

## **AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECT OF BRAND'S DIMENSIONS ON LOYALTY OF INDUSTRIAL CUSTOMERS**

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### **Abstract**

*Customer loyalty is one of the main criteria of his/her satisfaction that all participants in the area of marketing, and particularly industrial marketing, take it into account. One of the factors that have a determining role in formation of this loyalty is the **brand** of companies. Brand and its dimensions effect on all steps of purchase (before, during, and after purchasing a product) and cause different behaviors in customers. Hence, the current research has addressed to studying the relation between customers loyalty and factors which are influenced by the brand. In order to fulfill this objective, we have formulated a hypothesis based on a conceptual model of research and in which we have investigated the relation between customer loyalty and satisfaction, perceived value, resistance to change, feeling, trust, and brand equity. We also gathered required information through questionnaires and distributed them randomly among statistical universe of foodstuff stores which had refrigerators (confectionary, hypermarkets, and meat store). This research is done in Rasht City and our sample is composed of 154 stores which are selected randomly. Then, we analyzed gathered information by modeling structural equations. The results shows that trust in and satisfaction of previous purchase are the most important factors which influence on loyalty of customers who use foodstuff refrigerators.*

**Key Words:** Brand, customer loyalty, industrial customer

### **Introduction**

Today, that is when organizations direct their attempts towards communication of intangible and complicated messages, brand management is considered as an area with increasing importance in marketing management. Nowadays, one of the main problems that managers of brand are facing it is the manner of providing and developing a better understanding of the relation between structures such as brand and brand characteristics, and loyalty of customer. Specifically, many factors have been introduced in literature of marketing management that effect on customer loyalty. The concept of marketing implies that industry is the process of customer satisfaction not the process of goods production. An industry begins with customer and his needs not through privilege, raw materials, or sales skill. An organization can continue its survival only when it is

able to fulfill its customers' needs and demands with an accurate and comprehensive understanding of its customer. This indicates the importance of studying customer behavior. Therefore, in this study we evaluate the relative importance of some of the known factors related to brand in loyalty of industrial products customers (store refrigerator). This research contributes to existing knowledge through simultaneous examination of relative effects of factors such as satisfaction, value, resistance to changes, feelings towards a brand, trust, and brand equity on loyalty of perceived customer. This research uses the analysis of structural equation modeling. Therefore, this perception will be created that this factor has a high relative importance in formation of customer loyalty in our area of study.

### **Presentation**

Brand and related subjects are some of the main issues which are raised in strategy of an economic enterprise's product. Companies allocate large and long-term investments for their brands, especially in the area of advertisement, sales promotion, and packing. They know that their market power is resulted from creating a brand for their products and strong brand will bring customers loyalty for them. This loyalty will lead to formation of a long-term relation between buyer and seller and by establishing trust between them both parties will enjoy the advantages of this relation. In industrial markets, customers' loyalty is considered as a strategic advantage for suppliers of industrial products. By presenting required services and facilities for customers, producers take a step towards improving the supply of their customers' needs and they can also provide a fixed and permanent market for themselves. On the other hand, customers continue their relation with supplier confidently, and they are sure that the basic needs for their enterprise manufacturing or selling will be provided by supplier. The customers of industrial goods are always looking for establishing long-term agreements with producers or suppliers. Long-term agreements allow customers to enjoy after-sales services of suppliers (such as installation and repair of devices, repair and maintenance and...).

Perhaps, the most distinctive competence of professional enterprises is their ability in creating, maintaining, and developing their brands. With respect to increased competition in business, rapid changes in technology, and increased power and choice for customers, the success will belong to companies which are able to identify and understand the expectations and desired values of customers and response to them effectively (Wang, Y.S, and Liao, Y.W, 2007). Brands' features effect on customer behavior and today's business needs branding strategy. If a company considers a brand only as a name, it cannot understand the deep application of brand in marketing. The results indicate that brand's image effects on customers' perception regarding quality of services and products and company's reputation influences on customer perception and his/her loyalty. Specifically, brand and its power will have more importance in industrial marketing; that is where customer's sensitivity is very high, flexibility is low, and the least negligence will result into the waste of all marketing efforts; therefore, if companies are willing to develop their presence in markets, it is necessary for them to engage in evaluation of their brand's role in formation of customers' loyalty and formulate their marketing strategies in a way

to create a strong brand in market and to be able to compete with competitors for attracting loyal customers. Brand plays an important and strategic role in gaining competitive advantage and making strategic management decisions for companies (Simon and Sullivan, 2007). The fact that customers show loyalty to brand will be a good criterion for evaluating long-term effects of marketing decisions. One of the significant concepts in the area of marketing is “loyalty to brand”. This concept plays an important role in making long-term profits for company, because loyal customers do not need extensive promotional efforts; they are gladly willing to pay more for gaining advantages and quality of their favorite brand. Furthermore, customer loyalty has a competitive aspect in brand market, too. Specifically, in industrial markets, customers who are loyal to brand can ensure a company’s survival or lead it to destruction. The number of industrial goods’ customers is very limited; hence, industrial customers have a great power in determining market trend and success process of a producer or supplier; therefore, by emphasizing on creating loyalty, branding helps companies to establish themselves strategically for future and compete effectively with global giants that have captured global markets. Therefore, if companies are willing to develop their presence in market, it is necessary for them to be aware of their brand’s role in creating loyalty in customers. They should also examine what aspects of brand will strengthen this loyalty.

### **Theoretical Basics**

As environmental influences and marketing efforts can potentially change customer’s behavior, customers’ loyalty to brands is the result of strategic and good marketing activities. Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as the following: “a deep commitment to repurchase in future, or further purchase of a preferred product or service whereby, a repeated and identical brand will be purchased in spite of the fact that environmental influences and marketing efforts create a potential for change in behaviors”. Keller (1998) believed that in the past, loyalty to brands were often measured based on repetition of a simple purchase, while nowadays they found out that customer loyalty is something beyond a simple purchase behavior. From another dimension, Baldinger and Rubbinson believe that loyalty’s application, which includes both behavioral and attitudinal components, is preferred to just behavior-based emphasis on customer loyalty. In a study titled “The Chain of Effects from Brand Trust and Brand Affect to Brand Performance”, Chadhoori and Holbrook (2001) have presented a model of loyalty to brand that indicates purchase loyalty leads to greater market share, while attitudinal loyalty provides a situation that leads to higher pricing for the brand.

### **Attitudinal Loyalty**

Increasingly, attitudinal loyalty is considered as a variable of interest in Supplier Company. Researchers have argued that attitudinal loyalty is a part of real feeling or attitude regarding loyalty concept, because positive attitude of an individual to a company is probably a basis for future loyalty behaviors (Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997). As Berry and Parasuraman (1992) point out: although behavioral criterion for making decision to repurchase something implies that

customers have a sense of satisfaction towards company's justice, but even this behavior cannot determine what is going on in consumers' mind and heart. Focusing on attitudinal loyalty compensates for this defect, because researchers note that for example how much customers are interested in Supplier Company and how much they are committed to it. Interestingly, Morgan and Hunt (1994) have suggested that attitudinal loyalty to a company is very similar to the concept of relational commitment. Their findings show that trust in company is a determining factor in relational commitment to the company. We have exceeded and believe that trust will be a prerequisite for creating attitudinal loyalty. As we look at the subject from this point of view, trust will be considered as a basis for loyalty (Schurr&Ozannel, 1985). We also agree with this opinion that loyalty follows from quality perception; particularly, behavioral literature of buyer refers to the fact that formation of loyalty through a psychological process happens via concordance between a company's artifacts and its customers (such as: physical appearance of products, seller's voice, and central office location, transportation and after-sales services). Along with information related to organization (such as trade name), they are saved in long-term memory of customers. In other word, loyalty will be created when customer experiences company's services and understands the relation between quality of services and service provider.

### **Satisfaction**

Historically, customer satisfaction is one of the main areas of marketing management in business and academic level. In the area of consumer goods marketing and researches related to ordinary consumers, customer satisfaction has often been defined as "a level in which purchase expectations of consumer are met by purchased product". One of the reasons for the growth of customer satisfaction place is that satisfied customers can change to a strong competitive advantage and result into increased market share and profitability. In industrial marketing, customer satisfaction is related to elements and central results of "Interorganizational interaction process". However, this interaction process has been so far regarded traditionally and as a short-term economical interaction and an interactive process between parties in industrial markets. The most prominent distinction between customer's satisfaction in industrial markets and his satisfaction in consumer markets is that for measuring customer's satisfaction, an industrial supplier faces buyer group and system, not an individual. In fact, he has to deal with customer organization, not the customer himself. Therefore, each of them (members of customer organization) has different criteria for expressing his satisfaction or dissatisfaction of a supplier. This fact makes it difficult to evaluate customer's satisfaction in industrial markets. Satisfaction is different from other related concepts such as quality, loyalty, and attitude. In literature, it is hypostasized that it has a direct effect on customer loyalty, behaviors, and repurchase intentions; organizations which are more active in presenting values to their customers, have a higher level of customer satisfaction and this can be considered as a competitive advantage for them; therefore, based on what mentioned before we can hypostasize that:

**Hypostasis 1: industrial customer's satisfaction has a positive effect on his loyalty to supplier.**

### **Value**

The term “value” is considered as a complicated concept for market analysts. Carolyn (2002) suggests that there is little agreement on perception of value in marketing literature, such as the value of service quality, and the value of sacrifice. Some perceptions imply the proportion of what is received in marketing business verses what is paid in it. Some explorative studies were executed regarding consumers' perceived value. Answers were divided into four groups:

- The value is low price.
- The value is whatever I expect of a product.
- The value is the quality that I receive in return for the price that I pay.
- The value is whatever I receive in return for what I spend.

Zithaml has presented the following definition about perceived value: “perceived value is consumer's overall assessment about a product's desirability which is based on his perceptions regarding receipts and payments”. This definition is considered as the most acceptable definition in worldwide level. Oliver (1999) suggested recently that, traditional perceptions about value have been regarded self-orientated, passive, and random extensively. He claims that in fact value is a unique concept that is a combination of quality and satisfaction. Therefore, based on what mentioned before we can suggest the second hypostasize as the following:

**Hypostasis 2: perceived value of an industrial customer has a positive effect on his loyalty to supplier.**

### **Resistance to change**

One of the other research variables is resistance to change. Generally, commitment is the main point of relational marketing. Gilliland and Bello (2002) presented a model that relates commitment to trust and loyalty with this pre-assumption that trust is a basis for deliberate and loyal commitment. It is obvious that if buyer does not trust his supplier, he sees his credit in danger by recommending the supplier to his coworkers and acquaintances. On the other hand, when the buyer believes that Supplier Company behaves in favor of its customers, he feels there is minimal risk in recommending supplier to the others. Finally, it is suggested that customers' decision regarding further cooperation with the salesperson may have a relation with loyal behaviors in customers. For example, though sellers can change the place of their service or even leave the organization in which they are operating, but in any case, they are representatives of the company that they work for. Therefore, if a customer decides to continue his cooperation with the seller in future, he prefers to continue his cooperation with the company itself, of course with this assumption that other conditions ate fixed. Moreover, making decision to keep customer of a seller implies that a relational commitment exists between seller and customer (Ramsey &Sohi, 1997).Pritchard et al (1999) defines commitment as the following: “an emotional and

psychological attachment to a specific trade mark (brand)". These authors generalize their focus on commitment to the fact of resistance to change. Furthermore, they introduce reasons which suggest that resistance to change is a basis for loyalty; therefore, we can hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1: resistance to change has a positive effect on industrial customer's loyalty to supplier.**

### **Feelings towards the Brand**

Studies indicate that customers' evaluation of services have a high correlation with their feeling towards the brand, that is what they have displayed during their interaction (Mattila and Enz, 2002). Also, feeling can effect on consumer's attitudes, even in the absence of belief in product (Tylor et al, 2004). Generally, feelings have presence in all marketing issues and they are identifiable via indirect reactions to incentive requests, measuring the effects of marketing stimuli, emergence of goal-oriented behaviors, and evaluating consumer's welfare. However, the role of feeling in marketing relations and interactions is ignored by market analysts; based on this, we can hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1: feelings towards the brand have a positive effect on industrial customer's loyalty to supplier.**

### **Trust in Company**

One of the other variables that it seems to have a logical relation with loyalty is trust. In a society which is lawful, truthful, and its members behave based on cooperation, Trust defines expectations which is created based on prevalent norms between members of that society. In other word, we can define trust as a tendency to rely on a trustworthy business partner. Therefore, trust is a basis for commitment. We believe that customer's trust in the salesperson will has a positive effect on customer's trust in Supplier Company. In other word, we can say that customers have familiarized with salesperson through their previous transactions with him. Since the salesperson plays a key role between customers and the company (especially in industrial markets), customers often need to use their information about salespersons to be able to judge about the Supplier Company. In fact, they generalize all characteristics of salespersons to their company (Swan & Nolan, 1985). This concept is suggested by Doney and Cannon (1997) as the following: "a long-term relationship with a reliable company can get in danger if the representative of that company does not behave with integrity and takes away customers' trust from himself. On the contrary, trustworthy salespersons are able to keep customers committed to the company when hard conditions are imposed on customers by management of company and the situation is contrary to their will". Therefore, it seems that creation of a sense of trust or lack of trust in salesperson can transfer to the company, too. Trust in company can also be created by other individuals; i.e. important people other than salespersons. Generally we can conclude that: trust in company is resulted from its performance against expectations of customers who company tries to behave according to their will and takes their benefit into account (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Singh and Sirdeshmukh present a model that suggests: trust is a

basis for satisfaction and a basis for loyalty consequentially. Therefore, the next hypothesis of the research addresses to studying the positive relation between trust and customer's loyalty:

**Hypothesis 5: industrial customer's trust has a positive effect on his loyalty to supplier.**

### **Brand Equity**

Final structure of a model is the brand equity. Today, with respect to development and variety of companies' manufactured goods, stiff competition between companies, and high similarity between their products decision-making about choosing a product has become difficult, time-consuming and costly for customers. Therefore, buyers and consumers are looking for shorter and safer way for choosing a product or service; it helps them to not only decrease the risk of purchases, but also to gain the best benefit and required results from their choices. In this process, relying on products which have famous and powerful trade names is one of the useful way for helping buyers and customers in decision-making. Aker defines brand equity as the following: a collection of assets and belongings related to the brand such as name and symbol that add to or decrease the value resulted from a product or service for an economic enterprise or its customers. Keller (1987) believes that brand equity is different from customer loyalty and defines it (brand equity) as "different effects that awareness of brand has on consumer's reaction to marketing of that brand". He adds that customers give more favorable responses to a product that has a brand in comparison to a product which is launched without brand. This happens when its equity is considered positive. Brands can also have a negative customer-orientated equity. This occurs when customers show adverse reaction to marketing activities related to the brand in comparison to a nameless or unknown product. Keller adds that one of the features of brands which have strong equity is loyalty to stronger brand. This status reveals the intellection power of resistance that Aker refers to it as loyalty to brand; therefore, it can be regarded both as input and output dimension of brand's equity. This analysis provides the basis of the last hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5: brand equity has a positive effect on industrial customer's loyalty to supplier.**

So far, various models have been introduced in marketing discussions for studying customers' loyalty. For example, in an article titled "Understanding Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty", Zhaohua et al (2010) presents a model in which he introduces factors such as trust, services quality, perceived value (functional, emotional, social, and financial) and change expenses as influential factors in customer satisfaction and loyalty. With respect to Baldinger and Rubbinson opinion, Taylor and his colleagues have presented a model for customer loyalty under the influence of brands. Their article is titled "The Importance of Brand Equity to Customer Loyalty" and in this model they have considered customer loyalty as a function of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. They consider satisfaction, value, resistance to change, feeling towards brand, trust, and brand equity as some of the related factors to brands that effect on formation of customer loyalty in industrial markets. The following figure shows the relation of these factors with customer loyalty. Evaluating the relationships of this model's components -as a conceptual

model for research- has been used for the purpose of studying the role of brands in formation of customer loyalty in industrial markets.

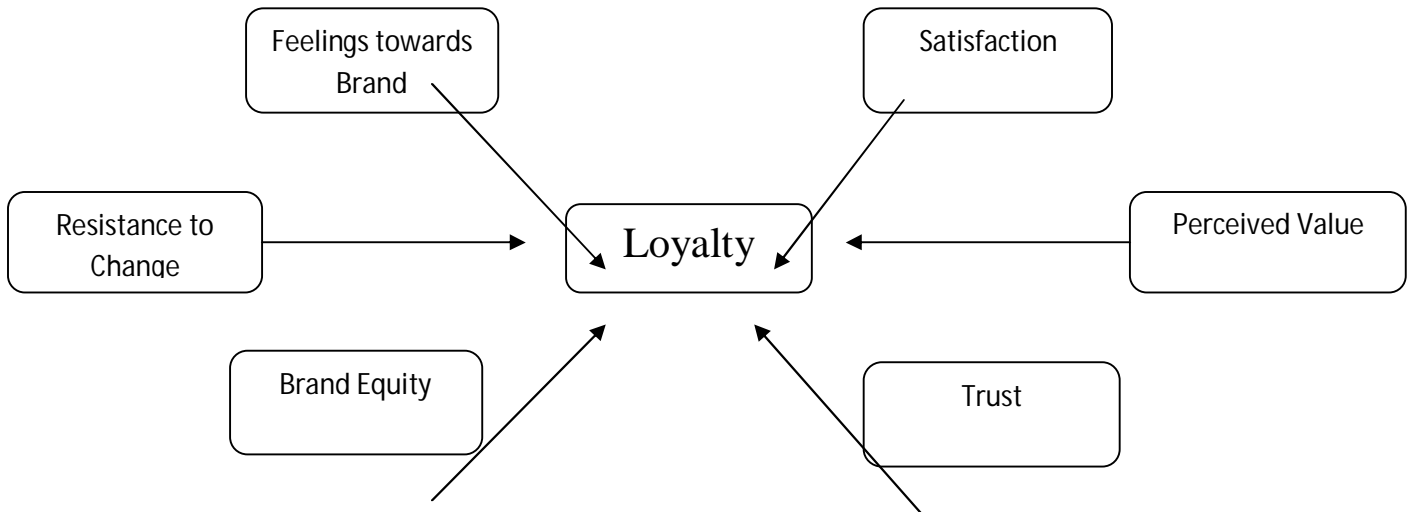


Figure 1- Conceptual Model of Research

### **Methodology of Research**

Due to the fact that current research addresses to studying theoretical structures in real contexts and situations, therefore it is an applied research. Since this research project is implemented during a short period of time (a period of time that its duration is enough for gathering information from participants), it is considered a cross sectional study. The methodology of this research is of the type of correlation. Correlation study tries to identify variables, examine the correlation between them, and predict or determine the strength of their relation with each other (Mirzaee, 2009). The method of this study is descriptive and as questionnaires are used for gathering information about attitudes, believes, and behavior, it will be classified as survey researches. In order to measure these research hypotheses, the research questionnaire of Taylor and his colleagues was adopted and a questionnaire with a five-item Likert scale (a range between strongly disagree till strongly agree) was designed. In this study, we used the method of internal consistency- Cronbach's alpha to measure reliability of data collection tool (questionnaire). The coefficient of this alpha was calculated by SPSS software. By distributing



35 questionnaires and collecting their data, a sample went under pre-test and then by using SPSS, the amount of trust coefficient was calculated through the method of Cronbach's alpha. The coefficient of Cronbach's alpha for total questionnaire was 0/91. It indicates that this questionnaire possesses required reliability. Table 1 shows the amount of Cronbach's alpha for each variable.

Table 1- the amount of Cronbach's alpha for each variable

variable	Cronbach's alpha
Feeling towards brand	0/87
Resistance to change	0/74
Perceived value	0/80
Brand equity	0/72
Satisfaction	0/74
Trust	0/95
total	0/91

**Sample size and population size**

Population size of this research is all foodstuffs stores (confectionary, hypermarket, and meat store) in Rasht City which uses store refrigerators. Statistical sample of this study (based on Kergesi and Morgan table) includes 154 stores that were selected by simple random sampling.

**Data Analysis**

After when a researcher specified his research method and collected required data for hypothesis testing through appropriate tools, it is time to analyze collected data and categorize them by employing appropriate statistical techniques that are compatible with research method, type of variables and so on. He should also test the hypotheses which have guided him in the study so far and finally he can find a solution for the question; that is the solution that the research was a systematic effort for reaching it (Khaki, 2003). The process of data analysis includes several steps. During these steps, collected data by different tools (questionnaire, survey, and observation) will be summarized, encoded, classified, and finally processed by statistical methods to provide a basis for establishing all types of analyses and the relationships between variables for hypothesis testing. From 154 distributed questionnaires, 145 useable questionnaires were available for the researcher ultimately. Therefore, the analysis of information is done with this number of questionnaire. In order to examine the relation between dependant and independent variables and hypotheses testing of the research, we used structural equation modeling that indicates significant level of relationship between variables and fitting indices of test model. In order to test all cause and effect links between customer loyalty and examined components, we made models of structural equations relations between variables by using LISREL software. In this model, variables like satisfaction, value, resistance to change, feeling

towards brand, trust, and brand equity are considered as external variables, and loyalty as internal one.

Generally, in LISREL program, each of the acquired indices for the model does not indicate fitting or the lack of fitting solely, but it is necessary to interpret these indices together. If both chi-square and test and secondary fitness tests show that the model is fitting, then we move towards determining fitting model factors and focus on these factors. Table 2 indicates the most important indices in this regard and it shows that the model has a good situation in respect of explanation and fitting. All these indices suggest fitness of model with observed data. Model fitting indices represent fitness of measuring model, chi-square degree of freedom which is less than 3, and RMSEA index which is less than 0/09 and other indices are in an acceptable range. In other word, the general framework and model is meaningful and acceptable.

Table 2- model fitting indices

Index name	Acquired amount	Acceptable range
chi-square degree of freedom	2/40	Less than 3
Root mean square error of estimate	0/069	Less than 0/09
Comparative Fit index (CFI)	0/96	Higher than 0/9
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0/95	Higher than 0/9
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	0/88	Higher than 0/8
Normed fit index (NFI)	0/93	Higher than 0/9
Non-normed fit index (NNFI)	0/95	Higher than 0/9

Table 3- Path coefficient and statistics t

Path (hypothesis)	Path coefficient	Statistics t
Satisfaction → loyalty	0/95	6/86
Perceived value → loyalty	0/30	3/28
Resistance to change → loyalty	0/78	5/29
Feelings towards brand → loyalty	0/20	1/86
Trust → loyalty	1/22	11/19
Brand equity → loyalty	0/27	2/62

According to results which are presented in table 2 we can say that satisfaction has a positive and meaningful effect on loyalty (statistics t is out of the range -2/58 till +2/58). Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed. In second hypothesis testing we can say based on the results that perceived value has a positive and meaningful effect on loyalty (statistics t is out of the range -2/58 till +2/58).therefore, the second hypothesis is confirmed. The results of third hypothesis

show that resistance to change has a positive and meaningful effect on loyalty (statistics  $t$  is out of the range  $-2/58$  till  $+2/58$ ). Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed, too. Also, the hypotheses number five and six are confirmed with a significant amount of  $11/19$  and  $2/64$ . Only the fourth hypothesis is rejected with the amount of  $1/86$  (statistics  $t$  is inside the range  $-1/96$  till  $+1/96$ ).

## **Conclusion**

This study addresses to the subject of “examination of brands’ role in formation of customer loyalty in marketing” and its aim is to study the relation of the six factors satisfaction, perceived value, resistance to change, feelings towards brand, trust, and brand equity with customers’ loyalty. Therefore, we developed some hypotheses and tested them by using structural equations of path analysis model and then we specified the level of correlation between dependant and independent variables. The only test hypothesis which was not confirmed is the relation between loyalty and feelings towards brand. Other hypotheses were confirmed with a high level of meaningfulness:

- Loyalty is widely a function of customer trust and satisfaction of Supplier Company. Resistance to change, perceived value, and brand equity are also effective in behavioral loyalty of customer, but they have less effect. Interestingly, no significant statistical relation was recorded between feelings towards brand and behavioral loyalty.
- The results of this study have some similarities and differences with the results of previous studies in the area of customer loyalty (for example: Taylor and his colleagues (2004) executed similar study about heavy machinery industry):
  - 1- The results of both studies indicate that customer loyalty is widely a function of his trust in supplier or producer of the product. Therefore, the more companies try to offer better services to customers, the more loyal customers will be to that brand.
  - 2- In this study the relation between loyalty and feelings towards brand is not significant, whereas in previous studies this relation led to continuity of customer relation with producer considerably. This difference stems from personal sales method of supplier or producer companies.

Generally we can conclude that all variables related to brand effect on customer loyalty, strongly or weakly. But, the role of trust and satisfaction in formation of customer loyalty is more than the other variables. These results provide explicit recommendations for executors of industrial marketing. They should go beyond merging marketing strategies and they should focus on customer loyalty to increase the level of trust between customers and suppliers based on supporting customers’ loyalty programs. Hence, they should enhance factors which are effective in improving customer loyalty and they should avoid factors that weaken it. The research model presents variables that have a positive and direct effect on customers’ loyalty. Therefore, industrial market analysts should focus on enhancement of these factors in customers’ perceptions. That is, enhancing production, supply, sales of products and after-sales services will be beneficial with respect to these dimensions.

### **Limitations of the research**

There are different variables in relation to formation of customer loyalty and different studies have addressed to its relation with the level of customers' loyalty and have confirmed it. We can generally classify them in form of marketing strategies of companies which make trade marks (brands). Therefore, we can consider measuring the effect of these factors as limitations of this research because its effect is considered fixed.

- Also, with respect to the area of data collection, data of this research is about geographical area of Rash City and it is executed among stores which use store refrigerators. It is possible that the study shows different results in other cities and also in other industries.

### **Recommendations of the Research**

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the research subject should be studied in other industry with comparative approach, and its results should be compared with findings of these two studies.

Also, in future researches with comparative approach, researchers can measure the role of other determining factors in industrial customers' loyalty (such as: personal sales methods, relational sales, and...), or evaluate customers' loyalty in a specific industry.

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