OPERATIONS

Beyond the Transaction: Sales Development and Relationship Management in a Local Building-Materials Trading Business

An Exploratory Case Study of Hutaib Traders, Karjat, Maharashtra

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Abstract

Small building supply businesses are typically positioned between building manufacturers and customers, whose needs can be specific and time sensitive. In such businesses, sales and customer and supplier relationship management are key areas, as well as the management of supply and onward delivery to building sites. An exploratory qualitative case study is used to investigate these areas for Hutaib Traders, a Karjat (Maharashtra) business which supplies plumbing, sanitary and water storage goods. Data was collected by, and analysed from, fieldwork completed as part of an Operations and Business Development internship between 8 th June and 18 th July 2026. This comprised 40 site visits, conversations with 13 plumbers, attendance at two brand related events and customer, product and price research. Further data collection included assisting with quotations, managing links with suppliers and confirming deliveries. Three key operational areas were identified. Firstly, the business could not fulfill a request for 150 pieces of GI pipe as supplies had to be obtained from Bhiwandi. Secondly, there appeared to be a mismatch between those in need of plumbing services and those plumbers looking for work. Thirdly, an estimated plumbing and sanitary goods requirement for a 10 farmhouse project in Lakaran was identified, equivalent to around ₹21 lakh. Again, this is an estimated potential opportunity rather than an actual order or sale. It appears that customer and supplier relationship management are interlinked. Plumbers can be both customers and service influencers. Furthermore, large contracting and building firms present potential high volume markets. Finally, supplier delivery times affect what can be promised to customers. A relationship and fulfilment model is suggested, together with basic systems for managing customer and plumber information. Structured lead generation, supplier delivery time monitoring and delivery confirmation are also advised. As a single qualitative fieldwork based case study, statistical generalization is not possible from this research.

Keywords: business-to-business marketing; customer relationship management; supplier relationship management; building supplies; lead time; order fulfilment

JEL classification: M31; L14; L23

1 Introduction

As well as relationships, trading is also involved in many areas. Building material traders provide commodities such as piping, sanitary ware, baths, and water/storage systems for plumbers, contractors, builders, sites and the general public. Despite these commodities being tangible, a trader's expertise, brand, stock and purchasing and negotiating will all play a part in influencing and maintaining a customer's trading relationship.

Trade intermediaries exist between brands and/or suppliers and end-users. As well as depending on suppliers for commodities, price, location and distribution, traders must understand their customers and/or end-users and ensure that those involved are comfortable using a trader's services. Failures in either of these areas may thus adversely impact upon a traders service offering to sites.

Building material retailer Hutaib Traders in Karjat was analysed to ascertain relationship management methods. UPVC, PVC, CPVC, GI and HDPE piping and plumbing, together with sanitary ware, baths and water/storage were amongst the commodities traded. Throughout my internship I was able to observe relationship management by, for example, undertaking market development, visiting sites, and talking to plumbers. Brand and also delivery activities were also analysed.

To what extent does a trader's relationship management (with both customers and suppliers) and order processing influence its market development? The research is informed by four sub-issues: (1) What are the different functions of customers?; (2) How do supplier and brand elements influence a trader's service?; (3) What knowledge about market development, order processing and relationship management has been obtained from fieldwork?; and (4) What cost-effective management options may further support market development?

Although this research does not claim to apply to all building material traders (or even to the construction industry generally), it does add local relevance as it examines in one location customer and supplier relationship management. Rather than separately analysing relationship management, market development and order processing, these are explored together.

2 Literature review and background theory

2.1 Relationship marketing

Whilst in the past there has been considerable attention on single transactions, relationship marketing relates to the creation, direction and improvement of relationships. In addition to recognising the significance of relationships (Berry, 1983), Dwyer et al. (1987) highlighted that buyer-supplier relationships can develop through stages of awareness, search, development, dedication and possibly even termination. Within a local trade setting, regular site attendance and recommendation can also produce valuable relationships.

Trust and dedication are central to successful relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Building material traders can increase trust by supplying good advice, being transparent about pricing and communicating and complying with information. Longevity in buyer-supplier relationships is also related to trust and mutual dependence (Ganesan, 1994). Again, this demonstrates how service and price can be important.

2.2 Customer relationship management

Although commonly linked with customer information, CRM is in fact a complex and strategic process. It includes strategy design, value creation, inter-channel coordination, information management and assessment (Payne and Frow, 2005). For a small trader, rudimentary CRM may include details relating to customers, preferred brands and customers' enquiry, ordering and assessment history. Again, it is not so much the technology that is important, but the degree to which suitable information is both collected and used.

In business markets there are often several customers and these may have distinct functions. Plumbers can both advise and/or dictate commodity requirements. Contractors may be responsible for purchasing and builders can regulate expenditure. The final decision-maker can then be an individual. Consequently, in relationships a trader will interact with more than just a specific customer. Alongside analysing a customer's trading activity, relationship management must also take account of the power of, and links generated by, different parties.

2.3 Managing supplier relationships and outlet alliances

Traders' service provision is affected by their supplier relationships. Anderson and Narus (1990) analysed the alliance working between distributors and manufacturers and emphasised the significance of collaborative working. Kraljic (1983) proposed that buying should be viewed strategically and that alongside economic effects, supply risks must also be considered. Consequently, when assessing building materials' suppliers, a local distributor should not only analyse pricing but also stock, delivery speed, regularity, goods quality, diversification of supply sources and communication effectiveness.

Supply chain literature frequently stresses the importance of synchronising both physical and information flow. Chopra and Meindl (2016), and Christopher (2016) both highight the significance of supply chain and logistics coordination. Within building materials trading, end-users experience the whole supply chain. Consequently, even if a quotation is provided, the goods must be attainable and delivered within the necessary timescale.

2.4 Research novelty and theoretical approach

Although the literature provides well-established knowledge regarding relationship marketing, CRM and supplier relationships, this research investigates how, within a local building materials trading enterprise, a trader's supplier relationship coordination and customer relationship management jointly affect market development and order fulfilment. This reflects a locally-specific research novelty. It is not being suggested that there is currently no research available relating to outlet and building materials trade.

An overarching theoretical approach is adopted. Good supplier collaboration and supply chain dependability affect stock availability and speed of delivery. This in turn affects traders' service provision. Order fulfilment and communication impact on trust and this can in turn encourage re-ordering and referral. Again, this is not a statistically validated cause-effect model but rather an analytical theoretical framework.

3 Research propositions

These are not statistical based hypotheses and are used within the qualitative research:

- P1 – The quality of relationships that exist between an organisation and its customers and suppliers can influence that organisation's development within its sales market.
- P2 – Plumbers and contractors can both directly and indirectly influence purchasing decisions.
- P3 – Suppliers' stock availability and lead times can influence an organisation's ability to meet customer delivery requirements and in turn maintain customer confidence.

- P4 – Efficient and structured information gathering about customers, plumbers, problems and deliveries can further support relationship management within largely verbal orientated business.

4 Research methodology

4.1 Design

A single-case, qualitative, descriptive and exploratory methodology has been followed. Hutaib Traders was chosen as I was able to directly observe both front and back office relationship management as part of my internship. As such, the investigation aims to analyse and recognise themes. No attempt is made to quantify results or to establish cause and effect.

4.2 Context and timeframe

This research relates to Hutaib Traders, a Karjat, Maharashtra-based trader. It specialises in plumbing, sanitaryware, bath and water storage goods. Fieldwork was conducted as part of my internship in Operations and Business Development between 8 June and 18 July 2026.

4.3 Information sources and gathering

I obtained primary data through observation, note-taking and casual conversation as part of my internship duties. During the internship I visited 40 sites, spoke to 13 plumbers and attended two brand events. Further data gathering involved customer engagement, requirement analysis, brand and pricing analysis, quotation and negotiation support, stock investigation and order coordination together with delivery monitoring. Secondary data sources included company and goods information and relevant academic literature.

As noted above, the statistics reflect my field data. However, this should not be viewed as representing a random or comprehensive sample of Karjat's customers nor as fully listing Hutaib Traders' entire customer base. Likewise, no formal questionnaire or representative survey was executed.

4.4 Sampling and analysis

Sampling was undertaken using both purposive and convenience strategies relating to people, sites and brand contacts. Data was analysed thematically, and grouped into categories such as customer types, plumber influence, market development, supplier and brand assessment, order fulfilment and financial aspects. Together with literature, process modelling and comparison were used for analysis.

4.5 Ethics, confidentiality and constraints

Individual plumbers, customers and brand contacts are anonymised. Confidential business information is also not revealed. Although the company is specifically referenced within this draft, it is mentioned in the underpinning SIP report. Before submitting this research, written permission from the company is required to enable it to be publicly referenced. It is also necessary to verify appropriate ethical clearance (or exemption) for the research, in accordance with relevant institutional guidelines. Constraints include the single-case nature of the research, brief fieldwork duration, non-formal data gathering techniques, limited access to confidential financial data and my intern status. Consequently, this research is interpretative and localised.

5 Results and analysis

5.1 Trader as relationship middle-man

Hutaib Traders is positioned between brands/suppliers and end-users. It is involved in procurement, brand provision, query handling and order coordination. Therefore, it manages both upstream brand and supplier relationships and downstream plumber, contractor, builder, site and private individual relationships.

Table 1. The trader's position between suppliers and end-users

Relationship side	Main parties	What the relationship contributes	Potential point of vulnerability
Upstream	Manufacturers, brands and suppliers	Product range, quality information, pricing, dealer terms, availability and dispatch	Stock unavailability, changing prices or delayed dispatch
Intermediary	Hutaib Traders	Requirement matching, product choice, quotation, coordination and follow-up	Manual tracking and dependence on individual communication
Downstream	Plumbers, contractors, builders, sites and individual customers	Demand, product influence, order volume, referrals and payment	Brand switching, price competition or unmet delivery expectations

This position means that the trader cannot manage customer expectations independently of supplier performance. A customer may judge Hutaib Traders on whether material reaches a site on time, even where the delay originates with an upstream supplier or transport arrangement. The intermediary must therefore communicate realistic lead times and maintain alternatives where possible.

5.2 Different customer groups perform different roles

The field observations and the business's customer profile indicate that customer groups contribute to sales in different ways. Plumbers work directly with the products and may recommend or influence brand selection. Contractors coordinate requirements across projects and may generate repeat or higher-volume orders. Builders represent project-level opportunities across multiple product categories. Individual customers typically purchase for construction, renovation, repair or maintenance. Construction sites are important delivery destinations where accuracy and timing become visible measures of service.

Table 2. Customer groups, their observed roles and relationship-management implications

Customer group	Observed / expected role in the buying process	Relationship-management implication
Plumbers	Product users, recommenders and potential referrers; may work across several sites	Maintain regular contact; record product and brand preferences; share availability updates
Contractors	Coordinate material requirements and project schedules; potential repeat and volume demand	Track active projects, quotations, quantities and follow-up dates
Builders	May generate multi-category requirements across construction projects	Identify projects early and prepare project-oriented quotations
Individual buyers	Purchase for house construction, renovation and maintenance	Provide clear product guidance, suitable options and post-sale support

Customer group	Observed / expected role in the buying process	Relationship-management implication
Construction sites	Final delivery locations where material quantity, specification and timing matter	Confirm site details, dispatch status and receipt of goods

Further, even though a plumber's own spending may not be high, they may also affect consumers' brand buying decisions. Similarly, although a large project may show much potential value, until there is clarity over the specification, finances and timescales along with confirmation of decision making powers – the value is in doubt.

5.3 Plumbers and coordination within the local market

Whilst speaking to 13 plumbers during the internship, I recognised their part within the market. It also appeared that there was a disconnect between those needing plumbing services, and those wishing to offer such services. There seems to be scope for a coordination issue whereby although there is both demand and supply for plumbing services, there may be no efficient method of linking these together.

Although this was recognised, the research did not include a formal survey of either consumers or plumbers, nor was there assessment of the extent of the issue. Nor was a digital coordination tool investigated. Despite this lack of information, there is still potential to develop a more up-to-date database of plumbers and to introduce a coordination mechanism based on consumer consent. Consumers could then identify plumbers and plumbers could also become aware of possible business opportunities. Coordination must however have well defined roles and must not suggest that a tradesperson provides guaranteed quality work.

5.4 Coordinating suppliers and the significance of lead time

Analysis of brands and suppliers highlighted various factors that are relevant when deciding which product or brand to select. Apart from quality and cost, issues such as stock levels, consumer demand, competition, retailer mark-ups and incentives and consumer acceptance were evident. Thus, despite a product being low in cost, if it cannot be consistently supplied and/or is not accepted by consumers, it may not be a commercially viable option.

Furthermore, I noted that 150 pieces of GI pipe could not be delivered on the day of ordering. As the pipe was sourced from Bhiwandi, extra time was needed for it to be sent to either the business or consumer. This example highlights how a consumer or business order can be affected by the supply chain. Note should however also be taken that this does not represent poor overall supplier performance, but rather underlines how even one order can be influenced by the supply chain.

Table 3. Observed supply situations, their operational implications and possible controls

Observed situation	Operational implication	Possible control
150 lengths of GI pipe required on the same day; supply had to be sourced from Bhiwandi	The required quantity and delivery deadline could not be met immediately	Check stock and source location before confirming a delivery commitment; communicate realistic lead time
Different brands discussed with representatives	Selection involves quality, price, availability, margin and acceptance	Use a periodic brand/supplier scorecard and maintain alternatives for important items

Observed situation	Operational implication	Possible control
Site delivery requires coordination and confirmation	A dispatch record alone does not establish successful receipt at the correct site	Record dispatch, transporter details, expected arrival and customer/site confirmation

Proposition 3 can be applied through analysis of the GI piping situation as an example. Supplier delivery times can influence a traders ability to deliver to a customers timescale. However, this does not show how often this occurs nor the associated monetary consequences.

5.5 Major projects and opportunity qualification

During fieldwork, a potentially large 10 farmhouse development site was also identified within Lakaran. It was estimated that this would require c.₹21 lakhs worth of plumbing and sanitary goods. Again, this represents an opportunity rather than a definite contract or sale. Importantly, this highlights the importance of planned opportunity identification. Fieldwork can identify greater and more complex future demand than is typically encountered on a traders sales floor.

Further qualification would be required to convert this type of opportunity into a sales forecast. Key qualifying data would consist of: project status, quantity, development phase, product details, bill of quantities, key personnel, procurement timetable, alternative quotes and agreed payment methods. Furthermore, information regarding the probability of incremental purchasing would also be useful. Such information can then assist traders in effectively separating good opportunities from definite ones.

5.6 Relationship to fulfilment cycle

It seems that both supplier and customer management are interlinked. Good supplier communication ensures products are available. Products and correct pricing then allow the trader to address customer needs. Controlled despatch and delivery confirmation bolster customer assurance. Contented customers can become repeat and/or referral customers. Repeated sales can then further underpin a traders bargaining power with brands and suppliers.

Supplier coordination and reliable sourcing ↓ Product availability, realistic lead times and competitive quotations ↓ Customer response and order confirmation ↓ Dispatch coordination and site delivery ↓ Delivery confirmation, trust and issue resolution ↓ Repeat orders, referrals and stronger business relationships

This framework is conceptual and derived from the case observations. It should not be read as a tested causal model. It highlights why a missed supplier update or unconfirmed delivery can weaken the value created by otherwise effective customer outreach.

5.7 Finance-related considerations

The SIP report identifies pricing, margins, credit, payment follow-up, supplier terms and stock-related working capital as relevant dimensions of the trading model. These matters affect relationship quality because a quotation must balance customer competitiveness with the margin available to the trader, while credit and collection arrangements influence cash flow. Stocking fast-moving products may improve responsiveness but ties up funds; relying entirely on supplier dispatch may reduce inventory requirements but expose the business to lead-time risk. The internship material

does not provide verified financial figures, so this paper does not calculate margins, working-capital ratios or profitability.

5.8 Summary of findings

Table 4. Summary of case-based findings and their interpretation

Theme	Case-based finding	Interpretation
Relationship dependence	Sales development involves contact with customers, plumbers, contractors and suppliers	Relationships are part of the service proposition, not an activity separate from selling
Plumber influence	13 plumbers were contacted during field exposure; plumbers can influence product and brand selection	Their network role may exceed the value of their direct purchases
Supplier lead time	A 150-length GI pipe requirement could not be met on the same day because sourcing was required from Bhiwandi	Availability and dispatch time should be checked before promising delivery
Project prospecting	A ten-farmhouse opportunity in Lakaran was estimated at about ₹21 lakh in plumbing and sanitary materials	Large opportunities need qualification and pipeline tracking; this was not a confirmed order
Service-network coordination	A perceived gap was observed between people needing plumbing work and plumbers seeking work	A structured, consent-based referral register may improve matching; scale remains unmeasured
Management systems	Follow-up and communication were largely relationship-led and manual	Simple records can support continuity without requiring expensive CRM software

6 Discussion

Sales development is therefore also related to customer knowledge and supplier co-operation in addition to product supply – again consistent with Payne and Frow (2005). Information should then be analysed and connected to areas of, and control of, value and supply.

In many cases the individual making decisions about purchases differs from those making payments. Therefore there are often several individuals engaged in a transaction. Should a trader only record information for the customer who makes payments then they may overlook someone such as a plumber, contractor or site manager whose actions can affect continuing business. Information should therefore note the roles played by different people in relation to each other and associate these with particular projects (provided that appropriate permissions and confidentiality is observed).

Pipe supply issues have been analysed and this illustrates how these can in turn influence service. As previously noted, co-operation between manufacturers and distributors is significant (Anderson and Narus, 1990) and Kraljic's (1983) supply management strategy is also relevant here. Alongside assessing the products available for purchase, traders must also consider and manage their suppliers. These aspects are integral in determining both procurement costs and the reliability of customer commitments.

The suggested farm house project has also emphasised another sales development concern. Despite a project seemingly offering high value, there is not always a high probability or rapid prospect of

business being secured. Ideally a clear sequence of stages for each project can be followed. These could include: lead generation, market research, design, pricing and price negotiation together with ordering and supply. By doing so, there is less likelihood of ambiguity arising between a project's value and sales activity.

To summarise, a relational business model is able to effectively maintain bespoke service whilst also employing fairly uncomplicated information procedures. Suitable methods may encompass basic fact sheets, routine review meetings and a supply history. As illustrated in strategic CRM, information procedures are only one aspect of an overall customer strategy and should not therefore be seen as a separate objective in themselves.

7 Managerial implications and recommendations

The recommendations below are designed for a small trading business and do not assume the availability of a large technology budget.

Table 5. Recommendations, practical actions and measures

Recommendation	Practical action	Purpose / measure to monitor
1. Customer and plumber register	Record contact, role, location, preferred brands, active projects, last interaction and next follow-up; obtain consent for contact details	Reduce dependence on memory; monitor active contacts and overdue follow-ups
2. Project opportunity pipeline	Classify leads by stage: identified, requirement understood, specification received, quotation submitted, negotiation, confirmed order and closed/lost	Separate estimated opportunities from confirmed sales; monitor stage movement
3. Supplier and brand scorecard	Review availability, lead time, quality consistency, price, dealer terms, customer acceptance and responsiveness	Compare suppliers on service as well as price; identify alternatives
4. Delivery tracking	Log order date, promised date, source location, dispatch date, transporter, site contact and delivery confirmation	Identify delays and improve communication; monitor on-time delivery where records permit
5. Plumber and contractor engagement	Schedule periodic check-ins, share product information and maintain a transparent referral contact process	Strengthen referrals and understand changing site requirements
6. Quotation and follow-up discipline	Use a standard quotation format and record validity, availability assumptions, delivery estimate and follow-up date	Reduce misunderstandings and improve enquiry conversion tracking
7. Credit and collection discipline	Record agreed payment terms and due dates; follow up consistently and respectfully	Protect cash flow while maintaining customer relationships

The first implementation priority should be a combined customer, plumber and project register, supported by a delivery log. These are relatively low-cost controls and directly address the observed dependence on informal communication. A more advanced CRM platform should be considered only after the business has defined what information it needs and established consistent data-entry practices.

8 Conclusion

This case study investigated the sales and relationship processes used within Hutaib Traders, a local building products trader. Suppliers' coordination and delivery and sales processes appear to be closely interlinked. Plumbers can advise on products and recommend clients. Contractors and builders can offer sales potential via projects. Clients can also engage with Hutaib Traders in sales via building, refurbishing and repair activity.

In addition to the sales process, wider issues can affect a client's perception of a business. As an example, it was not possible to supply 150 sections of GI pipe on the same day as the order was placed as products had to be sourced from Bhiwandi. Therefore, clear communication of lead times is crucial. Furthermore, whilst assessing the potential farm house project in Lakaran highlights the importance of appropriately analysing significant sales potential. Finally, the apparent lack of alignment between those needing plumbing services and plumbers requiring such services suggests there may be merit in further coordinating recommendation processes. However, the extent of this was not quantified.

It is concluded that managing client and supplier relationships should be interlinked. Although personal connections and local knowledge continue to be beneficial, structured methods can be used to enhance and standardise relationship management via contact logging, sales lead identification, supplier evaluation and stock confirmation. Given that this investigation relates to one business and a limited duration of internship, conclusions should be viewed as relating specifically to this case, rather than being indicative of wider industry trends.

9 Limitations and further research possibilities

This investigation was limited by its focus on one business and one internship. Data was obtained via opportunistic engagement. In addition, sales processes, profit margins, client retention and supplier performance information was confidential and therefore not available for analysis. The 40 site visits, 13 plumber engagements and two brand events highlight my engagement experience but do not constitute a representative sample. Likewise, the farmhouse project represents potential sales, not actual sales. The GI pipe example is for explanatory purposes only and does not quantify stock supply problems.

Further research might involve investigating a range of building products traders within Karjat and surrounding areas. Structured interviews could also be held with plumbers, contractors, builders and suppliers. Quotation acceptance rates and stock supply consistency could be analysed over an extended period. In addition, the value of a plumbers' recommending system in optimising service provision could be explored. Finally, the impact of client and stock information systems on client re-engagement could be investigated. Financial analysis could also be performed on a greater scale to evaluate the balance between in-house stockholding and dependence upon supplier lead times.

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There is no external funding associated with this investigation.

Conflict of interest

As this internship was completed at Hutaib Traders, a family business, this is noted in order for readers to consider the background to this investigation. This investigation has been conducted in an academic capacity. Appropriate company and/or institutional clearance for publication should first be ascertained.

Data availability

Internship observation notes and business information have been used within this investigation. Some of this information may be commercially sensitive. Consequently, these sources have not been appended to this manuscript and must not be disseminated without appropriate clearance. An aggregated, anonymised version of non-sensitive observational information may be available following suitable institutional and business clearance.

Ethics and permissions

Prior to journal publication, written consent should be gained to name Hutaib Traders. Ethics clearance, waiver or other institutional statement, if applicable, for journal publication relating to this investigation's internship observations and casual engagement data should additionally be verified with Amity University Mumbai. No formal ethics clearance is claimed for this investigation.

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