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Customer Relationship Management as a Strategic Capability for ICT Entrepreneurship in the Digital Economy

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *This study examines the implementation of CRM in an ICT service company and explores its contribution to customer satisfaction, customer retention, and long-term relationship development.* ***Method:*** *Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study adopts Robert K. Yin's case study approach to investigate CRM as an integrated managerial and entrepreneurial process. The analysis examines the implementation of CRM through four interconnected strategic stages: customer portfolio analysis, customer value creation, business network alignment, and customer life-cycle management.* ***Results:*** *The findings demonstrate that CRM strengthens the firm's capacity to identify customer behavior, personalize digital services, respond effectively to changing customer expectations, and cultivate customer loyalty. Moreover, an integrated CRM strategy enables ICT service firms to combine customer information, service quality, digital interaction, and relationship-building practices to support competitive differentiation and business sustainability.* ***Novelty:*** *The originality of this study lies in conceptualizing CRM not merely as an information technology application, but as a dynamic strategic capability that connects customer intelligence, digital value creation, entrepreneurial responsiveness, and long-term relationship management. The study provides practical implications for ICT entrepreneurs and service firms seeking to enhance customer experience, retain profitable customers, expand their customer base, and achieve sustainable growth within an increasingly competitive digital economy.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) has reshaped the way people communicate, work, learn, access services, and conduct business. ICT now supports many sectors, including health care, education, finance, transportation, public administration, legal services, and business operations. In Indonesia, this transformation appears in the steady increase in internet use. Data from Statistics Indonesia show that internet usage rose from 39.90% in 2018 to 66.48% in 2022. This growth reflects a broader social expectation that technology should not only support efficiency, but also help people live more connected, practical, and meaningful lives [1]. At the same time, digital technology enables society and organizations to respond more quickly to emerging problems and to design solutions that are more accessible and relevant to users' needs [2]. However, the expansion of ICT has also created new challenges for companies that provide ICT services. ICT service firms do not merely sell products or technical tools; they offer solutions that help individuals, businesses, and institutions manage, develop, and protect their information systems and digital infrastructure. As ICT becomes embedded in almost every aspect of modern life, competition among ICT service providers becomes increasingly intense. The idea of Society 5.0, introduced in the 5th Science and Technology Basic Plan, also strengthens the expectation that technology should integrate human needs, digital systems, and social value creation [3]. In this context, ICT service companies must compete not only through technical capability, price, or service variety, but also through their ability to understand customers, maintain trust, and build long-term relationships.

This situation makes customer relationship management a strategic issue for ICT service firms. Customers are no longer passive buyers who evaluate a company only after receiving a service. They increasingly act as business partners who expect responsiveness, reliability, personalization, transparent communication, and continuous improvement. ICT customers often require long-term assistance, system maintenance, technical consultation, and adaptive solutions that change as their organizations grow. When a company fails to manage these expectations, customers may shift to other providers that offer faster responses, better service quality, or more personal engagement. Therefore, ICT service companies need a systematic approach that allows them to identify customer needs, manage customer interactions, and transform customer information into better service decisions. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) offers one possible strategic response to this challenge. CRM helps companies manage relationships more effectively by integrating customer data, communication processes, service activities, and relationship-building strategies [4]. Through CRM, firms can retain customers over a longer period by improving the way they understand customer behavior, respond to complaints, personalize services, and maintain service continuity [5]. The core purpose of CRM lies in improving customer satisfaction, strengthening customer loyalty, and increasing revenue from existing customers, particularly in markets shaped by competition, globalization, and rising customer expectations [6]. CRM also enables companies to understand and influence customer behavior through meaningful interactions, which may improve customer acquisition, retention, loyalty, and profitability [7]. In business practice, CRM has become an important operational and strategic activity because it supports the acquisition, maintenance, and development of customer value and loyalty [8]. In ICT service firms, CRM has a particularly important role because customer relationships often extend beyond a single transaction. ICT services usually involve consultation, installation, maintenance, troubleshooting, system upgrades, training, and after-sales support. These activities require continuous communication and a high level of trust between the service provider and the customer. Buttle explains that CRM strategy consists of five customer-oriented stages: customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, network development, value proposition development, and customer life-cycle management. These stages suggest that CRM should not be treated only as software or a database. Instead, firms should manage CRM as an integrated strategy that links customer analysis, relationship development, partner networks, value creation, and long-term customer management.

Previous studies have shown the importance of CRM in improving customer relationships and business outcomes. CRM can increase customer happiness and support long-term relationships with potential customers [9]. CRM also influences service delivery performance in postal services, indicating that relationship management practices can affect operational outcomes [10]. In another study, CRM helps industries reduce operational risk, understand customer needs, detect irregularities in transaction activities, and improve weak service areas [11]. These studies confirm that CRM can support service improvement, customer retention, and business sustainability. Nevertheless, many existing studies still discuss CRM in a broad service or industrial context, while fewer studies explain how ICT service firms implement CRM as a structured strategy in their daily business practices. This gap is important because ICT service firms face distinctive relationship challenges. Their services are technical, problem-based, and often customized according to customer needs. Customers may evaluate not only the final service output but also the quality of communication, responsiveness, reliability, technical explanation, and continuity of support. Therefore, a deeper understanding is needed of how ICT service companies implement CRM, how they use customer information, how they build relationship value, and how CRM contributes to customer experience and long-term business relationships. Without this understanding, CRM may be reduced to a technological tool rather than being developed as a customer-centered organizational capability.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to position CRM not only as an information system, but as an integrated managerial strategy that connects customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, business networks, customer value creation, and customer life-cycle management in the ICT service context. This perspective provides a more practical and contextual explanation of how CRM works in a service company whose business depends on trust, responsiveness, and continuous customer engagement. This study enriches the discussion of CRM implementation in ICT service firms, a context that requires both technological competence and relational capability. The study provides practical insight into how CRM stages can support customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and business continuity and it offers managerial guidance for ICT service companies that seek to improve customer experience, retain existing customers, attract new customers, and strengthen their competitive position in a dynamic digital market. This research examines how CRM is implemented in an ICT service company, how CRM practices shape customer relationships, and how CRM contributes to service improvement and sustainable business performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. The case study method was selected because the research sought to understand how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) was implemented in an ICT service company and why such implementation contributed to customer retention, service improvement, and business growth. Following Yin's case study logic, this approach is appropriate for answering "why" and "how" questions, particularly when the phenomenon is examined within its real organizational context. The study was guided by five core components of case study research: research questions, propositions, units of analysis, the logic linking data to propositions, and criteria for interpreting findings. These components provided a systematic structure for examining CRM implementation as a managerial and strategic process rather than merely as a technological function. In this study, CRM was understood as an integrated strategy that connects customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, business networks, customer value creation, and customer life-cycle management, as suggested in CRM strategy development literature [10]. The main research questions were formulated as follows: Why does business performance improve after CRM implementation in an ICT service company? and How does such improvement occur through CRM practices? These questions were designed to explore not only the outcomes of CRM implementation, but also the processes, mechanisms, and managerial practices that support customer relationship development. The study was based on the proposition that CRM implementation contributes to business improvement by strengthening customer understanding, service personalization, customer satisfaction, and long-term relationship quality. In the context of ICT services, CRM is expected to help the company identify customer needs, manage service interactions, maintain customer trust, and encourage repeat purchases. This proposition was examined through the analysis of CRM practices implemented by the company, particularly in relation to customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, value creation, and customer life-cycle management. Rather than assuming a direct and simple causal relationship, this study investigated how CRM practices were perceived, implemented, and connected to customer relationship outcomes. This position is important because business improvement in service companies is rarely shaped by a single factor. It is often influenced by service quality, communication, customer experience, market conditions, and the company's ability to maintain consistent relationships with customers.

The unit of analysis in this study was the implementation of CRM strategy in an ICT service company. The research applied an embedded case study design, in which one company was examined as the main case, while several internal and external actors were included as embedded units of analysis. This design enabled the researcher to capture CRM implementation from multiple perspectives, including the company owner, customers, users, and relevant institutional stakeholders. The embedded case study approach was considered suitable because CRM implementation involves several interconnected actors and processes within the service ecosystem [11]. Informants were selected using typical case sampling. This technique was used to obtain information from individuals who were directly involved in, or had relevant experience with, the company's CRM-related activities. The informants included the company owner, government or institutional clients, loyal customers, users of ICT services, and customers who no longer continued their relationship with the company. In total, nine key informants were involved in the interview process. Their perspectives were used to understand how CRM was practiced, how customers experienced the service, and how relationship management influenced satisfaction and repeat engagement. Data were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, passive observation, and documentation. The use of multiple data sources was intended to strengthen the credibility of the findings through triangulation [12]. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of CRM implementation. The interview questions focused on customer interaction, service responsiveness, customer data management, communication patterns, customer satisfaction, and factors influencing customer loyalty or discontinuity. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while still giving informants enough space to explain their views in detail. Second, observation was conducted to understand the company's CRM practices in their natural setting. The researcher used passive observation, meaning that the researcher observed company activities without directly participating in operational decision-making. The observed activities included service transactions, communication with customers, business presentations, and customer handling processes. This stage helped the researcher understand how CRM was practiced in daily business activities, beyond what was stated in interviews. Third, documentation was used to complement the interview and observation data. The documents analyzed included service records, customer transaction data, business permits, company profiles, and other relevant administrative records. These documents were useful for tracing customer interactions, service history, and business processes related to CRM implementation. Documentation also helped verify information obtained from interviews and observations.

The data analysis followed a qualitative case study procedure. The first step was data organization. Interview recordings, observation notes, and documents were collected, reviewed, and arranged according to the main themes of CRM implementation. Interview data were then transcribed and checked to ensure that the meaning of each statement was accurately captured. The second step was data reduction. At this stage, the researcher selected relevant information related to CRM strategy, customer management, customer satisfaction, service personalization, business networks, and customer life-cycle management. Data that were not directly related to the research questions were excluded to maintain analytical focus. The third step was coding and categorization. The data were coded based on recurring patterns and themes. These codes were then grouped into several analytical categories, including customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, business network relationships, customer value creation, and customer life-cycle management. These categories were aligned with the CRM strategy framework used in the study (Buttle, 2004). The fourth step was thematic interpretation. The researcher examined how each theme explained the implementation of CRM in the company. The analysis focused on the way CRM practices helped the company understand customer needs, improve service delivery, personalized communication, and maintain long-term customer relationships. The findings from interviews, observations, and documents were then compared to identify similarities, differences, and supporting evidence. The study also used deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning was applied by linking the empirical findings to the initial research propositions and CRM theory. Inductive reasoning was used to identify new insights emerging from the field data, particularly those related to customer experience, service relationships, and practical challenges in CRM implementation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied data triangulation and method triangulation. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information from different informants, including the company owner, customers, users, and other relevant stakeholders. Method triangulation was applied by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. This process helped the researcher avoid relying on a single source of evidence and strengthened the credibility of the interpretation. Construct validity was addressed by using multiple sources of evidence, maintaining a clear chain of evidence, and reviewing key findings with selected informants. This process ensured that the concepts examined in the study, particularly CRM implementation and customer relationship outcomes, were represented accurately. Internal validity was strengthened through pattern matching and explanation building. The researcher compared the empirical patterns found in the field with the initial propositions and theoretical framework. When the observed patterns were consistent with the proposed explanation, the interpretation was considered stronger. The final stage of the study involved synthesizing the findings into a coherent explanation of CRM implementation in the ICT service company. The researcher integrated evidence from interviews, observations, and documents to describe how CRM was implemented, how it supported customer relationship management, and how it contributed to customer retention and business improvement. The final interpretation emphasized analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, the findings are not intended to represent all ICT service companies, but to provide conceptual and practical insights into how CRM strategy can be understood and applied in similar service-based business contexts.

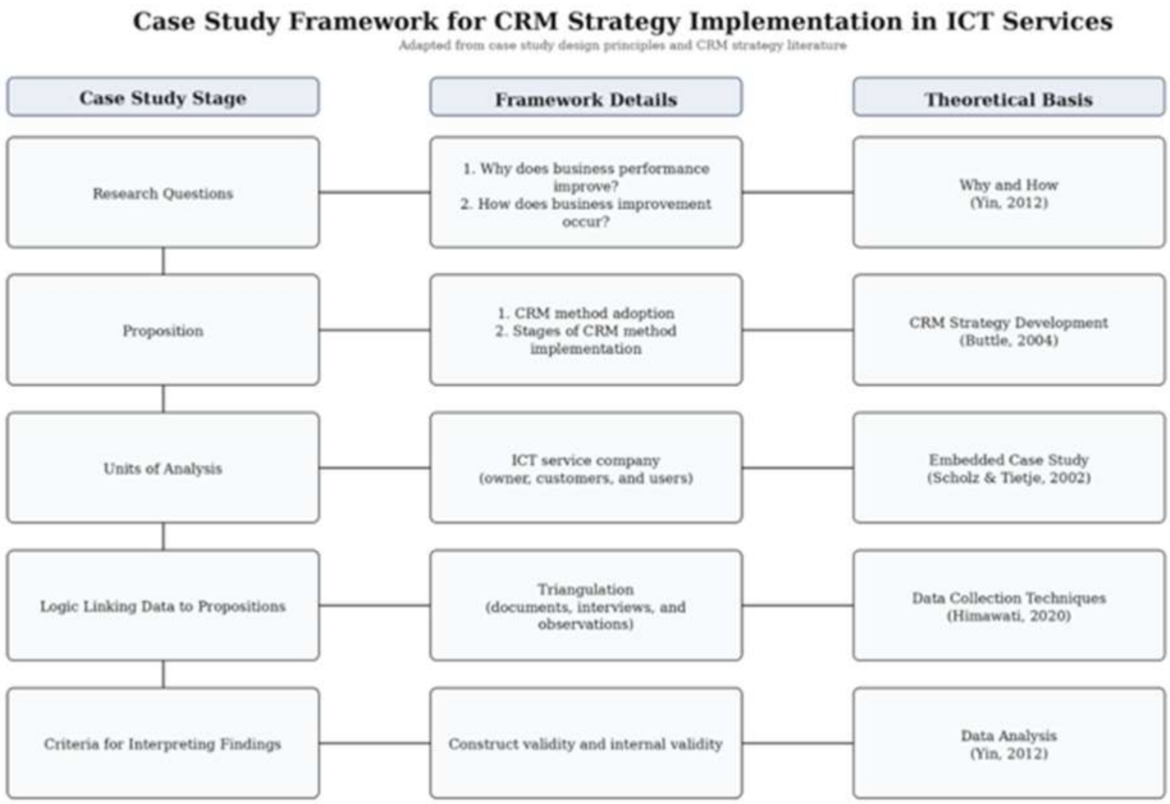

Figure 1. Case Study Framework for CRM Strategy Implementation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized around the five interrelated stages of the CRM strategy framework that guided this study [11] customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, business network development, customer value creation, and customer life-cycle management. Rather than treating these stages as discrete tasks, the case evidence shows how they operate as a single connected process, and it is this connectedness that allows the studied ICT service firm to convert customer information into durable relationships. Each subsection below reports the observed practice, interprets its role within the firm's strategy, and situates it against prior CRM and marketing research.

Customer Portfolio Analysis

The firm operates across the four principal domains of the ICT service industry — telecommunications, hardware, digital content, and software — and divides its market into business-to-business (B2B), business-to-consumer (B2C), and business-to-government (B2G) accounts. Each segment demands a distinct engagement logic. B2B relationships center on industrial and organizational partnership [15]; B2C accounts, such as residential CCTV, prioritize ease of use for the end consumer; and B2G accounts require fluency in procurement bureaucracy and regulatory compliance, as in the firm's e-government projects. Transaction records reveal a pronounced institutional orientation: 69 of 100 recorded transactions originate from the B2G segment. This concentration is not incidental. It steers the firm's entire relationship strategy toward the longer sales cycles, compliance sensitivity, and sustained post-implementation support that government clients expect.

Underpinning this segmentation is a structured customer database built around five variables: customer identity, transaction history, interaction records, payment terms, and stated preferences. In practice the database works less as an archive than as an analytical instrument, allowing the firm to read behavioral patterns, estimate segment profitability, and decide where relationship effort will yield the greatest return. Pricing follows the same value-based logic rather than a purely cost-based one, incorporating perceived value, flexible packaging, and competitive positioning, while promotion relies heavily on credible word-of-mouth referral within professional networks [14]. Using structured customer data as the basis for differentiated engagement is consistent with evidence that systematic customer mapping strengthens portfolio management [8], and it operationalizes an integrated marketing logic in which product, price, place, and promotion are aligned to segment characteristics rather than applied uniformly [13].

Customer Intimacy

Customer intimacy in the firm rests on translating raw records into responsive, personalized action. A 2020 digital attendance deployment in Gresik illustrates this well: when employees over the age of 45 struggled to adopt the new system, the firm did not rely on a technical fix alone but placed an on-site support team to assist users directly and gather feedback. This human-centered response reflects an understanding that digital transformation is as much a psychological transition as a technical one. The same flexibility appears in complaint handling: of the 32 transactions recorded in 2023, 20 gave rise to complaints, all of which the firm resolved — frequently with solutions that went beyond the original terms of reference (KAK).

Contract-value decisions are similarly evidence-led. The firm weighs project complexity, human-resource availability, and financial impact against the interaction history stored in the customer database, which lets it anticipate difficulties rather than merely react to them. Interpreted through the CRM framework, intimacy here is not sentiment but capability: the disciplined conversion of customer data into decisions that pre-empt problems and exceed contractual expectations. This reading aligns with work positioning CRM as a relational rather than purely transactional practice [4] and with evidence that relational capital amplifies the performance returns of CRM [7]. It also echoes findings that a deeper, data-informed understanding of customer needs is what differentiates effective CRM adopters [25], and that such responsiveness supports satisfaction and retention over time [9].

Business Network Development

The firm functions as the central node of a wider service ecosystem. Its direct ties include freelance specialists, financial consultants, and a commission-based marketing network, while its indirect ties extend to regulators, competitors, and broader market forces. Demand is volatile — orders rose roughly 1.5 times in 2023 — and the firm absorbs this volatility through a flexible staffing model, engaging project specialists to meet deadlines without diluting service quality, and through a 10–20% commission scheme that turns intermediaries into a credible, low-cost acquisition channel. Regulatory compliance (NIB, NPWP, and SBU under Permenkumham No. 17/2018) operates not merely as a defensive obligation but as a trust signal, particularly valued in the compliance-sensitive B2G segment.

Relationships with competitors add a further dimension, producing a competition-and-collaboration dynamic in which competitive analysis serves simultaneously as an early-warning system and a source of learning; the post-pandemic move toward hybrid physical-digital solutions is one visible outcome of this pressure [1]. Read together, these patterns suggest that the firm's network is best understood not as a supply-and-distribution channel but as a shared learning ecosystem that strengthens both growth [17] and resilience against market uncertainty [18]. The dependence and influence running through these ties reflect the power-dependence structure long recognized in exchange relationships [16].

Customer Value Creation

Value creation in the firm is multidimensional and extends well beyond the delivery of a functional product [19]. It unfolds across four broad factors, product introduction, purchase management, supporting conditions, and external conditions. At the introduction stage, communication and emotion are decisive: three customers acquired in 2019 singled out plain-language presentations free of technical jargon and the staff's patience in answering questions. The emotional intelligence of the sales team, its capacity to manage stress and avoid conflict, thus emerges as a genuine differentiator in establishing early trust [25].

Purchase management proceeds through five linked aspects: problem identification, rational evaluation of technical and cost efficiency, representation through visual design and product roadmaps, agreement formalized in a detailed terms of reference (Kerangka Acuan Kerja - KAK), and shared objectives that keep the firm and client aligned throughout the project. The one-to-three-month discussion period that typically precedes execution signals how central co-creation is to ICT service value. Supporting conditions, spatial (the 2017 choice of Sidoarjo for economic agglomeration and accessibility), monetary (competitive pricing), and temporal (well-timed launches), together with external conditions of control (legal compliance) and organization (knowledge exchange in B2B relationships) complete the picture. Interpreted through this thirteen-aspect lens [20], value ceases to be a static product attribute and becomes a holistic experience formed through continuous interaction, shifting the firm's logic from a fixed customer value proposition toward networked value creation in which every touchpoint contributes to perceived value. Because purchase decisions in this setting are strongly shaped by professional referral, social-network influence on preference formation is an important part of how this value is recognized and accepted [22].

Customer Life-Cycle Management

The firm manages the customer life cycle across three phases — acquisition, retention, and value development [21]. Acquisition rests heavily on word-of-mouth: the firm's earliest government client in 2017 arrived through a personal recommendation, and the same mechanism sustained a geographic expansion from Sidoarjo (2017) to Surabaya (2019), Gresik (2020), and locations beyond Java from 2021 onward. This trajectory shows how professional referral, rather than active promotion alone, builds a B2G portfolio, consistent with the role of social networks in shaping purchase consideration [22].

Retention is managed through data. The customer database tracks transaction habits, service preferences, and interaction history, and the pattern it reveals is striking: every transaction recorded in 2023 came from a returning customer. Responsiveness to complaints is central to this outcome, the 20 complaints resolved in 2023, often beyond the original KAK scope, generated the positive disposition (confidence, satisfaction, repurchase intention) that discourages switching. Appreciation programs, souvenirs, incentives, and parcels for loyal clients, reinforce this effect, functioning as positive reinforcement that lowers the likelihood of migration to competitors and, more broadly, as an element of the customer experience that shapes loyalty across the journey [23]. Value development then extends the relationship proactively through satisfaction surveys, routine coordination, and the presentation of new solutions even in the absence of an active transaction, prioritizing customers by profitability and growth potential in a value-based approach to relationship management [24].

Taken together, the three phases form a holistic framework in which the database is not a passive repository but a predictive tool for identifying upselling and cross-selling opportunities, and in which consistent service quality is balanced against the flexibility to handle exceptional cases. The life cycle, on this evidence, is less a linear funnel than a dynamic ecosystem in which each interaction feeds back into the strength of the long-term relationship.

Toward an Integrated CRM Strategy

Synthesizing the five stages (Figure 2) clarifies the study's central argument. In this firm, CRM is not a transaction-logging system but an analytical platform that integrates customer identity, transaction history, interaction, payment, and preference data into a coherent understanding of behavior, enabling sharper segmentation, more personalized engagement, and better resource allocation. This directly answers the study's two research questions. Business performance improves after CRM implementation (why) because CRM consolidates otherwise fragmented customer information into a strategic, relational capability rather than a purely technical function; and that improvement occurs (how) through the five interlinked stages, where portfolio analysis identifies where value lies, intimacy and value creation deepen it, network development sustains delivery, and life-cycle management converts it into repeat engagement.

The observable evidence supports this interpretation without recourse to precise performance percentages: the concentration of 2023 transactions among returning customers, the 1.5-fold rise in orders, the resolution of complaints beyond contractual scope, and the multi-year geographic expansion all point to gains in customer retention, satisfaction, and revenue that the firm attributes to its integrated CRM practice. This positioning contributes to the CRM literature by treating CRM as a strategic capability rather than a supporting tool, extending accounts that link CRM to competitive advantage [5], customer loyalty [6], and firm performance [7]. It complements service-context studies that connect relationship management to operational outcomes [10] and to risk reduction and service improvement [11], while adding a specifically ICT-service perspective in which technical competence and relational capability must advance together. The main challenge in the case surfaces is organizational: sustaining CRM at this level depends on staff who combine technical skill with emotional intelligence, and on a knowledge-management system able to crystallize learning from each customer interaction into repeatable practice.

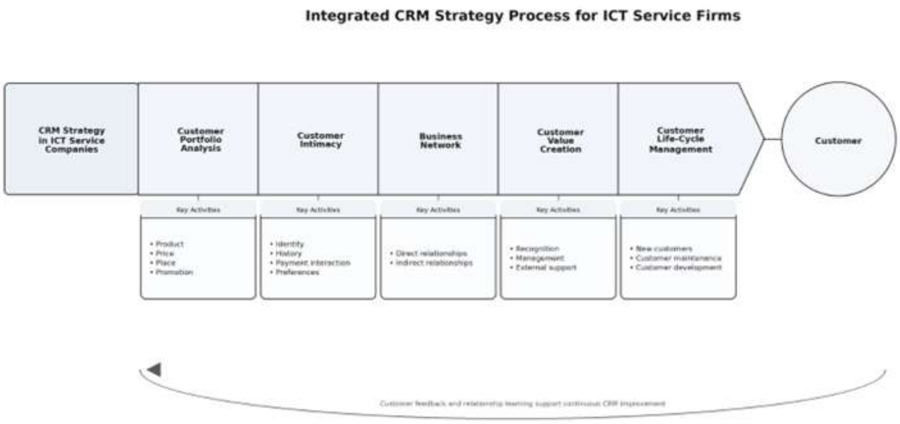

Figure 2. Integrated CRM Strategy Process for ICT Service Firms

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study demonstrates that Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a strategic capability that strengthens customer retention, satisfaction, and long-term relationship quality in ICT service firms. Effective CRM implementation requires an integrated process consisting of customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, business network development, value proposition development, and customer life-cycle management, enabling firms to create greater customer value and enhance their competitive position. **Implication:** The findings suggest that ICT service firms should position CRM as a strategic managerial capability by integrating customer data, service processes, communication channels, and relationship-building activities. Aligning CRM with the 7P service marketing mix can improve customer experience, support service innovation, strengthen customer loyalty, and enhance managerial decision-making. **Limitation:** This study is limited to the ICT service sector and employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which provides contextual insights but does not quantitatively assess the long-term impact of CRM on financial performance, customer loyalty, or customer lifetime value. In addition, the role of emerging technologies in CRM implementation is not examined extensively. **Future Research:** Future research should compare CRM implementation across different industries and organizational contexts, investigate the influence of market dynamics, organizational culture, service quality, and the 7P marketing mix on CRM effectiveness, and examine the long-term contribution of CRM to business performance. Further studies should also explore the integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, and automation to enhance CRM personalization, predictive customer insights, and service responsiveness.

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