



ARTICLE REVIEW



AFTER SALES AS FOREIGN CUSTOMER LOYALTY: A PERSPECTIVE FROM DEALERS OF THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

PÓS-VENDAS NA FIDELIZAÇÃO DO CLIENTE ESTRANGEIRO: UMA PERSPECTIVA DE DEALERS DO SETOR AUTOMOTIVO

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To analyze the after sales activities to get the foreign customer loyalty, as well as its operation in international markets, in the perspective of dealers of the automotive sector.

Methodology/approach: Qualitative research of exploratory nature, through interviews with service providers from several countries.

Originality/Relevance: Considered by several companies as a market need, after sales department, if it is well organized, works as one of the most effective tools for customer loyalty.

Key findings: The results pointed after sales as a great ally of the sales department, being determinant to customer's decision of the brand at purchasing. However, in the scope of international trade, difficulties in after sales service were noted, as well as the challenge of competing with the alternative market, highlighting the importance of managerial strategies and the construction of a solid relationship between company and client for retention and loyalty of consumers.

Theoretical/methodological contributions: This paper reveals the importance of the after sales department in the international market, customer expectations, execution difficulties, as well as analyzing elements related to customer loyalty right after purchase order placement.

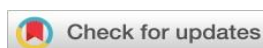
Keywords: After sales; Alternative market; International trade; Retention; Loyalty.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a atuação do pós-vendas na fidelização do cliente estrangeiro, assim como sua operação em mercados internacionais, na perspectiva de dealers do setor automotivo.

Metodologia/abordagem: Pesquisa qualitativa de caráter exploratório, através de entrevistas com prestadores de serviços de diversos países.

Originalidade/Relevância: Considerado por diversas empresas como uma necessidade de mercado, o pós-vendas, quando bem estruturado, atua como uma das mais eficazes ferramentas de fidelização de clientes.

Principais conclusões: Os resultados apontaram o pós-vendas como um grande aliado do setor comercial, sendo determinante para a escolha da marca no período que antecede a compra. No entanto, no âmbito do comércio internacional, foram citadas dificuldades no atendimento de pós-vendas, assim como o desafio de competir com o mercado alternativo, salientando a importância de estratégias gerenciais e da construção de um relacionamento sólido entre empresa e cliente para retenção e fidelização dos consumidores.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas: Este artigo revela a importância do departamento de pós-vendas no mercado internacional, as expectativas dos consumidores, as dificuldades de execução, assim como analisar elementos relacionados à fidelização de clientes durante o período de pós-compra.

Palavras-chave: Pós-vendas; Mercado alternativo; Comércio internacional; Retenção; Fidelização.

1 INTRODUCTION

Besides being recognized as a competitive strength, an active after sales service within the corporations builds loyalty to the clients who have already been conquered and also sustains the reliability in relation to the products and services offered. It is common to find companies that close the relationship with the consumer soon after selling their products, leaving aside the after sales process, one of the most efficient strategies for customer loyalty (Carelli & Lezana, 2019).

So that current customers do not become prospects of the competition, corporations are constantly seeking knowledge about their customers, either to customize their products in order to generate greater satisfaction or, equally, to capture, retain and get loyalty from new consumers (Zenone, 2017). Vasconcellos (2015) mentions that, when considering the number of competitors available in the international market, the fight to sell parts and services becomes even fiercer, due to several choices and players available in the market.

Globalization and the constant participation of Brazilian industries in international trade,

through the export of products and spare parts, the difficulty in retaining and building customer loyalty becomes even more complex when compared to the domestic market in after sales matters. The high performance of international competitors, associated with the availability of parts produced locally by the alternative (competition) market, it requires Brazilian companies and after sales network to focus on strategies that are in tune with the needs of their customers, to ensure their entry and survival in the aftermarket and service provision outside their territory.

In the aftermarket niche, considering the high availability of spare parts and other solutions offered by the alternative market, the fight to sell it becomes even more aggressive (Vasconcellos, 2015). The alternative market has high availability of parts and competitive prices, from parts, similar to original and genuine parts, which have origin identification and warranty, manufactured by independent companies. False parts misuse the original brand and have no identified origin, in addition to resale of used parts, often marketed as new parts, demanded from dismantling activities, which may come from stolen vehicles (Gama, 2022).

The deficiency of competitive differentials in the after sales market department, coupled with the high cost of genuine parts and services approved by their brands, cause the evasion of customers to the alternative market in the after purchase order placement. Considering the competitive environment, customer retention ends up becoming essential for sustainable business expansion (Kyei & Bayoh, 2017). Soon, ensuring that customers reach a level of high satisfaction, driving and raising the relationship between customer and company to an emotional line, can bring, as a result, consumer loyalty (Sparemberger, 2019).

It is known that after sales department has become a company's ally in the process of customer loyalty. In addition, the availability of spare parts brings viability to the acquisition of the product, due to the guarantee of maintenance and replacement of key components, which ensure the operation and longevity of the consumer goods purchased. However, availability alone does not guarantee customer satisfaction. There is a need to draw up a series of strategies and actions after purchase as a good experience, in order to avoid consumer evasion. According to Bortolotto and Goebel (2012), it is necessary that the company understands the market in which it operates to adapt to it, ensuring that it is prepared to offer its customer what he wants, so as not to fail to observe its performance indicators.

Considering the interest of Brazilian companies in maintaining an active and well-structured (organized) after sales network, as well as making feasible the operation and profitability of their local dealers (agents, representatives) to ensure the retention and loyalty of caught customers, the following research question becomes meaningful: what is the perception of service providers about after sales operations in international markets aiming to grab customer loyalty? To answer that question, initially the perception of service providers about the importance of after sales department and the expectations of customers in this segment were analyzed. Then, the difficulties related to after sales services operation were identified, and finally, the elements related to the retention and loyalty of international after sales services clients were analyzed.

For the automotive industries, after sales department is not only an essential resource, due to the complexity of their products, but it is also an opportunity to increase the profitability of the business through spare parts and maintenance services sales. With the wide range of options for automotive components in the international market, the need for Brazilian exporting companies to prepare their network of foreign market representatives becomes crucial to ensure their market share in the international market. From this perspective, this study can be as a basis for the construction of strategies in order to guide companies in the auto parts industry in their mission to guarantee after sales services that meet the expectations of international customers.

Therefore, if the intention is to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty through a well-structured after sales service and a long-lasting relationship, as well as to associate the sale of spare parts and services to business profitability, other companies may adapt strategies according to the reality of their operations, based on the results presented in this study.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to provide basis and relevance to the research, this chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that structured the study.

2.1 Brazilian auto parts sector

According to Pedrozo (2022b), sales results of the auto parts industry in 2021 were R\$ 163.3 billion, and by 2022, the prospects are to increase sales by 9.1%, reaching R\$ 178.5 billion. In this segment, investments should total R\$ 2.3 billion, and it is also estimated an increase of 0.7% in the number of jobs (Bednarski, 2022). For Pedrozo (2022a), based on the disclosure of sector data surveyed by Sindipeças, the confident forecasts for the increase in sales of parts are due to the greater market share of Brazilian vehicle assemblers.

According to Bednarski (2022), analyzing the data released by Sindipeças, the forecast for the auto parts industry in 2023 is a turnover of R\$ 188.4 billion, an amount 5.5% higher than in 2022 and, in addition, the number of jobs created by the sector should advance 1.2%.

According to the Auto Parts Trade Balance report, published by Sindipeças (2022), exports of auto parts totaled about US\$ 3.1 billion by May 2022, representing a growth of 15.1% in relation to the same time frame in 2021. By the end of 2022, exports from auto parts sector should reach US\$ 7.4 billion (Bednarski, 2022).

The Brazilian auto parts industry has faced problems in the supply chain due to the current international conjunctures and the national macroeconomic scenario, which has caused increased costs in international operations and internal imbalances (Sindipeças, 2022). Besides it, according to the published report, on the other hand, the foreign exchange situation and the growth of the automotive market in neighboring countries are helping the segment's foreign sales. Considering the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine, the projections (forecast) for solutions to the shortage of parts and components point to a solution only for year 2023 (Pedrozo, 2022b).

According to data surveyed by McKinsey Center for Future Mobility (2021), the growth of the aftermarket is driven by the size and age of the fleet, so what today represents 30% of the market, in the future will be almost 50%, considering that the age of vehicles generates greater need for replacement. However, it is necessary to follow the changes in consumer habits and profiles, considering the trends driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. For the future, scanning documents on-line channel for remote access sales and digital self-service models are preferred by B2B buyers, the 3 main reasons being related to travel expense savings, easy scheduling, and better shopping experience (McKinsey Center for Future Mobility, 2021).

2.2 After sales

According to Uchôa, Cordeiro, Oliveira, and Silva (2021), after sales can be an efficient tool to absorb information about customers and monitor the performance of products sold. When it is used correctly, after sales can also serve as a platform to maintain a growing relationship with the most desired and profitable customers, states Inglis (2002 apud Uchôa et al., 2021).

As Carelli and Lezana (2019) mention, some companies close the relationship with the

consumer soon after the purchase order of the product offered, leaving aside the after sales stage, one of the most efficient strategies for customer loyalty. Besides it, according to the authors, an active after sales within the corporations, besides being recognized as a competitive differential, builds customer loyalty and sustains the reliability in relation to the products and services offered.

As Carelli and Lezana (2019) point out, having an after sales sector and cultivating a good relationship with customers is a way to keep doors opened for future negotiations.

According to Silva, Matte and Milan (2020), as after sales can bring the expected results, it is necessary to plan a strategy focused on the customer. It is by achieving customer satisfaction that companies start to do business based on the relationships cultivated, generating profitability in the long term. Considering the retention and loyalty of customers conquered, as well as the access to information about the market and the possibility of discovering potential and expanding profitability, it is clear the importance of having a well-structured (organized) and qualified after sales service to meet the demands of customers, says Inglis (2002 apud Uchôa et al., 2021).

2.3 Perceived quality

Credibility has a positive impact on the perceived quality of a brand, observe Baek (2010 apud Cruz, 2020). The authors contribute to the understanding that, from the eyes of customers, buying from a brand with credibility in the market is synonymous with quality that can be counted on.

Companies have found, through quality, competitive advantages that ensure their survival in the market, being considered of great strategic value for organizations (Pontello, Gosling, & Macedo, 2017). For several times, quality has been defined taking as a basis the focus on customer needs and requirements, so the product or service provided must meet the expectations of consumers who hired it, quote Adil and Albkour (2013 apud Pontello et al., 2017).

The concept of perceived quality is the result of the comparison process between customer expectations and the perception of the product or service performance. Oliveira (2013) notes that consumers have their expectations from past experiences, through the exchange of information with their social group or individuals who have experienced the same situation - word of mouth marketing -, and other information available in the market. This first contact that forms his initial expectation is used as a standard benchmark for a first evaluation to be made to the quality of what was purchased.

Sparemberger (2019) points out that competitors constantly work on extending their advantages by making their products or services better. Thus, it coerces the entire chain of competitors in each niche to seek higher quality standards for customer satisfaction. Pontello et al. (2017) mention that, tied to quality, companies see customer satisfaction as another vital advantage for the success and health of organizations.

2.4 Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is sustained from the feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from the performance or perceived result of a product, service or brand, in relation to their expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Therefore, for Zenone (2017), customer satisfaction is tied to the relationship between what he received and what he expected (perception \times expectation). If the perception of the performance of the product or service exceeds the expectation, the customer will be more satisfied than expected.

On the other hand, if it is lower than expected, disappointment will be eminent, and the customer will not react positively to the experience.

Oliver's (2010) Expectation Disconfirmation model suggests that the performance of a product or service is compared, in the consumer's mind, to previously idealized expectations, leading the consumer to evaluate the performance as: (1) higher than expectation; (2) neutral; or (3) lower than expectation. In cases where performance was higher than expectation, this is called the occurrence of a positive disconfirmation. In cases where the performance was neutral, it is understood to have been in line with expectations. Finally, in cases where performance was below expectation, it is called the occurrence of a negative disconfirmation (Oliver, 2010).

Perceived satisfaction has the power to unconsciously lead the customer to repurchase, without the need for reinforcement of marketing actions (Zenone, 2017). Sparenberger (2019) suggests that sales team, who usually works with customers to examine their needs, provide information, suggest a product that meets those needs, should provide after sales service to ensure long-term consumer satisfaction.

2.5 Customer retention

Currently, companies have realized that ensuring that customers do not reach competitors is more profitable, therefore, they have worked on relationship maintenance strategies to achieve customer retention, maintaining the consumer's preference for the brand (Kyei & Bayoh, 2017). Kyei and Bayoh (2017) state that customer retention is essential for sustainable business growth, considering the competitive environment.

According to Madruga (2021), increasing the longevity of the customer relationship, which can impact retention, is one of the most expected benefits, since it also results in increased profits in the long term. For customers, the retention practice is also beneficial, considering that the company learns about their needs and customizes its services, facilitating repurchases. Besides it, according to the author, companies should invest primarily in retaining their most valuable customers, but it must be recognized that, currently, customers are increasingly restless and curious about the novelties of the competition. Thus, for companies to survive in the market, considering the competitive scenario, it is necessary to differentiate themselves, meeting the needs of their customers to stand out compared to their competitors and retain them for the brand (Sparenberger, 2019).

2.6 Loyalty

Oliver (2010) presents a four-stage process, considering the moment preceding the act of the first purchase until the final stage, which covers consumer loyalty and fidelity: (1) The first stage, preceding the first purchase, is based on expectations about the performance of the product or service; (2) then there is the confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations (satisfaction); (3) if satisfaction is confirmed, the consumer goes on to repurchase and, as a fourth stage, (4) the consumer will enjoy the feeling of loyalty.

As cited by Sheng and Frank (2012 apud Jayme, 2021), loyalty is related to the emotional attachment to a particular brand, service or product and, simultaneously, there is the intention of repurchase by the customer, where the attitudinal and behavioral loyalty models come in. For Zhang *et al.* (2014 apud Pereira, Liberberger, & Marques, 2021), attitudinal loyalty refers to the consumer's beliefs about the perceived value of the brand, where the consumer may refer the product or service to other individuals. On the other hand, behavioral loyalty, according to author Zhang (2014 apud Pereira et al., 2021), is composed of the consumer's intention to buy and repurchase that brand again.

Jayme (2021) adds that behavioral loyalty can be easily replaced by competition, since

the predominant factor is convenience, constituting a spurious loyalty. Similarly, the attitudinal loyalty, despite the emotional bonds, may not result in the purchase process, constituting a rising loyalty. Therefore, both loyalty models complement each other.

3 METHOD

To answer the research problem, a qualitative study of exploratory nature was conducted. Considering that the researcher is not always familiar with the contexts of the foreign market of the product or service to be analyzed, qualitative research has fundamental importance in international research (Malhotra, 2019). Qualitative research allows the study to address the different facets and realities of the interviewees, and it is possible to study real-life conditions, representing the opinions and perspectives of the participants, as well as encompass the contextual conditions in which the participants live, showing up revelations about existing contexts that can assist in explaining social behavior, and use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2016).

The operationalization of the research was conducted through in-depth interviews, which consists of an unstructured, direct approach, personal interview, in which, on an individual basis, the interviewee in question is probed by a qualified interviewer to reveal his or her motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about the stipulated topic, lasting at least 30 minutes. The main utility in applying an in-depth interview is to bring to the research greater understanding of the issues (Malhotra, 2019).

The interviews were conducted in April 2022, an average of two interviews per week. Based on the script of questions, the interviews were conducted through the Microsoft Teams platform and took between one and two and a half hours. The tool allowed the interviews to be recorded, with the interviewees' consent, facilitating later transcription and data analysis. The interviews were conducted in English, Spanish and Portuguese, according to the nationality of each interviewee.

To assist in the conduct of in-depth interviews, a semi-structured script of questions was prepared, allowing the interviewee to assist in conducting the interview, from their knowledge, while the interviewer manages to discuss about those matters. This type of script allows the interviewer to explore each answer to the maximum, until the question is exhausted, and serves as the basis for future analysis in categories (Duarte & Barros, 2006).

The script was made up of 12 questions. To induce the conversation in a natural way and favor communication, we used initial questions, followed by transition questions, to introduce the interview subject (matter). In the sequence, central questions were asked, directing the interview to direct points about the matter. A summary question was asked to address the matter, and finally, the interview was concluded with a final question, which allowed the interviewee to make final comments or considerations to conclude the interview.

The choice of interview participants was made through a non-probabilistic, non-random, convenience selection, considering the knowledge of the interviewees in relation to the issues addressed. One of the priorities of the selection was to obtain interviews from different countries, in order to add cultural issues to the research, being able to add cultural comparisons, if necessary. In order to generate ideas, intuitions, and hypotheses, convenience selection can be used in exploratory research (Malhotra, 2019).

In order to ensure the relevance of the research results, the following criteria were stipulated for the selection of participants: having experience in the international after sales service area in the automotive segment; working in companies that have ties with Brazilian headquarters, working in Brazilian affiliates or working as a Brazilian trading company; professional experience of at least 10 years in the department.

Through the recordings of all in-depth interviews conducted, the data analysis was done

by means of the content analysis technique proposed by Bardin (1977). According to the author, after defining the categories to be analyzed, the themes (matter) addressed were grouped into seven matrix tables, according to the categorization of the information obtained. The categories were defined a posteriori, which, according to Bardin (2011), are created after data collection and reflect the points in common between the other authors present in the study.

4 RESULTS

Eight after sales professionals with experience in international customer service were interviewed, four female and four males, who have between 10 and 29 years of experience in the department. The area of coverage of the interviewees' work includes countries in all continents.

4.1 Importance of after sales

When questioned about the performance of the after sales department as an ally in the customer loyalty process, the interviewed professionals mentioned the department as a problem solver, responsible for customer satisfaction and loyalty, thus being an effective support for the commercial departments to make the next sales effective.

Interviewees 1 and 7 also cited after sales as a value-added service, due to the provision of service for maintenance, refurbishment, and the sale of replacement parts.

Besides the importance of after sales, interviewee 2, based on his experience in an *trading company*, commented that many international customers have a lack of after sales service in factories, due to the poor structuring of the department.

Regarding the perception of the interviewees in relation to the end customers' view on the importance of the brand having an after sales service, it was mentioned that, considering the market niche, having active and organized spare parts sales and technical assistance sectors is extremely essential at the time of the decision to purchase the vehicles, and these requirements are demanded by the customers themselves. According to the interviewees, the customer already considers making use of maintenance services and parts purchases, and the availability of an after sales department is synonymous of trust between consumer and brand.

Interviewee 2 mentioned that companies that are not concerned with the structuring and functioning of the after sales department may suffer with the reactions of customers and competitors, thus having greater difficulties to keep their products on the market.

Complementing the fact mentioned by interviewee 2, interviewees 3 and 6 mentioned what a lack of after sales service can cause in the market. Interviewee 3 commented on a vehicle brand that exported its products and, even with excellent quality vehicles, ended up having to discontinue the brand in that country due to the lack of after sales service in the region.

Interviewee 6 mentioned that a market without after sales service, in the view of customers, is synonymous of loss of time, due to the time that the vehicles are stopped, without being able to run and generate profits for their operations. Besides, depending on the vehicle operation, the customer may suffer with contractual fines due to the impossibility of meeting the agreed demand.

4.2 Customer expectations when seeking after sales

When asked about the expectations of customers who seek their services, availability of parts and support / technical knowledge were the most frequently mentioned items, and even treated as basic and essential for the automotive segment. In several moments, the availability of parts was mentioned as the main point due to the criticality of the subject, and prices, they

are a determining factor for customers to seek the alternative market for spare parts.

Besides customer expectations, part of the interviewees commented on service excellence as an item sought by the segment's customers, especially those who value a differentiated treatment, which they consider to be included in the added value offered by the brand and choose to pay more for this, especially when combined with good payment terms.

Interviewee 2 also mentions credibility as a determining factor for after sales service at the international level, since the customer seeks trust and security, and credibility is a determining factor for generating new business.

4.3 Difficulties in international after sales service

When asked about the biggest difficulties in after sales services, international freights were mentioned as one of the major current problems, being a great challenge for companies that import spare parts from other countries. The interviewees cited the lack of availability of ships and containers, as well as the increase in the cost of oil as aggravating factors for the increase and oscillation of international freight rates, also influencing the delays in the delivery of materials.

Some interviewees also mentioned the lack of availability of spare parts, due to the latest world events that have been affecting all countries, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine. The main reason for the low availability of parts is explained by the lack of raw materials, which caused the lack of many components in the aftermarket.

From another point of view, interviewee 2 mentioned the migration of the production of parts and components to China and India as a major current problem, since it hinders price competitiveness, even though they present lower quality in finishing and performance of the parts.

Interviewee 7 brought the cultural difficulties of traditional companies as a current problem that affects after sales service, due to hierarchical and departmentalized processes, which end up affecting the customer experience when seeking support from the brand. In the interviewee's opinion, these situations stand out when compared to the practical problems caused by the latest events, since they are not understandable in the eyes of the customers and are framed as neglect.

When bordering the question to the greatest difficulties in working with Brazilian companies, the interviewees mentioned the country's logistics issues as a major problem, since, in addition to the prices and availability of international freight, Brazil's territorial extension is seen as a determining factor for the transit time of goods, as well as an unfavorable situation in the consolidation of shipments when considering orders from different suppliers. This issue was cited as more alarming when it comes to urgent orders.

The volatility of the Brazilian currency was also pointed out as a problem, since customers were questioning the price increase of parts caused by the instability of the Real, which has happened in recent years.

Interviewee 2 mentioned that there can still be some trouble with issues related to the cultural labels of the country, in the view of foreign customers, so there are still customers who are afraid to have a deal done with Brazilian companies.

Regarding *oversea* customers, the time zone difference was also mentioned, since the waiting time for returns is at least one day. In cases where the customers' vehicles are stopped and the dealer needs technical support from the factory, the time difference causes delays in the delivery of the vehicles.

4.4 Customer evasion to alternative market

Considering the alternative market as one of the biggest difficulties in the spare parts market, when asked about the reasons for customers choosing for these services, the interviewees mentioned the cost of the parts as an attractive factor for customers, due to the purchasing power of most customers and especially some markets.

They also said the difficulty of competing with the alternative market when it comes to price, since these suppliers do not have a structure behind their business, they only work with large stocks of parts of lower quality, so they are very competitive in prices.

On the other hand, according to interviewees 4 and 6, the start of the loyal customer to the alternative market is the availability of parts. According to the research participants, it is not possible to serve the customer due to lack of availability and he finds an alternative in the market, price comparison takes place, especially when combined with ease and availability, making the alternative much more attractive.

Part of the interviewees mentioned that customers look for the alternative market when they are not satisfied. Issues such as customer service, satisfaction, and perception of value added were cited as reasons for customers to search for cheaper parts, since, in the customer's view, there is no reason to pay more when there are no attractive differentials.

4.5 After sales customer retention strategies

When they were asked about what additional actions that should be taken by companies to prevent the evasion of customers after sales time frame, some interviewees mentioned that generating a good experience for the customer is crucial so that he does not look for the competition in the after sales period and stops buying the brand's products.

Keeping the attention on the client, checking if he has more needs or doubts, understanding his difficulties, providing support, meeting his expectations, being present, and cultivating a good relationship were mentioned as suggestions for actions that should be taken during and after the service.

Among the topics mentioned is the simplification and digitalization of bureaucratic processes to ease service, as well as making the company's structure less rigid, since the after sales department needs agility to solve the problems presented by clients.

Interviewee 1 mentioned offering honest prices as one of the relevant actions to avoid customer evasion in the after sales period, suggesting lowering profit margins to make the price more competitive, pointing out that it would be possible to increase profit by gaining sales volume.

On the other hand, interviewee 2 mentioned the need for executives with after sales knowledge to manage it, since most of the companies' management only has knowledge in selling the main products.

5 DISCUSSION

As reported by the interviewees, the after sales department acts directly to customer satisfaction and loyalty, through the technical support available in the post-purchase period, either through the technical assistance department or spare parts. This finding is aligned with the studies of Kyeyi and Bayoh (2017), who state that considering the competitive environment, customer retention becomes essential for sustainable business growth. Thus, by enabling customer satisfaction, retention and loyalty, after sales acts as an effective support of sales department, ensuring that customers build trust in the brand and feel safe when buying their products, besides generating value added to the consumer goods purchased.

From end customers' opinion, still according to the interviewees, the fact that a company

has or does not have an active and organized after sales sector is a determining element in the choice of the brand or product to purchase it. Along this same line, the consumer's behavior in relation to decision making during the purchase process varies according to their habits developed over time, up to situations involving a high level of risk, in which the consumer carefully collects and analyzes several pieces of information before choosing between a brand or product.

According to the interviewees, considering their experiences in the automotive niche, the customer already expects to make use of after sales services, such as technical maintenance and exchange of original parts, as well as eventual repairs, since the consumer seeks a product that presents a useful life consistent with the value invested. In the heavy vehicle segment, when it comes to commercial operations, a vehicle stopped due to shortage (lack) of parts or without technical service is not creating revenue and, many times, still leaves the operation unattended, generating customer dissatisfaction and possible contractual problems. In this sense, as Sparemberger (2019) cites, it is necessary to develop long-term relationships to achieve loyal customers, through a portfolio of high-quality products, combined with good customer service.

Also, according to the interviewees, professionals were split the customer profile into two large groups. The first group, fleet owners mostly, transport companies, and owners of vehicles with high value added, are inclined to invest in genuine spare parts and high standard services, entrusted to authorized dealers. Therefore, due to the fast return achieved by their business, they are willing to invest in their vehicles, so they are not price sensitive. On the other hand, this group requires a higher level of service, which meets their expectations and is distinguished, since they have more requirements regarding authenticity of the components and the qualification of the labor force. In this same way, as cited by Alvarez (2015), negotiations in the B2B segment involve long-term commitments, which require contracts that highlight a series of obligations and penalties that can destabilize the interaction between companies, so the levels of relationship and trust must be raised, since these are important matters in the purchase decision-making. As the author, it is from the relationship and trust that positive negotiations for both parties take place.

The second group was composed of self-employed drivers and small fleet owners, usually having fewer than 10 vehicles, and these vehicles have low value added, are more sensitive to price and prone to migrate to the alternative market for parts and services, opting for quality replacement and lower cost, as well as providing services without requiring skilled labor. This group of customers, in the vast majority of cases, is looking for more economic options, which enable the operation of their vehicles with lower spendings, considering the mode and financial return of their business. According to Ludovico (2017), every market has consumers who accept lower quality products, as long as the price fits their purchasing power. Thus, even if satisfied and loyal, the customer behavior of the second group may be coerced solely by convenience, presenting strategic instability for the service provider. Jayme (2021) adds that, considering convenience as the predominant factor, the brand whose customer loyalty is based only on behavior may be easily replaced by the competition.

Mentioned the exceptions of the division of groups, culture was also noted as a determining factor for consumer behavior, so it is necessary to consider that customers from certain countries are more likely to seek solutions in the alternative market in order to reduce their costs, as well as consumers from other countries keep their vehicles only with genuine parts and services approved by the brand, for cultural reasons arising from habit concentrations. Therefore, it is possible to refer to the quote from Zenone (2017), who comments that the consumer's behavioral influence can occur through the social, political, economic and technological environment, according to the macro environment where he is inserted.

When performing the categorization for the analysis of the research results, it was

possible to relate some information from the answers of the interviewees, several times, issues related to customer expectations were mentioned complementarily during questions that addressed the biggest difficulties faced in the service, as well as in the reasons for evasion to the parallel market. Zenone (2017) says that the feeling of satisfaction can be directly influenced by competitors' actions, so a satisfied customer does not necessarily mean a loyal customer. Thus, the relationship of the items mentioned demands attention from companies.

Given the above, considering the categories availability of parts, price, agility and essential service in the view of customers, it is observed the need for strategies to comply with improvements in the points mentioned about the difficulties in the international after sales service, as well as to study a possible action plan to prevent the evasion of customers to the alternative market. Therefore, as cited by Zenone (2017), to prevent their customers from becoming prospects of the competition, corporations are constantly seeking knowledge about their customers, either to customize their products in search of greater satisfaction, as well as to capture, retain and build loyalty among new consumers.

However, taking into consideration that the mentioned difficulties were affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic and, subsequently, the clash between Russia and Ukraine, it is necessary to associate this repercussion in the supply chain to external trouble. This scenario caused a shortage (lack) of supply and raw materials, international logistical chaos, as well as a lack of stocks and productive capacity of suppliers, because, according to Neubauer (2013), international logistics is integrally related to the management of the international chain of products.

As points presented above, it is important to emphasize that, according to the interviewees, for companies it is more relevant and advantageous to keep their current customers loyal than to focus on new customers, since satisfied customers bring new customers organically. This is also expressed by Abreu (1996, p. 27), who notes that "a satisfied customer brings many others. In the same way, an unsatisfied customer takes potential and, in some cases, to set customers away from the company". So, searching for new customers requires much more time and energy from the team, and therefore, it increases costs and uncertain profits.

As said by Zenone (2017), customer satisfaction is linked to the relationship between what he received and what he expected. Thus, it becomes meaningful to understand the needs of customers, so that, they can be driven to a level of loyalty to the brand, through approach, support and monitoring, creating an enduring relationship and, consequently, meaningful and profitable for companies.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through this research, it was possible to observe as mentioned the expectations of end customers, in the perception of dealers, customers seek a well-structured (organized) after sales, which presents feasible and quality solutions, as well as a service that does justify the value added of the brand and its products. Thus, it is understood as necessary to use strategies so that the difficulties presented by dealers are solved and mitigated, in order to better serve the international customer, given the relationship observed between expectations, difficulties, and reasons for avoidance during the analysis of the results of this study. Besides the difficulties presented, we highlight those influenced by external players, related to global conjunctures and scenarios, which require short and medium plans.

Within the international after sales scenario, the profile of the final customer must be observed in order to apply retention and loyalty strategies. One of the main points observed was that after sales dealers may prefer to focus on select group of customers, but more profitable and prone to loyalty, who are willing to invest in the maintenance of their vehicles, making the company win in more profitable negotiations.

On the other hand, by focusing on customers who choose for more economical options that make it possible to run their vehicles on a leaner budget, companies end up gaining in scale and sales volume. However, it is important to note that, for this group, the alternative parts and services market is categorical in terms of competitiveness and delivers many economical solutions, even lower quality. It is noteworthy that the alternative market was strengthened due to the lack of solutions for this intermediate market, in which the purchasing power of customers does not maintain maintenance with genuine parts, so it is up to the brands to offer intermediate solutions to meet this market.

It is important to emphasize that the strategy of focusing on a certain group of customers can ease the dealer's operation, since he can work on more assertive strategies; however, it is not attractive to Brazilian brands, since they need to provide an efficient after-sales service to the entire customer portfolio. Thus, it is suggested to work different strategies as customer group and it is emphasized the need for the Brazilian headquarters to help in the development and feasibility of these actions.

When mentioning, large customers, it is necessary to have a different look at this type of customer and apply specific strategies for B2B operations. Altogether to superior customer service, it is important that this group of customers has after sales executives looking specifically at their business, monitoring their operations and seeking customized solutions. So, it is possible to make large commercial agreements that benefit the three main after sales players: customer, dealer, and factory. Following up of these customers can be done through professionals focused on Customer Success, who follow the customer's experience and brand performance, ensuring a less reactive after sales.

Among the results, the relationship with the customer proved to be one of the most effective techniques for retention (buying it again) and loyalty, through actions to monitor the customer experience in the post-purchase period. Being present, checking their needs, presenting agile solutions to problems, making periodic visits, having a CRM with updated data, are examples of actions taken by dealers in order to better meet customer expectations. It is understood that the international customer seeks to see the value added of the product purchased and brand high quality, therefore, when involved by after sales, will be prone to become loyal to the brand and share their positive experiences. In agreement with this, it is possible to relate the preference of keeping current customers to the search for a new portfolio, since loyal customers become profitable in the long term and bring new customers organically.

When looking at customers looking for cost-effective solutions, in order to compete with the alternative spare parts market, it is necessary that the brand offers feasible solutions for this group of customers. Considering cost as the main reason, some automotive brands are already working with second-line spare parts, which do not have the same technical specifications as the genuine parts, but undergo homologation tests, are considered substitutes, and have a lower price. In addition, the strategy of working with a second line of parts increases the availability in the market. This type of solution is relevant, since many customers who migrate to the alternative market only stop buying from the brand due to financial issues. And the brand, on the other hand, loses in volume.

As for the availability of parts, considering the stabilized scenario, maintaining a healthy and functional inventory at the local dealer, in addition to ensuring the production capacity for after sales service at the origin, are essential actions to ensure a supply chain that keeps the vehicle operation functional. In the case of large accounts, in situations where the dealer does not have the physical space to keep a large inventory, it is recommended to work with consigned inventories, kept within the establishment of the end customers, so that they have parts available and can use them according to demand, ensuring more agility between maintenance.

Likewise, it is important that the plant maintains a good supplier portfolio, with more than one option to supply strategic components, in addition to reinforcing the need to feed for

after sales service. In addition, working on the brand's armor with suppliers is equally essential, through well-drafted contracts, to avoid that parts produced by the brand's suppliers end up being sold by the alternative market.

When technical services are mentioned, it is important to maintain a qualified team to serve the end customer. It is necessary to have skin professionals directed to customer service, as well as executives focused on sale of parts and, as one of the most important centers of after sales, a maintenance team with high technical capacity for problem solving.

So as after sales is able to deliver problem solutions quickly and to achieve customer satisfaction, it is necessary for companies to adapt to new options of process digitalization, in order to increase the operational, administrative, and managerial efficiency of their business. Several facilities developed to meet needs during the pandemic remain in use, as they facilitate and deliver practicality to the daily lives for customers, dealers, and industries. In international trade, the digitalization of processes stands out as an efficient way to streamline internal bureaucracies and increase synergy between companies.

In relation to the development of this work, some limitations must be considered. The choice of interviewees was not random; therefore, some questions restrict the results. Since the participants in this research have years of experience and contact with companies in the Brazilian automotive sector, one must consider that professionals who are starting a journey of coexistence with Brazilian headquarters may put different situations under discussion.

This research was conducted through the perspective of professionals from different countries in order to analyze expectations in the foreign market scenario of the automotive segment. Therefore, when applying after sales strategies based on the results of this study, one should consider the country of origin of the customers in question, as well as all the particularities of the market, since culture and macroeconomic scenario are extremely relevant to consumer behavior. Likewise, one must explore all legal aspects, restrictions, and applicable laws as governed by international trade in the country.

As a complement to this research, it is suggested to study short- and medium-term strategies, specifically directed to the particularities of the potential object of study, to mitigate the impacts generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Europe, which trigger difficulties as to the cost and performance of international freight, as well as the lack of inputs, raw materials, and components, affecting international logistics and the productive capacity of the business.

It is suggested to study, in greater depth, the nuances of the alternative market and the perception of end customers regarding the solutions offered, in order to search for possible solutions so that the brands, along with their local dealers, can compete more aggressively to avoid customer evasion in the after sales period. Especially, to search for practical solutions for the intermediary market, composed of customers who would like to acquire original or genuine parts, at more affordable prices.

Eventually, it is important to note that this research was conducted in a post-pandemic context, so several factors influenced the international trade scenario and, consequently, part of the issues were raised by the participants of this research.

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