship with the hotel are motivated to come back to the hotel and also spread the word of good mouth to others. However, many consumers justified that Cinnamon Red hotel is less relationship orientated and highlighted that they do not trust or committed towards Cinnamon Red hotel. Whereby when there is no trust or commitment towards the hotel, there is no relationship developed between the consumer and the hotel (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). As a result of this, the consumers are not motivated to neither come back to the hotel nor recommend this hotel to others.

Therefore, from the data analysis, it was found that when Cinnamon Red has good relationship marketing practices, then the consumers will feel that they can trust the hotel and thereby the consumers will be committed to make purchases from the Cinnamon Red. Thereby, when they are willingness to come back and spread the word of good mouth increase, this will ultimately enhance brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). In addition, according to Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe (2013) when the employees are relationship marketing orientated, the employees will be motivated to provide a better customer service which will lead to increase the perceived quality of the hotel.

Therefore it can be seen that the increase in relationship marketing will lead to increase brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and perceived quality of Cinnamon Red hotel. Overall, from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of this research, it is justified that there is a positive relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity and thereby the hypothesis of this study is satisfied. Based on the research findings the following model in Figure 2 is constructed by the author.

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research undertaken has proved that relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand equity. Through an exploratory research, the researcher highlighted the link between relationship marketing and brand equity of Cinnamon Red hotel as the researcher determined that the front line staffs are really important in this context. Therefore, this study focuses on the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity in three star hotels in Sri Lanka with special reference to Cinnamon Red Hotel.

Based on the data analysis, the research concludes that relationship marketing has a positive relationship with brand equity. This was proved by the quantitative analysis where it was found that there is a positive correlation and linear regression between relationship marketing and brand equity and also this relationship is significant. Additionally, the qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to understand why relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand equity. The researcher determined that though relationship marketing, Cinnamon Red should be able to increase the trust and commitment within the consumers towards the hotel. Thus, the relationship between the consumer and the hotel will be established at the point where the consumer has greater trust and commitment towards the hotel (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Thereby, this relationship with the hotel will motivate the consumer to

come back to the hotel again and further spread the word of good mouth to others which will strengthen Cinnamon Red's brand equity (Berman, 2005).

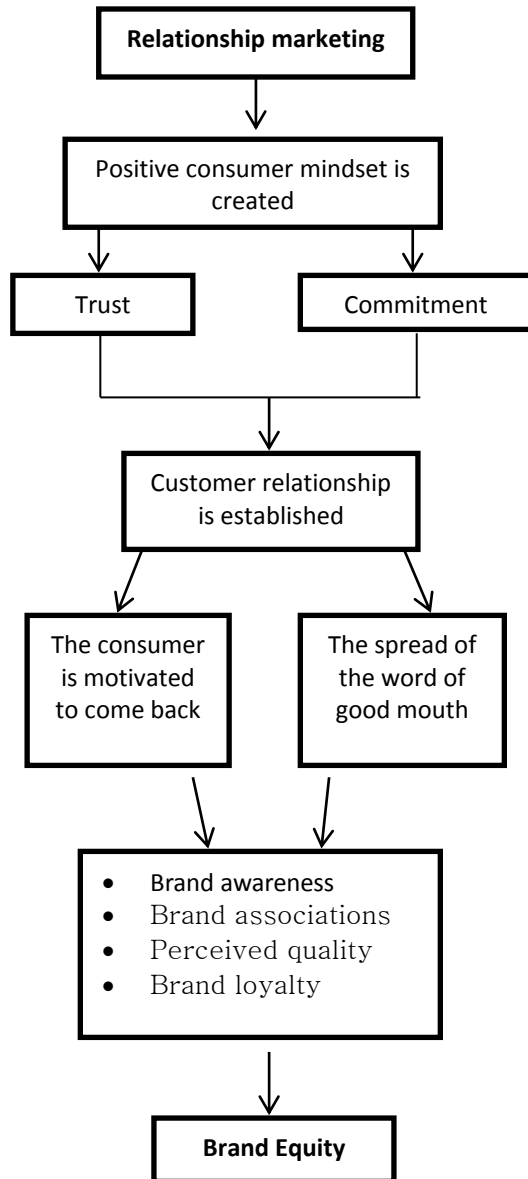


Figure 2: The positive impact of relationship marketing on brand equity

Source: Author developed from the literature and the research findings

## VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research undertaken has proved that relationship marketing has a positive impact on brand equity. With regard to the research findings, the researcher has justified certain recommendations. Initially in order to successfully implement relationship marketing practices,

the researcher recommends the top management to inject the relationship marketing mindset to the entire hotel employees. When the hotel staff are relationship marketing orientated, then they will be motivated to serve the customers well and thereby increase the perceived value of the hotel (Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe, 2013). Secondly, the researcher recommends the management of Cinnamon Red hotel to obtain consumer details and create a consumer data base. Thus, in relationship marketing it is very important to study the consumers and to do this it is important to obtain customer details and thereby create a customer database.

Furthermore, it will be better for Cinnamon Red hotel to provide special discounts for the profitable consumers on their birthdays. These relationship marketing practices can create a positive mentality within the consumers and thereby increase the trust and commitment towards the hotel. As discussed, an increase in trust and commitment will result in establishing a relationship between the consumer and the hotel. As a result of this the consumer's willingness to come back to Cinnamon hotel will increase and further the spread of the word of good mouth will increase which will strengthen the brand equity of Cinnamon Red hotel in the long run.

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