

## INNOVATION AND CHALLENGES OF REFERENCE MARKETING IN TIMES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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### Abstract

Referral marketing (RM) has emerged as an effective strategy for increasing customers, sales, and business positioning through the recommendation of products or services by satisfied clients, collaborators, or contact networks. This article presents a state-of-the-art review of RM, complemented by a qualitative analysis based on interviews with experts and company collaborators who have successfully implemented this methodology. Common practices, key steps for implementation, critical success factors, and risks to be avoided were identified. The findings reveal that RM is typically led by executives, sales staff, and commercial personnel, and is primarily motivated by business growth and the acquisition of new customers. Based on the shared experiences, a strategic framework is proposed to offer practical guidelines for companies that have not yet adopted RM to implement it effectively. In addition, local practices are contrasted with global trends, such as the digitalization of RM and its integration with social media, CRM tools, and loyalty strategies. The study concludes that while RM presents challenges—such as managing credibility in digital environments—its strategic implementation, adapted to the specific business context, enables the development of sustainable competitive advantages. This research contributes to the applied knowledge of referral marketing and offers recommendations to strengthen its adoption in emerging organizational contexts.

**Keywords:** Referral marketing, customer acquisition, customer loyalty, commercial recommendations, business best practices, consumer trust.

## **Introduction**

In a business environment characterized by high competitiveness, advertising saturation and growing consumer distrust, marketing strategies based on trust and recommendation have become especially relevant. Referral marketing (MDR), also known as referral marketing, has evolved from traditional "word of mouth" to become a powerful tool supported by digital platforms, social media, and automated customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

This article explores MDR as a strategy to attract new customers, increase sales and consolidate brand positioning, based on the analysis of interviews conducted with experts and collaborators of companies that have successfully implemented this methodology. In addition, the main practices, recommendations, common errors and forms of measurement associated with the MDR are examined, and a strategic framework for its implementation is built.

At a time when customer and influencer recommendations can have a decisive impact on consumer behavior, MDR represents an accessible and scalable avenue for business growth, especially in emerging markets. This research seeks to contribute to its dissemination and understanding, offering practical tools for its effective application.

## ***Evolution of Relationship Marketing***

Garnefeld, Eggert, Helm & Tax (2013) conducted a laboratory experiment to demonstrate that reward referral marketing programs strengthen customer loyalty and reinforce the effectiveness of such programs. The study was a combination of theoretical bases and field study where product recommendations were given to groups in exchange for rewards, observing as a result that there is an influence and affectation on new customers when making recommendations or referrals, including in their behavior to the form and amount of money spent, and brand loyalty.

A study carried out, but with a different approach, was carried out by Kumar, Petersen & Leone (2010) who found that knowing what moves the reference value of customers significantly helped to target referral marketing campaigns to the right customers having increases of between 10 and 30% in sales profits generated from the purchases of referrals. In their work they propose a four-step approach: 1. Determine if the customer would have purchased anyway without being referred, 2. Predict the value of each referred customer, 3. Predict the number of referrals each customer is likely to make, and 4. Predict the timing of referrals.

On the other hand, Berman (2016) presents two studies carried out by Schmitt, Skiera, and Van den Bulte (2011), and Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009), in the first Schmitt et al. (2011) examined the impact of a benchmark marketing program carried out by a German bank that acquired 5,181 customers with this strategy between 2006 and 2008 and compared them with customers acquired by the bank without the referral program. finding that in comparison the customers obtained through the referral program cost the bank less, stayed longer and generate more profits for the company. The second study, that of Trusov et al. (2009) compared a traditional word-of-mouth dynamic against a formal referral program applied in a major social network over a period of 36 weeks, finding that both techniques are very effective, although often the word-of-mouth strategy, whether it occurs organically or naturally, it can become even better.

In another research on the subject, Shimul & Phau (2018) analyzed how referral marketing impacts luxury brands compared to brand satisfaction, for which they collected information from 393 customers and applied structural modeling equations. The aforementioned authors found that referral marketing, when it comes to positive experiences, has a more important effect on brand preference than on brand loyalty, identifying three key elements, brand satisfaction, brand attachment or preference, and how much customers recommend them.

An additional study on the subject is the one carried out by Demir (2018), who analyzes referral marketing with a focus on environmental protection, specifically the formation of customer organizations of recommendation in favor of the environment (CEA). Demir uses the social identity model and theory to map the relationship in organizations of recommendation customers, finding that referral marketing is a very powerful and useful tool to reach people or customers and that they also become spokespersons in favor of the care and protection of the environment.

Now let's look at the case of Ghosh, S., Gaurav, K., Bhattacharya, S. et al. (2020) who conducted a systematic study with the aim of achieving a methodology that takes advantage of the large amount of existing information on customer behavior as part of reference marketing. Ghosh et al. were able to determine some key customer motivations and their impact from a baseline marketing campaign looking for the efficiency of marketing campaigns.

A case analysis on the subject is the study carried out by Kumar, V., Cohen, G. S., & Rajan, B. (2015) where they sought to obtain brand value from referral marketing of specialty medical practices, where they qualitatively analyzed how doctors and medical specialists managed to build value in a brand through referrals, observing that effectively the more references and recommendations they can obtain, the value of the brand and procedures are more recognized and employed.

**Table 1**  
*State of the Art.*

Title, article or book	Country and year	Authors	Description or Objective	Results and/or Conclusions
"The Loyalty Revolution: Turning Customers into Partners"	2003, Harvard Business Review Press	Fred Reichheld	Reichheld introduces the concept of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a metric to measure customer loyalty through recommendation. Explore how businesses can turn satisfied customers into enthusiastic brand advocates.	Reichheld demonstrates how positive word-of-mouth can drive long-term business growth and customer loyalty. It provides case studies and practical strategies for implementing loyalty programs focused on customer satisfaction and referral

				generation.
Theory of Referral Marketing	2005, United States and Netherlands	Arvind Rangaswamy, Gerrit H. van Bruggen	It proposes an integrated approach to managing and leveraging word-of-mouth in marketing.	The Theory of Reference Marketing combines concepts from the diffusion of innovation, social influence, and viral marketing to create a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing word of mouth in marketing. It focuses on identifying and leveraging social media leverage points to drive adoption and dissemination of products and marketing messages.

*Source:* Own elaboration

State of the Art, Continued

Title, article or book	Country and year	Authors	Description or Objective	Results and/or Conclusions
"BNI: The Art of the Reference Network"	2007, McGraw-Hill	Ivan Misner	In this book, Misner introduces the idea that referrals are the cornerstone of successful business networks. Explore how to build strong, trusted relationships that generate organic leads and business opportunities.	Misner presents practical strategies for developing an effective referral network, based on trust and reciprocity. He argues that word of mouth is one of the most powerful forms of marketing and offers advice on how to cultivate and maintain long-lasting business relationships.

Identifying the consumer with the company: beyond relationship marketing	Spain, 2007	Longinos Marín Rives; Salvador Ruiz de Maya	"Identifying the Consumer with the Company: Beyond Relationship Marketing" is to explore how the emotional connection between consumers and businesses goes beyond traditional marketing strategies, impacting both consumer behavior and business success.	In today's marketing, companies seek not only customer loyalty, but also brand identification. This involves building deep and meaningful relationships that turn customers into enthusiastic promoters and part of the company's identity, leading them to act not only as consumers, but as members of a social group. This approach not only strengthens customer loyalty, but also benefits the company by making it less vulnerable to changes in the environment and competition.
Optimal decision making for online referral marketing. Optimal decision-making for online referral marketing.	United States of America, 2011	Zhiling Guo	It researches and proposes optimal decision-making strategies for online referral marketing, in order to maximize the impact and effectiveness of referral campaigns in digital environments.	This article theoretically analyzes price and optimal referral strategies under different demand-side dynamics in the context of online referral marketing. The implications of pricing and referral strategies for seller profitability are examined, highlighting how these strategies can vary according to market dynamics and offering guidance for the practical implementation of online referral

**Source:** own elaboration  
State of the Art, Continued

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Book. Winning by Giving, The BNI Story	Mexico, 2017	Ivan Misner, Graham Weihmiller, Robert Skrob	To publicize the history and fundamental principles behind the success of BNI (Business Network International), highlighting how the approach of giving and collaborating has contributed to the growth and development of this business networking organization.	It tells the story of BNI, from its humble beginnings to its global success as the world's most successful referral networking organization. It explores how collaboration, generosity, and the "Win by Giving" philosophy have been instrumental in developing a unique organizational culture and growing the network. It highlights the importance of decision-making, the quality of the members and the personal and professional transformation experienced by BNI members. In addition, it emphasizes how effective networking and practicing the organization's core values are key to making the most of BNI membership and turning it into an investment in future success.
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*Source:* Own elaboration  
State of the Art, Continued

Title, article or book	Country and year	Authors	Description Objective	Results and/or Conclusions
Consumer advocacy for luxury brandsConsumer advocacy for luxury brands.	Australia , 2018	Anwar Sadat Shimul, Ian Phau	It investigates how consumers become advocates for luxury brands, exploring how and why some customers are actively engaged in promoting and endorsing these exclusive brands.	This article discusses the role of attachment to luxury brands in consumer advocacy, highlighting its importance over satisfaction and brand loyalty. In addition, it presents contributions to the literature by incorporating the positive consumer experience and exploring the interaction between different key constructs. Luxury brand professionals can benefit from



				understanding that satisfaction alone is not enough to generate consumer advocacy, and by implementing strategies to strengthen the brand bond and encourage consumer advocacy.
Social customer relationship management: An integrated conceptual framework Social customer relationship management: an integrated conceptual framework	England, 2019	Senika Dewnarain, Haywantee Ramkissoon, Felix Mavondo	It develops an integrated conceptual framework for the social management of customer relationships, addressing how organizations can effectively use social media tools and platforms to interact, engage, and maintain strong relationships with their customers.	This article explores the evolution of CRM towards social customer relationship management, highlighting the importance of co-creating value through social media. It focuses on the hospitality industry, where social media technologies have a significant impact on customer retention, engagement generation, and positive word-of-mouth. It proposes an integrated conceptual framework that merges CRM effectiveness dimensions with social media technologies to build engagement and brand loyalty, which can reduce marketing costs and increase revenue for hotel businesses.
Link value, market scenario and referral networks. Link value, market scenario and reference networks.	United States of America, 2020	Yongli Li, Peng Luo, Paolo Pin	It analyzes the relationship between link value, market conditions, and referral networks, in order to understand how these factors affect value exchange and business relationships in a business context.	This article addresses the importance of the value of social media link for businesses, especially in terms of marketing and referral. It focuses on measuring how adding new links affects a company's revenue and proposes cost-effective referral strategies based on these measured values. In addition, it studies the



			relationship between link value and Bonacich centrality in different market scenarios, providing a new approach to design effective reference mechanisms in the real world.
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**Source:** Own elaboration

State of the Art, Continued

Title, article or book	Country and year	Authors	Description or Objective	Results and/or Conclusions
The connecting effect. The Proven Method to Grow Your Business Immediately	United States of America , 2020	Ivan Misner, Ph.D.Graham Weihmiller, MBA,CFERober t Skrob	Present a method to increase business growth immediately, focusing on effective network connection and expansion strategies.	"The Connector Effect" addresses the relevance of connections in the business world and presents a proven methodology for developing a strong network of contacts. Through practical examples and specific tips, the author demonstrates how well-cultivated relationships can drive professional and business success. Explore how to build strong relationships that generate a steady stream of referrals through active participation in networking groups like BNI. The importance of one-on-one meetings, the implementation of the GAINS method, and effective follow-up to convert contacts into meaningful connections that drive long-term business success is highlighted.

Ensuring the spread of referral marketing campaigns: a quantitative treatment	United States of America , 2021	Sayantari Ghosh, Kumar Gaurav, Soumik Bhattacharya, Yatindra Nath Singh	It investigates quantitative methods to ensure the effective dissemination of referral marketing campaigns, seeking to identify strategies that maximize the reach and effectiveness of such campaigns.	This study addresses the crucial role social media plays in marketing, focusing on referral marketing. It proposes a methodology to understand customer behavior from a mathematical and quantitative perspective, using hierarchical clustering analysis and natural language processing. In addition, the key determinants that regulate the dissemination of a marketing campaign are investigated, and an experiment is carried out to generate a referral network in realistic scenarios. The results obtained provide valuable insights into the spread of the message and the structure of the network, which can be crucial to ensure effective dissemination of a designed marketing campaign.
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*Source:* Own elaboration

State of the Art, Continued

Title, article or book	Country and year	Authors	Description or Objective	Results and/or Conclusions
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Brand awe: A key concept for understanding consumer response to luxury and premium brands. Brand amazement: a key concept to understand the consumer response to premium and luxury brands.	England, 2021	Jooyoung Kim, Hyejin Bang, W. Keith Campbella	Investigate how the concept of "brand awe" influences consumer response to luxury and premium brands.	In this study, the concept of "brand amazement" is introduced, a mixture of emotions that consumers experience when encountering luxury or premium brands that they perceive as vast and that require schematic adaptation. This amazement is made up of euphoria, fascination and immensity. Brand amazement is shown to act as an important mediator between the triggers of consumer responses, such as prestige and innovation, and actual consumer responses. This highlights the importance of creating experiences that elicit amazement for brands, as these experiences not only increase attraction to the brand, but can also influence consumer behavior, such as the desire to share and save positive experiences associated with the brand.
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**Source:** Own elaboration

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study was a qualitative approach with an exploratory, constructivist scope and a collective case study. Its general objective is to design a strategic framework of best practices and recommendations in the use of marketing or referral or recommendation marketing to improve customer attraction and increase sales based on the analysis of cases of companies that currently successfully use this strategy.

The research analyzed cases of companies that, in Mexico, particularly in the state of Oaxaca, use marketing or referral marketing (MDR) to obtain more customers and improve their sales. Two methods will be used to collect information: interviews and focus groups. These were applied to the unit of analysis that the research has: collaborators of companies that use marketing or referral or referral marketing to obtain more customers and improve their sales. The type of sampling employed is by experts, volunteer participants, and convenience.

The research and in particular the data collection was carried out in the period of time from January to August 2023.

### Results Analysis: Referral Marketing (MDR)

This paper presents a detailed analysis of the results obtained from interviews conducted with experts and collaborators of companies that apply reference marketing (MDR) strategies. The objective is to identify good practices and useful recommendations for companies that want to implement this strategy in order to increase customers and sales.

### Expert Validation of the Guide

14 leading marketing experts were interviewed. They evaluated the guideline on three criteria: sufficiency, relevance and clarity, using a dichotomous scale (Yes/No) and the KR-20 index was applied. The results were highly satisfactory.

**Table 2. Overall guideline validation percentages by criterion**

Criterion	Total Approval Percentage
Sufficiency	95%
Pertinence	99%
Clarity	100%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on research data.

*Note:* The internal consistency measured by the KR-20 index was  $\geq 0.95$ . This validates the tool as suitable for qualitative studies on MDR in companies.

### Results of interviews with company employees

35 employees were interviewed, of which 60% were business owners. The answers were grouped around five key questions.

**Table 3. Most frequent actions in MDR implementation**

Action	Frequency
Identify Promoter Customers	4
Encourage referrer customers	4
Use of social networks	3
Follow-up to referrals	1
Application of BNI methodology	3

Source: Authors' elaboration based on research data.

### Key Aspects associated with the MDR

- - MDR is highly effective in increasing customers, sales, and visibility.
- - It is based on human relationships, trust, incentives and clear structure.
- - The validated guidance is useful for future research.

Recommendations for companies that do not yet apply MDR:

1. Identify satisfied promoter customers.
2. Implement an incentive system.
3. Train your sales team.
4. Use social networks and networking.
5. Measure results periodically.

**Table 4 Objectives of the use of the MDR**

Objective	Quantity
Increase customers	13
Increase sales	6
Improve visibility	2
Business growth	2

Source: Authors' elaboration based on research data.

**Table 5. Positive results of the use of MDR**

Result	Percentage/Detail	Frequency
Increase in customers	8%-80%	8
Visibility and positioning	-	5
Increase in sales	10%	4
New products or businesses	-	2
Strategic alliances	-	1
No measurement available	-	1

Source: Authors' elaboration based on research data.

### **Recommended steps to start MDR**

From the respondents' responses, the following key steps are identified to successfully start a referral marketing strategy:

1. Know the product and its characteristics perfectly
2. Know the market and customers perfectly
3. Train salespeople
4. Identify happy customers or promoters

**Table 6. Requirements for implementing MDR**

Requirement	Frequency
Product and market knowledge	11
Network	4
Clear approach and strategy	3
Good communication and service	2

Source: Authors' elaboration based on research data.

### **International Trends in Referral Marketing (MDR)**

Referral marketing (MDR) has evolved as one of the most effective strategies for customer acquisition in the contemporary digital environment. Globally, leading companies such as Dropbox, Airbnb, and Uber have based part of their exponential growth on highly incentivized and technologically optimized referral schemes.

According to the Nielsen report (2023), 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends or family more than any other type of advertising. This pattern has led B2B and B2C platforms to integrate automated referral systems into their CRM ecosystems, allowing conversions to be tracked and rewarding both the referrer and the referral.

In contrast, the results of this study show that in the Latin American context (specifically in Mexico), MDR is still mostly managed manually and relationally. The strategy is based on trust, reputation and personal ties, which is consistent with the local business culture, but can represent an opportunity for improvement through the adoption of technological tools. Only a few companies report the use of platforms such as BNI or social networks as active referral channels. Likewise, while in developed markets predictive systems and customer scoring algorithms (NPS, CLV, etc.) are used to identify the most effective champions or promoters, in the companies interviewed the subjective and direct identification of the satisfied customer prevails. This highlights a strategic opportunity to introduce data analysis tools and custom CRM systems to companies in the region.

On the other hand, the level of formalization of rewards or incentives in the international MDR is much more structured. Technology companies establish scalable programs, with tangible benefits

for each referral. In the present study, the practices are maintained at a more informal, albeit functional, level. This gap suggests a fertile field for the professionalization of MDR in Latin American companies.

In addition to the main analysis, data related to those responsible for implementing the MDR, good practices, issues to avoid, strategic recommendations, and ways of measuring impact were incorporated. These dimensions allow for a broader analysis of the factors that influence the success or failure of referral marketing (See Table 7).

**Table 7. Complementary analysis based on practices, actors and recommendations in MDR**

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
<b>Actors responsible for implementing the MDR</b>	The main executors of the MDR are directors and managers (13 mentions), followed by employees in general (9), and commercial or marketing areas (8). This distribution demonstrates that the MDR is seen as a shared responsibility, albeit led by senior management, reflecting the strategic interest of these positions in achieving growth through recommendations.
<b>Key Factors for Successful Implementation</b>	Among the main recommendations are the quality of the product or service, credibility, knowledge of the market and after-sales follow-up. These elements are aligned with the principles of trust that govern relationship and word-of-mouth marketing. In addition, the importance of understanding that MDR requires time, maturation of the process and does not translate into immediate results is highlighted.
<b>Common mistakes to avoid</b>	The most frequent bad practices include not delivering on promises (5 mentions), low quality (5), and lack of sales training (3). This reinforces that the MDR is based on reputation, which requires congruence between what is offered and what is delivered. Failing in the customer experience puts the referral chain at risk.
<b>Strategic recommendations for implementing MDR</b>	The most repeated recommendations focus on: establishing a clear strategy with goals (4), using existing tools (3), and fostering human relationships (trust, sociability, teamwork). It is also suggested to complement the MDR with other marketing strategies and not rely exclusively on it.
<b>MDR Success Indicators</b>	The impact of MDR is measured mainly by the increase in customers (16 mentions) and sales (9 mentions). This indicates that companies recognize tangible and direct results. However, few use formal data analysis systems, which represents an opportunity to professionalize monitoring and establish more robust performance indicators.
<b>General perception of its usefulness</b>	Almost all the interviewees recommend implementing the MDR (24 mentions), reflecting a high level of satisfaction with the results obtained. This confirms its effectiveness as a complementary strategy within a comprehensive marketing and sales approach.

## Conclusions

The research carried out allowed to confirm, from a practical perspective, the theoretical foundations of reference marketing (MDR) presented in the first stage of the study. Through the analysis of interviews with experts and business collaborators, it was possible to establish a strategic implementation framework and validate its effectiveness as a tool to increase customers, sales and brand visibility. In this sense, the empirical findings supported the reviewed literature, highlighting that MDR is mainly used by executives, managers and sales personnel to achieve key objectives such as attracting new customers and increasing revenue. The testimonies and results obtained show that this strategy has a real and measurable impact on the commercial indicators of companies.

Based on the analysis of experiences and recommendations of those who have successfully implemented the MDR, a strategic framework with key best practices was developed. This includes: Knowing the market and its needs, developing a differentiated product, training a solid sales team, identifying and working with promoter clients, designing and encouraging referral programs, using social networks and digital platforms to enhance the strategy and continuously monitoring, evaluating, providing feedback and adjusting the program, among others.

The study also contrasted the findings with global trends. It was identified how the MDR has evolved towards the digital environment, leveraged by social networks, online ratings and influencer testimonials. This transformation has made the strategy more scalable and accessible, but it has also brought new challenges such as the appearance of false recommendations, which can put trust at risk, one of the pillars of MDR. In this same sense, with the expansion of e-commerce, where the physical experience of the product is not possible, references and recommendations have become crucial for the purchase decision. Thus, MDR becomes a fundamental tool to generate trust, guide the customer and drive online conversions.

Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that any company – regardless of its size or sector – that properly implements these good practices can expect tangible benefits in terms of customer acquisition, increased sales and consolidation of its brand positioning. The work seeks precisely that more organizations know, understand and adopt this methodology and that this is reflected in their results.

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