

Marketing Management Strategies in Credit Cooperatives in Brazil

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Abstract

Managing a cooperative can be characterized by established relations and its directions in order to satisfy the cooperates in short and long terms. The main goal of this paper involves the investigation and adherence to strategic management tenants and the cooperativist culture in credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais State, Brazil. The article observes the cooperativism philosophical bases, according to theoretical aspects of several authors. The methodology follows administration methods: it employs differentiated static analyses with the aid of conjoint analysis. Therefore, a statistic descriptive study (survey) was developed and questionnaires were elaborated and applied as interviews with CEOs of credit cooperatives in the state of Minas Gerais. The main results of the research and the discussion on the main pointers were correlated with the theoretical basis in order to solve doubts and to present perspectives. The correlations were important to reveal solutions and to describe new aspects that enrich the knowledge on the subject. At the end, the paper summarizes its contribution based on the results of the research. It also presents the main perspectives and recommendations that instigate further discussion and research on management and governance in cooperatives.

Keywords: Management; Governance; Credit Cooperatives; Market Research; Marketing, Conjoint Analysis.

1. Introduction

Cooperatives are enterprises that employ cooperative services. Such institutions intermediate services among cooperates and the market. Cooperatives were conceived to solve the conflicts between collective needs and individual aspirations (KARAFOLAS, 2016). The union of people around common goals results in paradigmatic relations with notable characteristics. The cultural essence of cooperatives reveals a strong system based on the pillar of social responsibility. The cooperative model is an alternative way to make differences of classes smaller with unquestionable efficiency. However, this paper critically reflects on restricted aspects of relationship marketing management.

Throughout history, cooperatives have presented themselves as an efficient way to bring people together around ideals and goals. This model of society provides a mutual help and solution to several problems, that is, those who take part in the system commit themselves to reciprocally contribute assets and services to perform non-profit economic activities. In this society, the cultural question to be prioritized is the appreciation of the group members. This model consists of members voluntarily and democratically employing conjoined management efforts to seek social, economic and human promotion (WARA, CUMBER, ACHIDI, 2014).

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Cooperative model assumes a central role in the market as it keeps focus on society in the search of social balance and welfare, but it is always trying to produce surplus to share among the cooperates. When efficiently implemented and coordinated, cooperatives achieve meaningful advantages to governance in comparison with entrepreneur-oriented organizations (BLESZNOWSKI, 2018). However, cooperatives are complex organizations and are exposed to many kinds of pressure, which is a natural result when competitiveness aspects are established. Considering the multiplicity of actions that exist in this system, due to its complexity, it can only be understood by deep reflection. The complexity results in contradictions to the cooperative ideal and its essence, so they can be distorted depending on the governance style adopted. Organization development is dynamic what makes necessary to identify some characteristics that allow strategic actions predictability. This knowledge enables organizations to reassess business viability periodically. These variables, according to Michels and Rossbach (2018) grant favorable conditions to organizations concerning both their own environment and activities.

This paper aims at bringing the ideal governance style to light. This information can be used as an orientation to alternative management methods, or it can be included as a guideline to improve the way managers and collaborators work together. Governance style composes an important strategic element to organizations. In this sense, Mintzberg (2015) state that the strategic formulation, be it performed by an individual, be it performed as a revision process, is an essential step in the company orientation process. Therefore, the search for the knowledge about specific management characteristics that allow the identification of relation marketing management tools focused on cooperative clients is justified.

2. Brazilian Cooperatives and Strategic Environment Management

Strategies adapt to different environments, that is, any structure can focus its actions in developing context directed strategic activities. Cooperatives are characterized by simple and functional structure that enables the establishment of full development of structured activities. Decision making is flexible and cannot involve power concentration by the managers. The establishment of a creative and agile environment may depend on the view that the managing department possesses of the task. However, due to the complexity of the organizational environment, major decisions that may have direct impact on the cooperative's results are usually discussed in general meetings. In a cooperative, because of its professional dynamics, autonomy is allowed when performing tasks. The cooperative mission properties draw its members to focus their strengths around an ideal. The cooperative model identifies the members' socialization as an organizational value, so the social mission helps to imprint the pattern of actions on the cooperative members. The context in which organizations operate is formed by parts of its environment; consequently, it is essential for the board of directors to know it. This way, the board can identify controllable and non-controllable variables that mark the rhythm of change. Surviving in an uncertain environment can only be achieved through the adoption of strategic elements that characterize the cooperative social function.

According to Carvalho (2016), cooperatives are responsible not only for guaranteeing satisfactory revenue to its members, but also for changing their environment to protect the cooperates' interests and to establish sustainable development. These companies usually tend to adjust themselves to the external market. Cooperative members and community's behavior can be developed based on conscious and responsible change. It is not possible for an individual to live disconnected to any organizations; so, cooperatives establish challenges aiming at fostering values in their members, so they can preserve and spread the knowledge.

Reality in an organizational context seems to be deeply connected to external contingencies because major leading organizations establish strategic guiding elements that, in a sharp and visionary way, are followed by cooperatives. Ontologically, cooperatives establish nomothetic diffusion because they are strongly bound to ideals of free and voluntary access since people union is based on common purposes. Cooperative directors must be alert to the importance of adapting activities according to members' needs in order to present fast answers, considering the changes in a dynamic environment. Understanding the forms of reaction demands knowledge of financial and economic situation, which enables adequate support for decision making. Keeping track and predicting situations are easier if the environment is structured and safe, as well as support to members and their investments.

Cooperatives develop their strategy with unique character, taking advantage of region where they are and work strategically as business unities, disseminating mutual help. Strategy in organizations can consist of proactivity of those involved so decisions can be implemented according criteria of authority and task division (CARVALHO, 2016). Particular aspects start to create competitive advantages. Directors' incentives to staff can create necessary strategic culture to creative environment in the organization, so activities gain harmonic and coordinated efforts.

Development of strategic thinking in daily operational activities strengthens teamwork, making all coordinated actions reflect necessary answers to common sense. Environmental changes are only possible when the context in which organizations are set is known. Current environment is the result of past predictability; the director is responsible for delineating the future. Strategic elements incorporate the culture of the organization and establish market positioning. Inevitably, values and beliefs of the organization follow tendencies, and based on this statement many companies establish real routines, in which staff are practically forced to recycle constantly; the concern of developing staff competence increases individual responsibility since being static in a dynamic environment is not allowed.

It is up to cooperatives to choose what elements will condition their evolution, promoting and stimulating a competitive environment, with formal strategies that aggregate factors that collaborate to positive results. When deliberations are executed in an isolated way, strategic conditioners can generate uneasiness in the directors' minds. However, it is important to keep in mind that businesses consolidate in medium and long term and that the establishment of an adequate environment takes in consideration the anxieties of the cooperative members. The eventual confusion in some organizations concerning particular decisions may be conditioned to the lack of elements that formally focus on the strategic orientation.

In the everyday operations of companies, it is usually difficult to assess a decision made and the vision of a bigger context, from the perspective of assertive marketing strategies. Nevertheless, the risk is inherent to managing processes and actions, which are firmly asserted, permit an adequate orientation. In credit cooperatives, directors usually have autonomy and freedom for decisions, what can influence relations orientation in different contexts. The relationship of strategic factors that guarantee efficiency of results foster the involvement of everyone, since responsibilities concerning implementation of strategy are shared. Acquired knowledge makes easier the applicability of the defined strategy. Each collaborator in the organization needs to have this knowledge and needs to develop the spirit of mutual cooperation in the environment. Homogeneity creates equality in the search of economic conditions balance and promotes interpersonal relationships that generate the creative and logic spirit, which strengthens cooperatives influence in their member's lives.

3. Methodology

The methodology applied in this study consisted of analyzing results of interviews with credit cooperative directors in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, gathering information that will compose the knowledge on the way relational marketing focused on the customer is managed. The first step consisted of an exploratory study to gather information of credit cooperatives in Brazil, based on data collected from OCB (2015). It identified 1.042 (one thousand forty-two) of this type of cooperative in Brazil, of which 195 (one hundred ninety-five) are based in Minas Gerais state. The second step was the development of a questionnaire to be used in the interview with the cooperative directors to achieve a statistic-descriptive study (survey). Thus, this study is built around a theoretical foundation, the secondary data, and questionnaires applied to credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais, the primary data. Due to the number of cooperatives, their geographical distribution, and the state of Minas Gerais size - 586,528 km² the questionnaires were applied in different formats: email contact, in loco visits, telephone calls, and the use of Google docs platform, so the directors were able to take part in the survey despite the distance.

All 195 credit cooperatives were asked to answer the questionnaire and contribute to generate important details about relational marketing, so it can be considered an instance of random causal sampling (BRANCATI, 2018). The sample represents a subset of elements extracted from a population. This way, in a total of 195 credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais, according to the method of Levin (1987), we have a sampling number of 34 credit cooperative directors interviewed, with a level of trust of 91%. The researcher works with limited time, energy and economic resources, rare are the times in which it is possible to work with all the elements of a population (Levin, 1987). One manager per credit cooperative was interviewed by a semi-structured questionnaire with questions about relationship marketing managing. By random causal sampling, proposed by Levin (1987) and supported by Malhotra, Nunam and Birks (2017), managers of credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais were selected. Following this procedure, it is easier to select samplings and frequently with less incoherence. Louis (2017) adds that this procedure consists of contacting convenient sampling units, being possible recruit individuals as: classroom students, some friends and neighbors or, in this case, credit cooperative management department representatives.

The questionnaire allowed static inference that involves the formulation of specific judgments about the whole, after examining just part of the sample, as Malhotra, Nunam and Birks (2017) recommends. The data were tabulated and assessed according to conjoint analysis method, as detailed in the result analysis and discussion section. The conjoint analysis deserves special attention since it depicts vividly decisions about services. The evolution on administration research reinforced its acceptability in many different sectors. With the aid of software that performs data combinations, this model of analysis has become a differential in many situations (HAIR, 2016).

Quantitative studies usually try to strictly follow a previously established research plan, which can be based on clearly pointed propositions and variables that are the object of operational definition. The goal is to shorten the distance between theory and data. According to Hair (2016), relations among variables can be described in different ways, including presence, direction, strength and kind of association. Statistical inference focuses on using sampling as a method to acquire information about a population, without the necessity of examining each individual of the population (MALHOTRA, NUNAM, BIRKS, 2017). Thus, the application of a particular statistical analysis, called conjoint analysis, to identify preponderant factors in the administration of credit cooperatives helps identifying the level of formalization that is important for marketing managing. The collected data were tabulated and inserted in the SPSS software (version 22). Due to the applied questions, descriptive analysis tests were carried out to identify the characteristics of the interviewees. Inferential statistics tests were also applied to check casual differences and equalities of results and groupings of interviewees according to age and experience. After identifying the interviewee's characteristics, they were grouped, and their answers were checked. So, each item corresponding to the questions was assessed. Based on the collected data correlations between answers were made. Thus, every point of concordance among the interviewees was observed. The next step was verifying possible differences in the way of conceiving the cooperative model considering the experience time of the directors who were interviewed.

Apparently, there can be some external or internal influences, cultural factors such as: formation, different characteristics of cooperatives, and some other variables that may directly or indirectly interfere in the managers' opinions about the level of formalization of the management. Some relevant factors were employed in the analysis of the data: gender, age, and experience in cooperatives. According to Beales (2014), the importance of the move is tied to cultural questions that were developed by concrete practical experience.

To Jolliffe (2018), time and experience are fundamental factors that determine trust. This way, Kotler (2015) argues that decisions are based in intrinsic knowledge that people believe to have, but not all of them have it. Considering age and experience of managers, they were divided in four groups:

- Novice – up to 2 years of professional experience;
- Apprentice – more than 2 and less than 5 years of professional experience;
- Experienced – more than 5 and less than 10 years of professional experience;
- Senior – more than 10 years of professional experience;

Cooperative management must include knowledge on market opportunities, because it provides sustainable and uniform growth of the system (CHECHIN et. al., 2012). However, concerning the services, what is perceived is more important than what is provided (SHORT, 2018). The relationship between provided service and perceived service represents an interaction of expectations and perceptions of cooperative members.

4. Results and Discussion

Pointers can be structured in many ways, so they allow different ways of consolidation of the situation which best fits the management model (GIDE, 2015). Thus, in front of the systematic sampling proposed by Levin (1987), this research focused on a set of cooperative managers that was called population. The cooperatives were classified in numbers from 1 to 34 according their answering and returning of the questionnaires.

Initially, as a secondary data source to the application of the analytical model, the questionnaire answers from 34 credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais were compiled in the SPSS v. 22 software.

Data compilation represents a summarization of the research panorama. The answers to the structured questions were capital to achieve the goals. This way, the numbers were registered according to the research compilation. Next, the data were interpreted. Table 1 shows that all questions were answered by all 34 credit cooperative managers.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistic of participants

	Classification by experience (in years)	gender	age
Median	3,0	1*	32
Mean	2,9	1,2	41
Standard Deviation	0,9	0,4	7
Minimum	1,0 (novice)	1*	29
Maximum	4,0 (senior)	2**	55
25	2,0	1*	34
Percentage 50	3,0	1*	39
75	4,0	1*	48

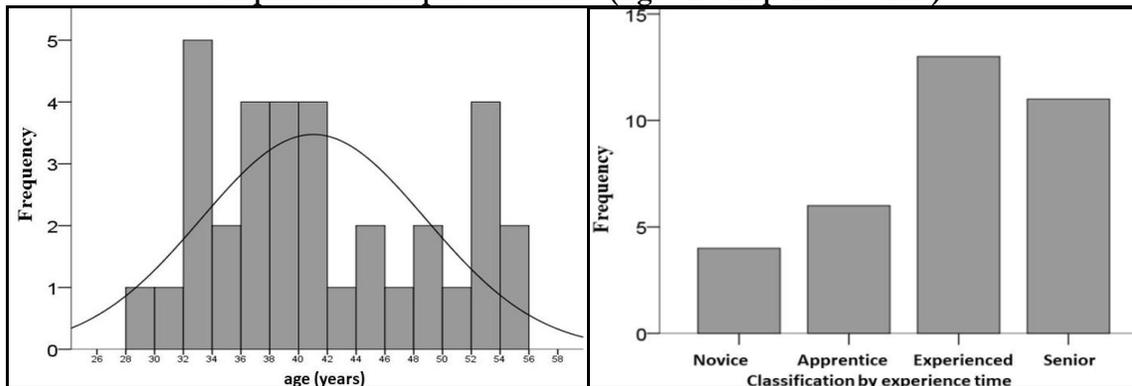
Label = * 1-Male; ** 2- Female

Source: elaborated by the authors, from the results inserted in the SPSS software

According to table 1, the description of frequency, the mean and median of experience time show that the participation of more experienced managers is the biggest and the quartiles confirm these data. Malhotra, Nunam and Birks (2017) state that descriptive statistics embodies handling data to sum them up and describe them, without going beyond them, i.e., without interfering in anything that extrapolate the data. Most credit cooperative managers interviewed (79%) were over 41 years old men and have more than five years of experience in the cooperative model, according to the proposed classification method of the managers.

Calve, Morales and Zikidis (2017) argues that the correlation between age and experience time is key to cooperatives, since there is the trend that people in the cooperative system over time become more conscious of social practices and questions relating welfare. There is also the opposite degenerating trend: cooperative tenets can be distorted by the lack of experience of managers, changing the cooperative model into more formal and less affective. Graphic 1 shows the classification by experience time in years, according to the proposed categorization.

Graphic 1: Descriptive Statistics (Age and Experience time)



Source: elaborated by the authors

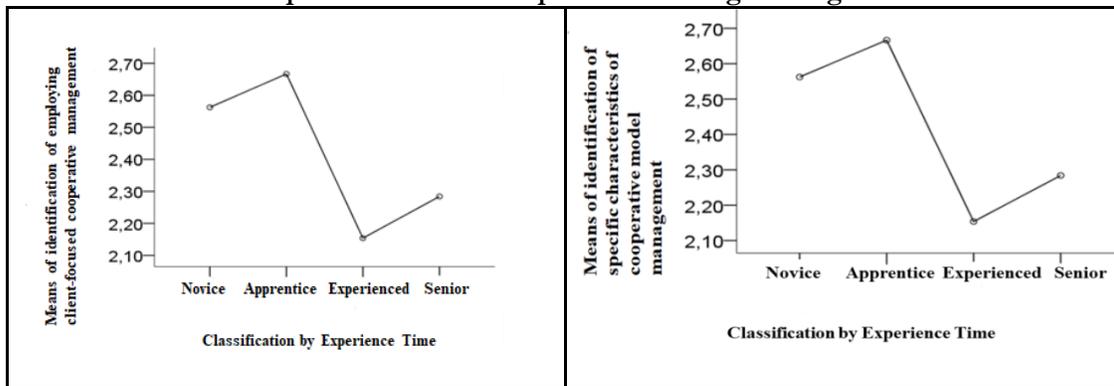
Concerning the profile of the credit cooperative managers who were interviewed, 12% are novices, 18% are apprentices, 38% are veterans, and 32% are seniors. After identifying the managers’ main characteristics, the research focused on the grouping and checking the answer to the questionnaire, according to the research goals and the experience time of the interviewees. The results confirm what Zeithaml and Bitner (2017) states: creating solid and long-lasting relationships is a hard task with difficult management, especially in an environment in which the clients have so many options.

The correlation between this research goals and the experience suggests that the gender of the managers is not a point of conflict, since male and female managers share similar perceptions about the concepts surveyed. However, the results suggest that, as time passes, and experience is gained, some propositions are more likely to be changed.

In the cooperative model, the level of information is proportional to the level of commitment. The bigger is the knowledge of causes, the bigger is the offensive involvement in the search for economical and social balance of people (LLOYD, 2017). Relationship marketing permits that procedures be efficiently standardized. Accordingly, all the managers agreed that keeping the work teams is directly related to keeping the clients and the latter's' fidelity is a result of the quality of the service which is provided. The cooperative members must know the tenets that govern the cooperative model, and the credit cooperative managers have to develop actions as alternative ways of increasing the sensibility of the people to social questions. In marketing strategies, the importance of statistical data in interpreting results, especially concerning credit cooperatives, seem not to be employed among practices of relational marketing. According to Mehta, Steinman and Murphy (2016), orientation focused on market and society are the main organizational challenge, which may correspond to opportunities or even threats if ignored by the organization. Experience change provided by a cooperative management is enriching as it crosses and complements different abilities and knowledge, adding different values to the experience of all who are involved in the process. Experience and opportunities make organization managers develop capacities for many different processes (TOMELIN; TOMELIN, 2014).

In a five-point labeled scale, in which '1' stands for 'totally agree' and '5' stands for 'totally disagree', it can be verified that Means and Standard Deviations are very restricted, since answer variation were constrained to '2' and '3', revealing the managers general trend to only partially agree with the questions. In graphic 2, Means of scoring for experience in the proposed study are shown. This way, the impact of experience under most varied aspects according to a classification by experience time in each group can be understood.

Graphic 1 – Means of experience scoring in the goals



Source: elaborated by the authors based on research results processed by the SPSS software

As seen in graphic 2, concerning the importance of using client focused marketing management tools in cooperatives in Minas Gerais, experienced managers are those who show more agreement with this tenet, while apprentices remain indifferent. Experience acquired over time, in many cases, can help managers to easily identify elements that low experienced professional can not perceive. Concerning the correlation between the identification of specific characteristics of cooperatives and the time of experience, the higher rates of agreement are identified among experienced and senior managers. Besides that, these two groups are those who demand more methods and tools employed. There are small differences between points of view when gender is considered in the management of credit cooperatives. Even though, these differences are not significant to justify their classification in two groups.

The widespread use and acceptance in academic fields of Cronbach alfa coefficient is an important factor that motivates its employment as a tool to estimate trust (HOTA *et al.*, 2010). So, the next step was verifying the level of trust of the objective constructs, as it can be seen in table 2.

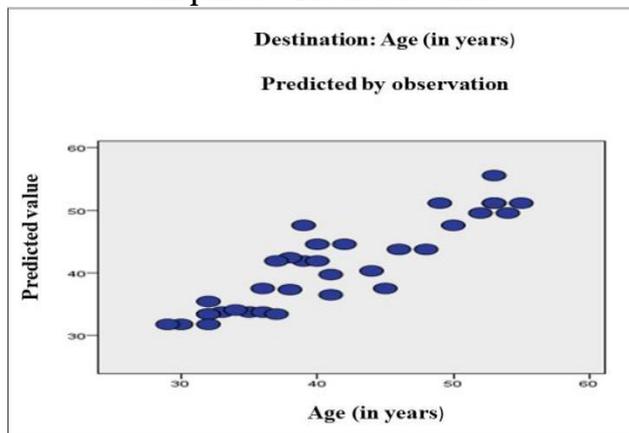
Table 2 – Trust Statistics

Cronbach Alfa	Cronbach Alfa based on standardized items	Number of Itens
0,88	0,88	6

Source: elaborated by the authors based on research results processed by the SPSS software

In a last analysis, it was verified the view on the answers about questionnaire items correlated with age, independently of gender. Besides, data were extrapolated with prediction of answer values, according to the experience of the interviewees, as shown in graphic 3.

Graphic 3 – Predicted Values



Source: elaborated by the authors based on research results processed by the SPSS software

In graphic 3, the prediction shows tendency of cooperative values are higher with age. The concentration is higher between ages 36 to 42: the older the interviewees are, the heavier the weight of decision is, so the managers become more critical. Some market strategies, if well-defined to satisfy a particular market niche, can strength the institution. The cooperative members conscience of fulfilling their mission can be mixed with the very own collective development strategy.

According to the research, it can be stated that the style of governance applied in its tenets and strategies, is an adequate approach the market management in credit cooperatives in Minas Gerais. The interpretation of the data made clear a correlation between a comprehensive relational base, with managers, staff and cooperative members, and higher satisfaction and trust in the general people. Trust contributes to social stability and increases action potentialities of the system (LOUIS, 2017). The process of economic globalization, changes in the national economic scenario and the increase in global competitiveness demanded Brazilian cooperatives to review their principles and doctrines, as a way to adapt themselves to new times (ANTONIALY, 2017). Thus, data interpretation compiled in this research reveals crucial information about the main elements that should be considered to strategic focused development.

5. Conclusion

The data results, supported by the methodology and founded in theoretical references, made possible reflection that contributes to fulfilling this paper goals. During the research, concepts were confronted with usual practices in the cooperative model to make clear the managers view about relational market practices focused on customer. Concerning management strategies in credit cooperatives and their adherence to the cooperative model, it was shown, based on the answers collected in the survey, that most managers cannot see any significant correlation between these aspects; this connection is no easily perceived by the managers. Credit cooperative managing staff can take some actions that escape the formal rules of treatment, but these situations are exceptions that, even not formalized, can be adherent to marketing processes.

In fact, managers have autonomy to make decisions that break the rules, but they are not prone to do it: 64% of the interviewees understand that actions that go against the regular procedures should not be stimulated or praised. Governance style varies according to relational marketing management tools. Honesty and ethical behavior can help identifying customers and members needs and desires (DANGI, 2016). In general, there is the concern among the interviewees that they should solve the problems and receive constant demands from customers and cooperative members, believing that, this way, they help to find solutions to collective problems. Cooperation is the organizing way that can provide economic integration of people and, so, make possible opportunities and economic growth. However, as any other organization, some aspects are crucial to succeeding in business.

One of these aspects, according to Herbrand Musiolik (2015) are the instruments by which individuals and organizations establish mutual relationships, being influenced and dependent of social and economic functions. It makes it possible to explain, through the research and the theoretical foundation presented, the importance of credit cooperative marketing management tools. It can be emphasized to the managers the importance of promoting continual verification of changes that frequently happen in institutional environment, although in particular situations there might be personal interests. Collective goals must suppress and be above individual goals; people ethical behavior concerning respect to the cooperative members can align different formats of interest, guiding the decision-making process in face of inequality.

Credit cooperatives' great challenge is in keeping the cultural essence without losing the ideological concept of the common well search. Cooperative seeks knowledge of market opportunities because they grant uniform and sustainable growth of the system (CHECHIN et al, 2012). Concern with relational strategic development can minimize differences and promoting the grasp of opportunities. Professionalization is the best way to solve management problems in cooperatives, where, in general, it was noted that there is the care of hiring well qualified professionals to occupy management positions.

On the other hand, cooperative members participation cannot be imposed, but it must result from spontaneous adherence movement that starts in the individual and that is expressed in solidary actions, which make the individual share rights with the other members of the group. More information is needed to people commit themselves and change cooperatives into more efficient and progressive organizations that value economic and social, assuming offensive nature, which is inherent to new models and processes, substituting the defensive behavior that is typical in structural models. The board elected by a small number of members may not have administrative view, what makes extremely difficult the establishment of adequate strategies to the activities developed. Thus, it is essential that all the cooperative members get involved and take part in the general meetings.

In a fierce competitive scenario, these organizations must direct their strategies towards fast answering environmental demands. There are no doubts left that, currently, banks have great interest in the credit cooperative customers, what makes the former a risk to cooperatives. Based on this tendency, it is essential that credit cooperatives rethink some actions to make possible a broader future view, by long-term plans that implement the cooperative culture in all the people in the cooperative. Importantly, the management must always be aware of mutations that occur in the institutional environment, seeking to minimize not only information asymmetry, but, above all, grasp opportunities that may appear. New inferences, which can result from other research, can increase the knowledge about processes of relational marketing management focused on the client. It is necessary view to a realistic future, which depends on the education of the cooperative staff and members, professional board members, and investment on staff training and on new technologies.

This paper aimed at contributing to better understand governance, as well as investigating possible impacts administrative actions that can happen during the management of cooperatives. Under an ontological and epistemological view, it is believed that the reflection posit here can go beyond existing epistemological constraints, intrinsic to current paradigms, as well as helping some cooperatives, in this delimiting rupture that surrounds everyday events. It is hoped that this research can serve as a source of information to new studies and, mainly, to the alignment of the main points that can be explored, aiming at the practice of adequate use of marketing in the spread of the cooperative model culture. According to this research, women, even timidly, tend to be more indifferent to usual concepts and practices in cooperative model. However, the female managers interviewed weren't experienced; they were either novices or apprentices. It is fair to question if, with time, women will tend to think according more experienced managers interviewed, or if it as gender specific tendency. In order to clarify this point, new studies could be employed.

Also, as a suggestion of new studies on the theme, other elements can be added as a way to continue or even deepen this research, because the results of this research could be compared to results with cooperative managers in other parts of Brazil. Besides that, another important aspect can be explored: do experienced credit cooperative managers better accept the cooperative model tenets because of their beliefs or because their resignation with lack of changes?

The cooperative model wouldn't make sense if wealthier people had greater decision power. So, cooperation presents itself as a possibility of reducing people marginalization and soothing inequalities that are characteristic, many times implicit to, of contemporary economic development models of credit cooperatives. This research has great importance to researchers and managers because its description and understanding provided by the knowledge of the credit cooperative scenario in Minas Gerais and its suggestions to new studies. Each cooperative has autonomy to develop its methods of relational marketing management, and to focus in the areas that better suit them. Perhaps, the biggest challenge is to get the knowledge and understanding of strategic processes of management that can prioritize social and economic equality.

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