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Cecile BOZZO

Assistant Professor

DMSP

Université Paris Dauphine

Place du Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny

75775 Paris cedex 16

tel : + 33-1-44-05-49-34

e-mail : cecile.bozzo@dauphine.fr

Looking at industrial marketing literature over the past two decades, it seems that it has always considered the theme of buying behaviour stability as an important research question. Convinced that organisations are more competitive and strong if they develop long-term relationships with their partners, a great number of researchers have tried to explain the antecedents and / or the consequences of customer loyalty. However, a few researches have recently put into evidence that long term buying behaviour is not always a manifestation of customer loyalty (for example within the IMP papers : Bliemel & Eggert 1998, Bozzo 2001). According to these works, almost two other categories of customers develop long term buying patterns but having motivation to act clearly distinct from loyal customers :

- customers in a situation of captivity (or retention) for whom the behaviour is linked to a dependence towards the supplier because of the existence, or the feeling, of strong barriers to switch

- and customers in a situation of inertia for whom past buying behaviour seems to be the best explanation for future buying behaviour.

This third category of regular buyers has retained our attention. Inertia is a well known concept on consumer markets, and it has been studied for several years. It has been admitted that individual consumers can be involved in an inert buying pattern in order to reduce their cost of thinking or just because they show limited interest towards the alternative brands on the market. However, it seems to be more incongruous on a business to business context. As a matter of fact, industrial buying is supposed to be more rational and structured than consumer buying, and inertia does not fit with these characteristics...

This paper will, then, focus upon one specific kind of long term buying behaviour : inertia. Our main objective is to present the characteristics of this particular state of regular buyers within an industrial context, in order to develop our understanding of this uncommon kind of consumers.

The literature review focuses on repeated buying behaviour. Looking closely at relationship marketing, industrial consumer behaviour and customer loyalty, we underline the fact that all

regular buyers are not loyal. Different kinds of regular buyers exist, on industrial markets as well as on consumer markets. Given this, the literature review leads to the proposition of a conceptual description of inertia that is tested by a quantitative study. This study reveals the existence of three different kinds of inert customers (really inert, unconcerned and blinded) and allows us to make a description of these groups.

I. The concept of Inertia in the industrial marketing field

1. Loyalty, inertia and repeated buying behaviour

Within the extensive field of consumer behaviour research, the conceptualisation and measure of customer's loyalty has always been a central preoccupation for researchers. Since the works of Guest in 1944 researches in both consumer and industrial fields have tried to give an operational approach of the concept. However, looking more closely at the literature, it appears that loyalty has often been reduced to repeated purchasing behaviour. It seems that an unfair reasoning leads to the idea that a customer having a regular and stable buying behaviour with one of his suppliers can be assimilated to a loyal customer. In other words, as industrial customers are not stupid, why would they develop a repeated buying behaviour if they are not loyal to their supplier?

A first answer to this question can be found in the early works of Jacoby and Kyner in 1973. Those two authors gave the first consensual definition of loyalty, that is still used forty years latter. When they gave this definition, they underlined the risk of confusion between simple repeated purchasing behaviour and real loyalty (repeated purchasing behaviour based on positive attitudes towards the exchange partner). Based on an empirical study, they have shown that loyal customers differ from other kind of customers having the same behaviour, on the underlying dynamics of their buying behaviour. They recommended the future researchers to be careful with this distinction in order to avoid confusion and approximation.

A few researches in industrial or consumer marketing have considered this recommendation across time and tried to describe the different kinds of customers behind regular buyers. Some of these works have put into evidence that a regular buyer can be : (1) loyal if his motivations are linked to positive attitudes towards the supplier (the brand), or (2) in a situation of inertia if he is conditioned by habit. In this second situation, the customer does not feel any strong or

deep links with the supplier (any real positive attitude), but repeat the same buying behaviour in order to:

- Reduce the perceived risk linked to a bad choice. If the supplier offers an acceptable level of quality, he won't take the risk of trying an other one (that may result less performing), even if he does not feel any real strong commitment or attachment to this firm.
- Limit the information research process and the cost of thinking (Bawa 1990). As he already knows the supplier, he has no additional effort to make to understand the characteristics, functionality or specificities of its products.

This inert customer keeps his time and energy for other activities (Nicosia, 1966, Engell, Kollat et Blackwell, 1973) and presents low levels of involvement as well as a poor understanding of the differences between the brands (Assaël 1987) or suppliers. Several works have proposed a modelling of this kind of customers (for example: Jeuland, 1979 and Bawa, 1990). According to these works, this repeated buying behaviour process can be conceptualised as : "the incremental choice probability obtained by conditioning on past choice" (Wernerfelt 1991).

Given this, inertia can be defined as a particular state for industrial customers developing regular and stable buying behaviour without any real strong positive feelings.

2. A description of inert industrial buyers

As announced in the introduction, our purpose follows a two step approach : before we can provide any description of inert customers, we first have to isolate inert customers from other regular buyers.

A set of factors encourage business firms to engage in repeated purchasing behaviour. If we look at the more consensual across the literature and the more operational for industrial managers, five of them emerge.

First, a basic factor in all repeated purchase behaviour is satisfaction level (see for example : Anderson, Fornell, Lehman 1994; Churchill & Surprenant 1982; Fornell 1992). Without a minimum of satisfaction, repeated behaviour is not guarantied (except on real monopolistic markets but this situation tends to disappear).

As several studies have demonstrated that satisfaction is a necessary but not sufficient factor (Reicheld 1996), trust and commitment have emerged from many researches over the past ten years as complementary explanatory variables. One of the first and main research on this area was realised by Moorman, Zaltman and Desphandé. in 1992 and 1993. The great contribution of Morgan and Hunt (1994) stills, too, a reference. Since then, a great body of research has been developed, improving the understanding of the two concepts (see for example Smith & Barclay 1997 for trust; Kim & Frazier 1997 or Geyskens & al. 1996 for commitment).

As far as loyal customers are concerned, they present very high levels of satisfaction, trust and commitment (strong positive attitudes). Inert customers develop medium to high levels (below a minimum level the advantages of the relationship would be inferior to their latent dissatisfaction). However, they still inferior to the loyal customers.

Going further, long term relationships are also strengthen by the existence of cooperative links between the customer and his supplier. In moving and unstable environments, involved customers and suppliers are looking for guaranties of long lasting relationships. Cooperation (or partnership) is one of the clearest manifestation of this trend (Grandori 1997, Dyer et Singh 1998). In a cooperative relationship, the two parties work together to develop their common interests and profit (Kim 1999). Stability of buyer behaviour over time is, then, widely reinforced. Cooperation is a particularity of loyal customers. In fact, cooperation needs strong positive attitudes to develop (Anderson and Narus 1991), and these attitudes only exist when the customer is loyal. Indeed, inert customers don't present cooperative patterns.

At the opposite, the influence of non-shared dependence consists mainly in a stabilization of the purchases, based on the perceived risk and cost of a change (Fontenot and Wilson 1997, Ganesan 1994). As a "hostage" of the relationship, the customer develops regular and stable purchases (Jones and Sasser 1997) even if he does not really want it. It is clear that the feeling of dependence doesn't motivate loyal customers (who want to continue the relationship and don't have to). But it won't neither motivate the inert customers (who don't have strong positive attitude towards the supplier, but don't have strong negative ones). Dependence motivates the behaviour of a third category of regular buyers: retained customers. These customers have negative attitudes but develop repeated buying behaviour because they feel they have no other real choice (for a description of retained customers, see Bozzo 2001).

Given what we could find across the literature, five variables allow to differentiate inert customers from other regular buyers (loyal and retained): satisfaction, trust, commitment, cooperation and dependence. More, inert customer can be described as a customer presenting medium to high levels of satisfaction, trust and commitment, and low levels of cooperation and dependence.

II.   **The empirical study**

1.   <u>Design of the study</u>

Following the same reasoning we used for the theoretical part of this research, we tried in this study to isolate, in a first step, inert customers from other regular buyers (loyal and retained). Once we had our inert group of customers, we began the description.

To achieve this study, we needed to select customers having developed repeated purchasing behaviour with one of their suppliers. In order to improve the quality of the selection as well as the response rate to the questionnaire, we decided to use some partner-suppliers. Their role was to give us a list of regular and stable buyers that could be interviewed. Five partner-suppliers proposed a selection of 423 of their customers having a repeated buying behaviour. They were contacted by mail and 28% (117 customers) sent back their questionnaire. The products sold by the five suppliers were all important, strategic, products for the customers, with high frequencies of buying.

Consistent with the literature, five partition variables were used to achieve the cluster analysis:

- satisfaction with the relationship outcomes
- trust in the supplier (firm and salesperson)
- commitment to the relationship
- cooperation with the supplier
- dependence towards the supplier (lack of alternatives, perceived risk, perceived cost).

A set of variables of control, consistent with the past studies on repeated behaviour, was also introduced :

- declared behaviour stability with the supplier
- declared behaviour stability with the other suppliers
- declared future behaviour stability (long term perspective)
- intensity of information research

The Ward method applied to the squared Euclidian distances has been used for the exploratory partition. According to the literature, the expected levels of loyal, retained and inert customers on the five variables are presented in table 1.

	Satisfaction	trust	Commitment	Cooperation	Dependence
Loyal	Very high	Very high	Very high	Medium	Low
Retained	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	High
Inert	High	High	Medium	Low	Low

Table 1 : "expected levels on the partition variable for the three kinds of regular buyers"

The agglomeration schedule seems to confirm a possible three group partition. This three groups exploratory partition leads the following medium level of the individuals on the five variables of partition:

	Satisfaction	Trust	Commitment	Cooperation	Dependence
Group 1	6.1	6.7	6.3	4.3	2.7
Group 2	4.1	4.6	3.0	2.5	4.9
Group 3	5.4	5.9	5.1	3.2	3.4

Table 2 : "levels on the partition variable for the three kinds of regular buyers"

Comparing this results with the expected theoretical scores, it appears that group 1 represents loyal customers, group 2 retained customers and group 3 inert customers. The group of inert customers represents more than 55% of our sample.

2. Description of the inert customers

Considering the group of inert customers, a visual representation of the scores on both partition and control variables can be useful to illustrate the differences between this category and the other regular buyers (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for a comparison of inert customers and the two other categories on the two sets of variables).
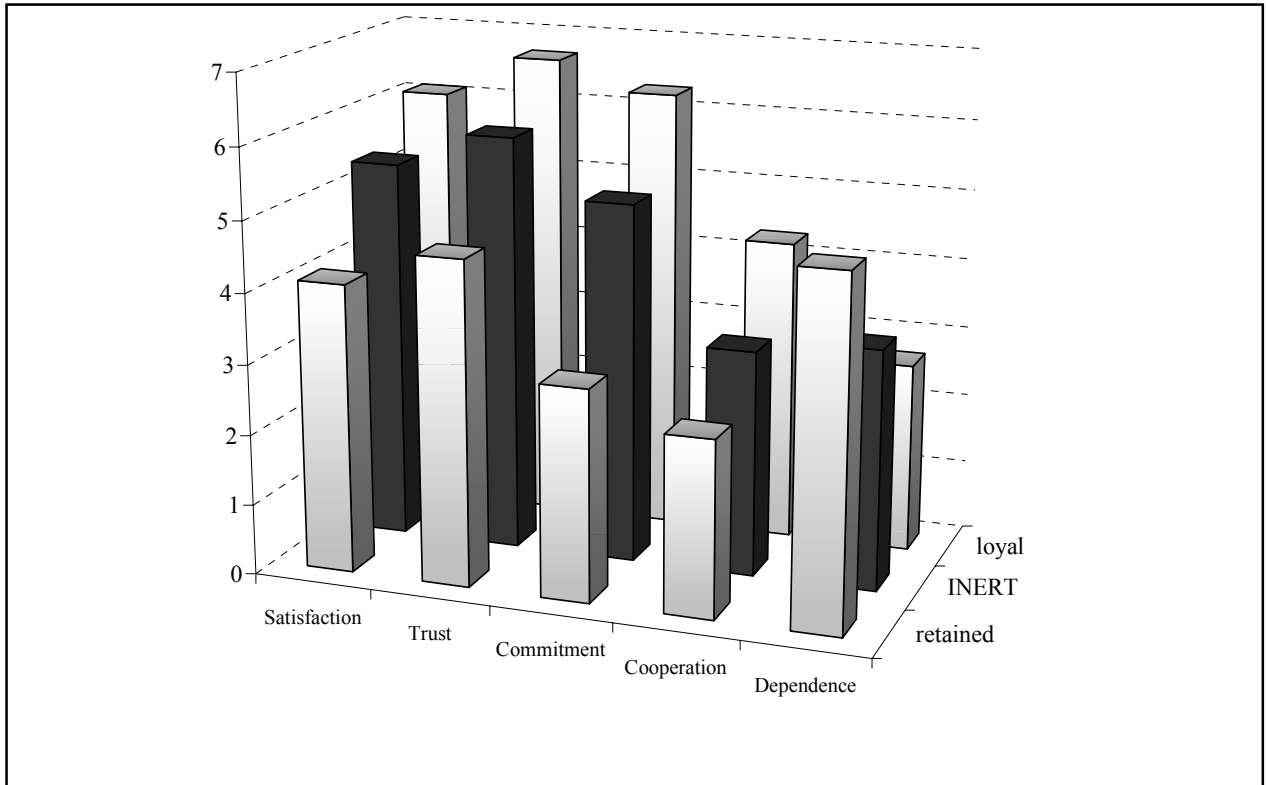
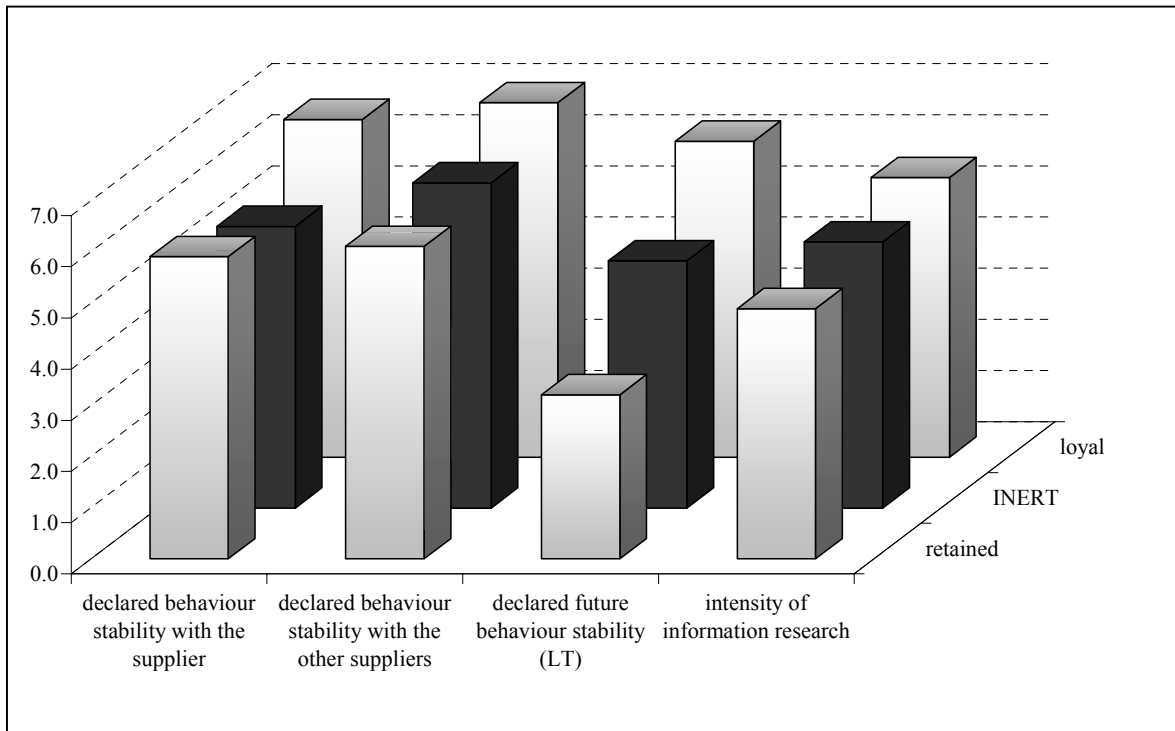Figure 1 : "levels on the partition variable for the three kinds of regular buyers"

Figure 2 : "levels on the variable of control for the three kinds of regular buyers"

Concerning the five partition variables, inert customers appear to be just "in the middle". They are not fully satisfied, they trust but with a reserve, they are quite committed, they are not so far from an engagement in cooperative actions and, at the same time, not so far from

feeling dependent. Inertia represents these kind of relationships that don't have any real justification but still going on over time. And it is not even surprising. By definition, inert customers behave mainly because of their past behaviour. Limited thinking, limited risk taking, limited involvement, …, lead to this apparently inconsistent behaviour. What remains more problematic for managers is the percentage of our sample having this inconsistent behaviour : 55%… How can they manage and control those customers?

As far as the variables of control are concerned, inert customers are again between retained and loyal customers. They seems to be a little more involved in the relationship than retained customers, but less than loyal ones.

3.   Are the inert customers really homogenous?

After this description of the group constituted by inert customers, it is interesting to go back to the partition and look more closely at the agglomeration schedule (Annexe 1). In fact, three different possible partitions appear : three groups as presented bellow, four groups or five groups. The repartition of the interviewees within the groups is presented in table 3.

	group 1	group 2	group 3	group 4	group 5	TOTAL
3 groups	34	18	65	-	-	117
4 groups	34	18	24	41	-	117
5 groups	34	18	24	19	22	117

Table 3 : "repartition of the interviewees within the groups"

Given this, if we look closer at this third group (the inert customers), it appears that it represents more than 55% of the interviewees in the three groups partition. This over-represented group can be split into two sub-groups in a four groups partition, and into three sub-groups in a five groups partition. In order to understand whether inert customers form a homogenous group or not, we have to find the best partition between the three, four or five groups possibilities.

To choose the more efficient partition, we use a specific program called EVALUP[1]. This program compares the different possible partitions among several criteria:
-   The C-Index of Dalrymple-Alford. It reflects the quality of the partition and should present the smallest level as possible. For a perfect partition, the C-Index is equal to zero.

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[1] EVALUP was developed by Professor J. L. Chandon, I.A.E.d'Aix-en-Provence (France) in 1994.

- The point-biserial correlation. It gives an evaluation of the variation between the individuals restored by the partition. This correlation is maximised in a good partition.
- The percent of explained variance by the partition, that should be at a maximum level for a good partition.
- The intra and inter group distances. A good partition presents the smallest intra-group distance and the biggest inter-group distance.

	3 groups partition	4 groups partition	5 groups partition
point-biserial correlation	0.383	0.378	0.407
% of explained variance	14.7%	14.3%	16.6%
C-Index of Dalrymple-Alford	0.123	0.052	0.03
Intra-group distance	27.24	26.27	24.21
Inter-group distance	8.54	8.54	8.54

Table 4: "evaluation of the partition with EVALUP"

As none of the three partitions presents a C-Index equal to zero, we don't have a perfect partition. But the five groups partition presents the smallesft level on the C-Index, the biggest point-biserial correlation, the best percentage of explained variance and the smallest intra-group distance. Thus, it appears to be the best partition among the three possibilities. The three groups partition presents, too, acceptable results (the C-Index is the highest of the three possibilities, but it stills very low).

Given this, we can consider that three groups exist among this sample of regular and stable buyers, but the third one, representing inert customers, is constituted of three sub-groups. It is interesting to notice that, with this new five groups partition, the size of the five groups are not anymore disproportionate.

We had not identify the possible existence of sub-groups within the inert customers during the literature review. The three sub-groups appeared from the data. We will, therefore, describe these three groups comparing them to each other and comparing them to the loyal and retained customers. Figure 3 presents the level of each sub-group on the partition variables, compared to the level of the two other categories of regular buyers (loyal and retained). Table 5 proposes a comparison of means (F-tests) by pair of groups between : (1) loyal customers and each of the three sub-groups; (2) retained customers and each of the three sub-groups; (3) sub-group a, sub-group b, sub-group c.
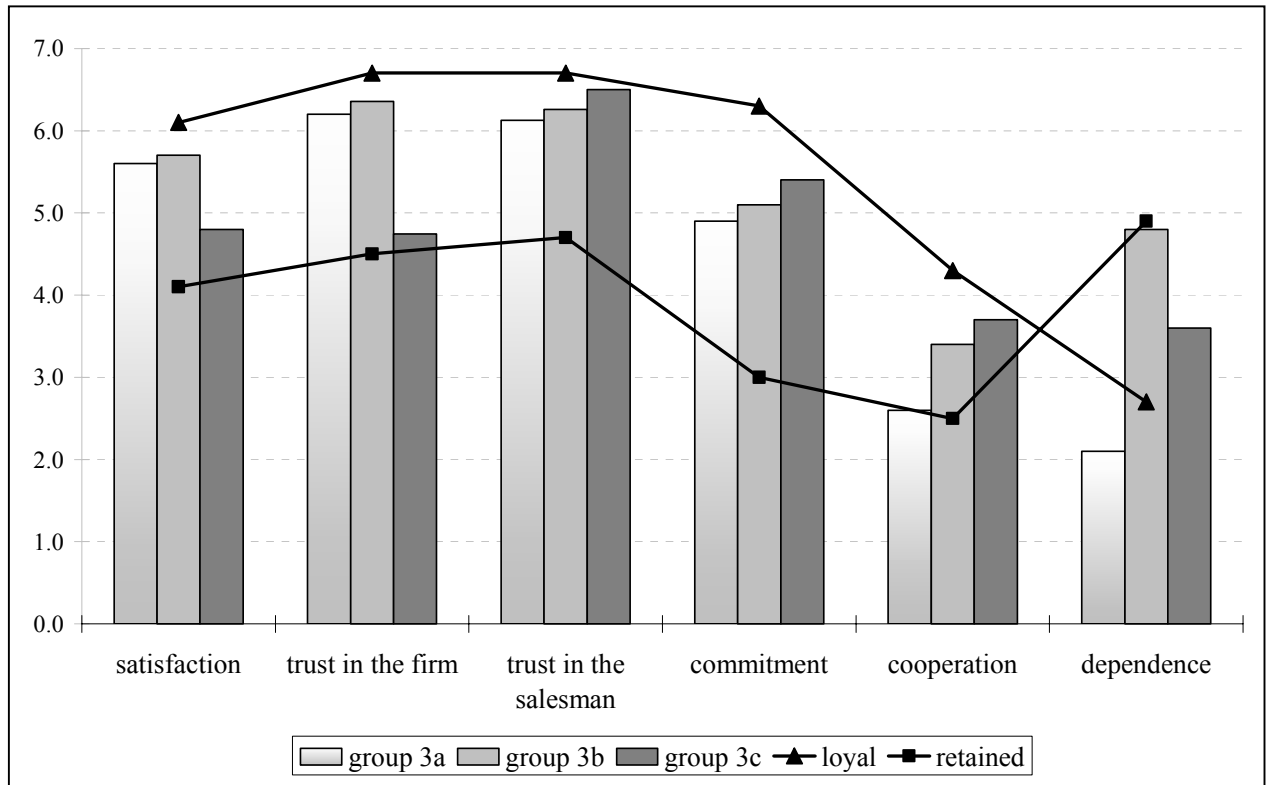
Figure 3: "levels on the partition variable for the three sub-groups of inert customers, compared to the loyal and retained buyers"

	Loyal / Group 3a	Loyal / Group 3b	Loyal / Group 3c
satisfaction	R $_{(9/11)}$	Rp $_{(9/11)}$	R $_{(11/11)}$
trust in the firm	R $_{(9/9)}$	NR $_{(1/9)}$	R $_{(9/9)}$
trust in the salesman	R $_{(7/7)}$	NR $_{(2/7)}$	Rp $_{(5/7)}$
commitment	R $_{(7/7)}$	R $_{(7/7)}$	Rp $_{(5/7)}$
cooperation	Rp $_{(15/20)}$	NR $_{(5/20)}$	NR $_{(6/20)}$
dependence	NR $_{(1/8)}$	R $_{(8/8)}$	NR $_{(1/8)}$

	Retained / Group 3a	Retained / Group 3b	Retained / Group 3c
satisfaction	Rp $_{(8/11)}$	Rp $_{(10/11)}$	NR $_{(4/11)}$
trust in the firm	R $_{(9/9)}$	R $_{(9/9)}$	NR $_{(0/9)}$
trust in the salesman	R $_{(7/7)}$	Rp $_{(6/7)}$	Rp $_{(6/7)}$
commitment	R $_{(7/7)}$	R $_{(7/7)}$	R $_{(7/7)}$
cooperation	NR $_{(1/20)}$	NR $_{(2/20)}$	NR $_{(9/20)}$
dependence	R $_{(8/8)}$	NR $_{(0/8)}$	Rp $_{(4/8)}$

	Group 3a / Group 3b	Group 3a / Group 3c	Group 3b / Group 3c
satisfaction	NR $_{(0/11)}$	NR $_{(5/11)}$	Rp $_{(6/11)}$
trust in the firm	NR $_{(0/9)}$	Rp $_{(8/9)}$	Rp $_{(8/9)}$
trust in the salesman	NR $_{(0/7)}$	NR $_{(0/7)}$	NR $_{(0/7)}$
commitment	NR $_{(0/7)}$	NR $_{(0/7)}$	NR $_{(0/7)}$
cooperation	NR $_{(2/20)}$	NR $_{(7/20)}$	NR $_{(2/20)}$
dependence	R $_{(8/8)}$	Rp $_{(4/8)}$	Rp $_{(4/8)}$

Table n°5: « F tests by pair of groups »

R (11/11) = H0 "means are equal" rejected (rejected for the 11th items)
Rp (9/11) = H0 partially rejected (rejected for 9 of the 11 items)
NR (1/8) = H0 Non rejected (rejected for 1 of the 8 items)

If we analyse the differences between the third group (3a) and the loyal and retained customers, all the descriptive characteristics of inert customers re-appear:

- compared to the loyal customers, this group presents significant inferior levels on satisfaction, trust, commitment and cooperation and the same level on dependence.
- compared to the retained customers, this group presents significant superior levels on satisfaction, trust and commitment, significant inferior level on dependence and the same level on cooperation.

Given this, it seems that this group can be described as the "**really inert**" customers' group. Therefore, if these customers represent the inert customers as described in the theoretical definition, what about group 3b and 3c?

The comparison of group 3b to loyal, retained and really inert customers is, sometimes, quite surprising. As a matter of fact, this group presents:

- high levels of satisfaction and medium levels of commitment, with significant differences compared to loyal and retained customers.
- high levels of trust in the firm and high levels of trust in the salesman, with significant differences compared to retained customers.
- high levels of dependence, with significant differences compared to loyal and really inert customers.

It seems, therefore, that this category could be described as customers perceiving that they are dependent from their supplier (just as retained customers) but still having normal levels of satisfaction, trust and commitment for inert customers. They could represent a specific category of customers who realise that they are dependent from their supplier but who don't mind.

This category can be called "**unconcerned customers**": they know that they are in a weakness situation but don't pay any real attention to it.

Finally, looking at the differences and similarities between the last group (3c) and loyal, retained and really inert customers, we discover that this group presents:

- medium levels of satisfaction and low levels of trust in the firm, with significant differences compared to loyal and really inert customers, but similar levels compared to retained customers.

- High levels of trust in the salesman and medium levels of commitment, with significant differences compared to loyal and retained customers, but similar levels compared to really inert customers.

- Medium levels of dependence. This result has to be balanced depending on the three dimensions of dependence included in our measure: lack of alternatives, perceived risk and perceived cost of change. For the two first dimensions, this group presents high levels of dependence, with significant differences compared to loyal and really inert customers, but similar levels compared to retained customers. For the perceived cost, the levels are low, with significant differences compared to loyal and retained customers, but similar levels compared to really inert customers

Consequently, the repeated behaviour of this last group of customers appears to be linked to their trust in the salesman. As a matter of fact, their level of satisfaction, trust in the firm and commitment are not really high. More, they see limited alternative suppliers on the market and associate a high risk (but a limited cost) to a potential switching behaviour. The only really motivation we can interpret from their answers consists in the positive appreciation of the salesman.

This category can be called "**blinded customers**": their faith in the salesman acts like a screen improving them to see that the relationship is not the best they could have.

Concerning the variables of control, the levels of the three sub-groups on the four variables (declared behaviour stability with the supplier, declared behaviour stability with the other suppliers, declared future behaviour stability and intensity of information research) were the same. This result confirms the fact that these three groups represent three sub-categories of the group constituted by inert customers.

III. Directions for future researches

The main interest of this study is to let three kinds of inert customers emerge from a group that seemed homogenous : the real inert, the inert blinded by the sales representative and the inert unconcerned by his own situation. But if we are able to describe these groups on their levels of satisfaction, trust, commitment, cooperation and dependence, we are not able to explain, deeply, the mechanisms that have created these blinded and unconcerned customers. Therefore, several directions for future researches can be proposed.

1. <u>Really inert customers and inert relationship</u>

One of the possible research area on inert customers would be to introduce the dynamism of supplier policies in the study. In fact, one possible question is: is inertia an inherent characteristic of these customers or is it the result of the supplier's own inertia? We can easily imagine situations where the supplier doesn't take care of his customer, doesn't call him or visit him, doesn't try to have something else than monetary exchanges with him. In this situations of poor relationships, both supplier and customer can "fall asleep". Therefore, customer's inertia can be the reflect of relationship's inertia.

If this kind of situation exists, the main threat for the supplier would be the coming of a new dynamic competitor. Waking up the customer, he may bring him to switch for a more customer-oriented relationship.

2. <u>Unconcerned customers</u>

These customers seem to accept their situation of dependence. However, this group doesn't seems to be very consistent with the characteristics of industrial buying and industrial buyers.

For example, how can a buying centre accept this kind of situation? It would be interesting to check whether these kind of situations occur when the decision to buy is taken by one person or by a buying centre.

More, the size and the revenue of the firm may have an impact on this kind of behaviour. We could not find any real impact in our study. But, one possible explanation for this group can be that powerful firms, who daily buy a great number of products, don't mind being dependent on their supplier for one of these products.

Last, we tried to have in our sample suppliers selling important, strategic, products to their customers. But some different degrees of perceived importance between the customers may have created this group of unconcerned.

As a conclusion, future researches could control the effects of these kind of variables on the behaviour of this group of inert customers.

3. <u>Inert customers blinded by the sales representative</u>

If one goes back to the literature keeping in mind the description of our blinded customers, he would find some very useful light on the problem and some possible directions for future researches.

As the major source of influence for this category of regular buyers is their trust in the salesperson, it is central for the supplier to understand the reasons why this trust is so deep. As a matter of fact, the suppliers must know if this behaviour is specifically linked to one particular salesman (and will disappear with this salesman) or to a global propensity to trust sales representatives (and will be stable in the future). These two situations are supported in the literature:

(1) Several studies underline the existence of customers developing trust in one specific salesman. Different explanations are proposed. Some authors insist on the power of "the ability of the salesperson to adapt his behaviour" to the customer (Brown & al. 1993) to strengthen the relationship. As the customer perceives this adaptation, he develops deep positive attitudes towards this careful salesperson. Some others focus on closeness between the customer representative and the salesman as a way to enhance the stability and longevity of relationships (Nielson 1998). In that case, the process is very closed to the one existing between two organisations as described by Pfeffer & Salancik (1978): "the more each (firm) becomes enmeshed in the social networks of the other (…) the more binding friendship becomes, and the more stable and predictable it is likely to be". It is undeniable that when friendship is installed between the customer and the supplier representatives, trust is positively affected as well as the duration of the relationship. Other possible mechanisms exist in the development of this strong personal link. But whatever the reason, the most important fact to retain is that this situation leads to a kind of alienation of the supplier to his salesman. The trust is here quite impossible (at least very hard) to transfer from a salesman to another, what puts the supplier in a situation of weakness towards his employee. The consequence of this situation is a story lived by many firms : the salesman leaves the firm and brings with him some customers (Bendapudi & Leone 2001) …

(2) The second possible motivation for strong trust is linked to the idea of propensity to trust, developed in psychology and studied in marketing as an antecedent of trust. The propensity to trust can be defined as "the general willingness to trust others" (Mayer & al. 1995). As a "personality trait of people interacting with peripheral environment of an organization" (Farris & al. 1973), it will influence trust, whoever the man behind the salesperson. The supplier has

a more favourable position in this second situation for two reasons. First, the firm does not depend on one particular salesman for the future stability of the relationship with the customer. Second, given that personality traits are stable across time, trust (and then buying behaviour) will be stable in a long term perspective.

Assuming that our research stills exploratory, we haven't studied those two possibilities. The only fact we know is that one group of inert customers presents high levels of trust in the sales representative despite low levels on the other variables. It seems that it would be very interesting to study the determinants of this unexpected trust in order to give precise recommendations to suppliers in this situation.

Annex 1: agglomeration schedule

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C A S E        0         5        10        15        20        25
Label  E Num   +---------+---------+---------+---------+---------+
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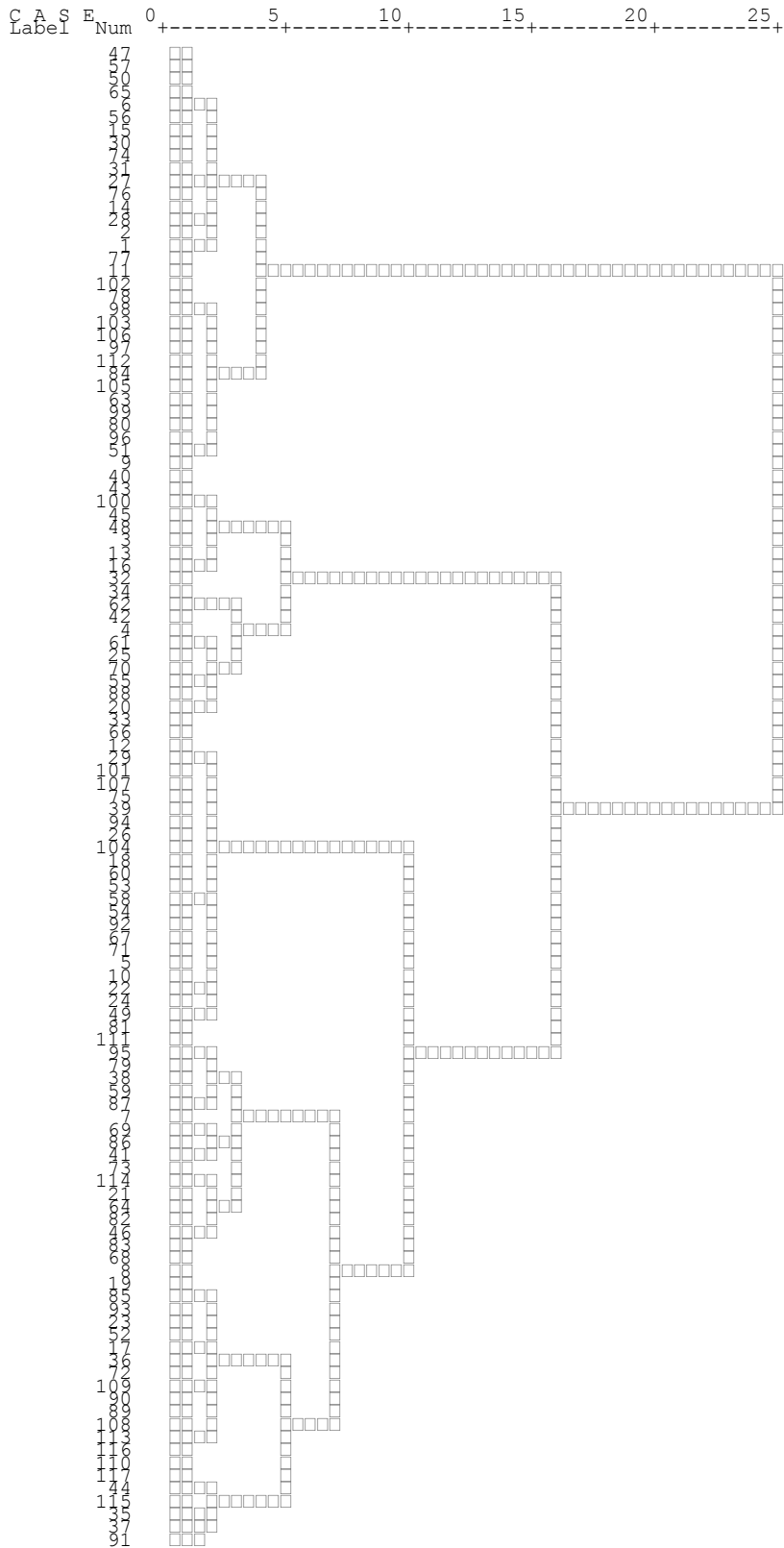
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