(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Benevolence as a predictor of customer referrals: A study on ocean freight forwarders

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of benevolence, a form of emotional trust as a predictor of customer referrals in the ocean freight forwarding industry. While previous research has explored the effects of technical and functional service quality on customer satisfaction, this research emphasizes the emotional factors that drive referral behavior. Using a quantitative approach and multiple linear regression analysis, data were collected from customers who had firsthand experience with freight forwarding services. Results showed that among all the evaluated factors technical quality, functional quality, credibility, and benevolence only had a statistically significant impact on customer referral intent. This finding highlights the importance of emotional connection over operational performance in driving customer advocacy. Customers are more likely to recommend a company when they feel genuinely cared for, not merely served. The study offers practical recommendations for freight forwarding companies, such as focusing on empathetic communication, follow-up after service, emotionally rewarding referral programs, and personalized CRM usage. The findings emphasize that in high-trust service industries, sustainable growth through referrals is best achieved through relational strategies centered on kindness and care.

Keywords: Customer referrals; Benevolence; Ocean freight forwarding; Service quality; Emotional trust; Customer loyalty

1. Introduction

Today, the business world is always changing, and many companies are competing with each other. One smart way to grow a business is through customer referrals. When happy customers tell others about a company, it becomes a stronger influence than a regular advertisement. This is because people usually trust their friends and family more than ads from companies (Dechant et al., 2018). However, this strategy only works well if the company provides good service and keeps its customers satisfied. Businesses that treat their customers kindly and with respect often receive customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Triadi et al., 2024; Shrestha & Ale, 2020).

Also, when a company has a referral program that offers rewards, customers are more likely to participate and share with others (Chen & Hao, 2023). But if customers feel uncertain or afraid of the risks when recommending, they might choose not to refer anyone (Song et al., 2020; Galano, & Santos 2024). That's why companies must also work to remove those fears. Overall, referral is a powerful tool to attract new customers and keep the existing ones satisfied (Chen et al., 2021).

In service-based industries like ocean freight forwarding, trust and reputation are even more important. Since there is no physical product that customers can touch or test, they rely heavily on the experiences and opinions of others. Customers want to know if the company can handle important tasks such as shipping, paperwork, and customs processes properly (Liu & Lee, 2018; De Leon, & Santos, 2025). If staff are friendly and helpful, customers become more loyal and see the company as reliable (Olfebri, 2024).

When a company consistently provides service that is better than what the customer expected, those customers are more likely to tell others about it (Charłampowicz, 2021). In international shipping, where the risk of mistakes is high, customers are more careful in choosing who to trust. They often base their decisions on what past customers have shared (Jovčić et al., 2019). That's why collecting feedback and building strong customer relationships help create a good reputation (Olfebri, 2024; Jovčić et al., 2019; Tuliao et al.,2025).

Now that many freight forwarding companies are entering the market, competition has become tougher. That's why trust and long-term relationships are more important than ever. Companies that show real care for their customers by replying quickly, offering helpful support, and solving problems tend to gain more loyal clients (Harriet et al., 2024). Referrals from satisfied customers are very valuable because they help spread a positive image. However, it is not yet clear which specific parts of the service encourage people to refer others.

Some studies suggest that technical quality and functional performance are important. But emotional trust especially kindness, or benevolence might be a stronger reason why people refer others (Tolmay, 2018). If a company communicates politely, connects with customers on a personal level, and treats them like friends, customers feel more warmth and are more likely to help promote the business (Chayomchai, 2021).

This study aims to discover what factors make customers loyal and willing to refer others in the ocean freight forwarding business. It will examine whether technical service quality, helpful service, and trust especially kindness are the key reasons behind customer referrals. By identifying which factors truly matter, companies can improve their services in a way that naturally builds trust and encourages business growth through strong customer relationships.

2. Literature Review

Customer referrals are now recognized as one of the strongest and most trusted ways to market a business because they are built on personal relationships and trust. When a customer shares a good experience about a product or service, it feels more real and believable than regular advertisements (Herjanto et al., 2023). In the service industry, people usually rely on what others say and on the company's reputation, which makes referrals very powerful (Dose et al., 2019). Referrals do not only help bring in new customers they also attract customers who are more active, more loyal, and more likely to stay with the company for a long time (Jiang et al., 2023). People who are referred by someone they trust feel less worried and are more confident in their decision to buy (Dose et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2023). This means that referrals are not just about increasing customer numbers, but also about building stronger connections, loyalty, and better chances of purchase because of trust in the recommender (Ruiz-Gaona et al., 2024). Companies that use referrals wisely can gain higher returns because happy customers become active promoters of the business. This shows how important trust and emotional connection are in the service industry (Gani et al., 2023).

In the field of logistics and freight forwarding, referrals are even more important because the services are complex, involve sensitive details, and customers often cannot check everything before making a decision. So, they rely heavily on the experiences of others to know whether a company is reliable and capable of completing the job efficiently and correctly (Sutrisno et al., 2019). A company that consistently delivers good service, treats customers well, and handles tasks properly is more likely to receive referrals. Satisfied customers will speak positively about the company, which helps it grow, attract more clients, and build long-term relationships (Sutrisno et al., 2019).

In logistics services, service quality is often divided into two types technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality refers to the actual results, such as whether orders are correct, how fast deliveries are made, and whether items arrive in good condition. Functional quality, on the other hand, is about how the service is provided how the staff behaves, how easy it is to communicate, and how quickly help is given when problems occur (Fu & Wang, 2021). Both technical and functional aspects are very important because they shape how customers feel about the service and whether they are satisfied. When customers are happy, they are more likely to stay with the company and also refer others (Sutrisno et al., 2019; Fu & Wang, 2021). That is why it is essential for logistics companies to build a strong reputation by delivering high-quality services so they can survive and compete in the challenging freight forwarding market.

In business relationships, trust plays a very big role. There are two main types of trust: credibility and benevolence. Credibility means the customer believes the company is skilled and can do the job correctly. Benevolence means the customer feels that the company genuinely cares about them, not just about making money (Rashid et al., 2023). Both types of trust are important, but benevolence creates a deeper emotional connection. When customers feel that the company truly cares about them, they become more loyal and are more willing to support and recommend the company to others (Ariesmendi et al., 2023).

Some studies say that yes, technical and functional service quality are important in making customers satisfied. However, emotional factors such as kindness, listening to customer concerns, and treating customers with respect are often stronger reasons why people give referrals (Chen et al., 2021; Ortiz et al., 2025). When customers feel valued and supported, they not only stay with the company but also share their good experiences with friends and family. This strengthens the company's reputation and helps maintain long-term customer relationships (Singh et al., 2022; Bebenroth & Goehlich, 2021). In the end, when customers experience benevolence, they don't just see it as a business deal they feel a meaningful connection. This emotional bond leads to more referrals and greater success for the company (Rashid et al., 2023; Omar et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

This study uses a quantitative approach to find out which parts of a service's reputation truly influence a customer's decision to refer others in the ocean freight forwarding business. The research applies multiple linear regression to examine how different factors such as service quality and trust affect customer loyalty through the act of referral.

The participants in this study are customers who have recently used the services of an ocean freight forwarder. They were chosen through purposive sampling, which means only those who have actually experienced the service were selected, so they could give informed and meaningful answers. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire.

The questionnaire focused on three main areas: technical quality, functional quality, and trust. Respondents were asked to rate aspects such as whether their order was correct, whether the delivery was on time, how well problems were solved, how staff communicated with them, and whether the information provided by the company was honest and clear. For the trust part, two types were measured: credibility (whether the company is capable of doing the job properly) and benevolence (whether the company genuinely cares about its customers).

The main variable measured in this study is whether the customer is willing to recommend the freight forwarder to others. This serves as an indicator of customer loyalty, driven by the feeling of trust and satisfaction. All responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale.

After gathering the data, the researchers analyzed it to determine which factors significantly affect customer referrals. The regression analysis was used to see how much influence all the factors had together (measured through R-squared) and to identify which specific factor had the strongest impact. The results showed that benevolence was the only factor that had a strong and statistically significant effect on customer referral. This means that customers are more likely to refer the company to others when they feel that the company truly cares about them not just about doing business. All steps in this study followed ethical standards. No participant names were recorded, and all data was kept private and secure.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overall Model Fit

The regression model used to identify predictors of customer loyalty through referrals yielded an **R value of 0.777** and an **R^2 of 0.604**, indicating that **60.4% of the variance** in customer referral behavior can be explained by the independent variables included in the study. This is a strong model fit in social science research, reflecting that the set of variables technical quality, functional quality, and trust (benevolence and credibility) offers a substantial explanation for customer behavior related to referrals. The remaining 39.6% of variance may be due to other external or contextual factors not measured in this study. As noted by Jiang et al. (2023) and Ruiz-Gaona et al. (2024), customer referrals are multifactorial and closely tied to perceived service experience. This result confirms that service reputation factors meaningfully influence customer loyalty behaviors, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the power of referrals in service-intensive sectors (Herjanto et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2024).

4.2. Benevolence as the Sole Significant Predictor

The regression analysis revealed that among all predictors, benevolence a sub-dimension of trust was the only variable with statistical significance (B = 0.2424, p = 0.025). This positive coefficient suggests that customers who perceive a freight forwarder as caring and supportive are significantly more likely to recommend its services to others. This result underscores that emotional connection, rather than operational performance alone, drives word-of-mouth referrals. While technical excellence builds credibility, emotional loyalty built on trust and benevolence is what converts satisfied customers into brand advocates. This aligns with Tolmay (2018) and Chayomchai (2021), who emphasized that

emotional and relational factors are critical in referral behavior. Moreover, Ariesmendi et al. (2023) and Rashid et al. (2023) suggest that benevolence strengthens emotional loyalty, a finding confirmed here. Freight forwarders that express genuine care for customer welfare cultivate deeper trust, resulting in higher referral rates.

4.3. Non-significance of Technical and Functional Quality Variables

All dimensions of technical quality (order accuracy, timeliness, order condition) and functional quality (contact quality, discrepancy handling, information quality) were not statistically significant predictors of referrals, even though some, such as ordering procedures ($p = 0.158$) and credibility ($p = 0.156$), approached significance. This finding suggests that while service delivery must be competent, it does not necessarily translate into referral behavior unless it is coupled with emotional engagement. In essence, good service is expected it builds satisfaction but it does not motivate advocacy by itself. As Chen et al. (2021) explained, referrals are driven more by how customers feel during the service encounter than by the technical performance alone. Similarly, Fu & Wang (2021) described that functional and technical quality contribute to satisfaction, but benevolence is what makes the customer go the extra mile and refer the brand to others.

4.4. Implications on Customer Relationship and Referral Strategy

The dominance of benevolence as a predictor offers a clear insight: freight forwarding companies should invest in personalized, empathetic customer service to increase referral-based growth. Building trust through proactive communication, transparency in problem-solving, and after-sales follow-up creates positive emotional impressions that lead to customer advocacy. Moreover, this finding reinforces the role of referrals as relational assets (Dechant et al., 2018; Gani et al., 2023), and not just marketing outcomes. Customers refer services not only because of satisfaction but because they believe the company deserves to be trusted by their peers an idea echoed by Gershon et al. (2024). As Ortega & Gevero (2024) pointed out, freight forwarders with consistent emotional connection with clients enjoy higher loyalty levels. The current findings extend that logic by showing that benevolence is the actionable bridge between loyalty and actual referral behavior.

4.5. Strengthening Referral-Driven Loyalty: Strategic Actions for Ocean Freight Forwarders

Based on the results of the study, *benevolence* came out as the only strong factor that truly motivates customers to refer others. This finding highlights the importance for ocean freight forwarding companies to focus on trust-based strategies that create emotional connections with their clients. Below are several practical ways to build this kind of trust, helping customers remain loyal and willingly share their positive experiences thus growing the business through referrals.

First, companies should practice *human-centered relationship management*. Frontline staff should be trained in soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and emotional care. It's not enough to simply fix a problem quickly; the way staff communicate with genuine concern and warmth matters just as much. Employees must show care, understanding, and respect when handling questions or complaints. This kind of sincere interaction helps build trust and demonstrates benevolence. When customers feel that someone truly listens and cares, they don't just feel satisfied they are more likely to share their experience with others. As Ariesmendi et al. (2023) explain, the best way to build emotional loyalty is to provide real, personal service not robotic, scripted responses.

Second, companies should follow up even after the service is complete. Communication should not stop once the shipment has been delivered. Sending a thank-you message, checking if the delivery went smoothly, or reaching out again after some time shows customers that they still matter. This type of proactive care demonstrates that the company values long-term relationships, not just one-time sales. Rashid et al. (2023) point out that this ongoing attention builds benevolence and increases the chances that customers will refer the service to their friends or business partners. Over time, these small acts of care build strong trust.

Third, companies should create referral programs that include emotional touches. Many businesses offer discounts or rewards for referrals, but it's even better to add a personal thank-you. For example, sending a handwritten note, a small gift, or publicly acknowledging a loyal customer on social media can make a big impact. These emotional rewards help customers feel appreciated and recognized. Gani et al. (2023) state that emotional connection strengthens referral programs. When customers feel like they are part of the brand's journey, they are more willing to help not just for the reward, but because they feel truly valued.

Fourth, businesses should use *Customer Relationship Management (CRM)* systems to support personal connections. CRM tools can store important details about each customer such as their preferences, past issues, and frequency of service use. When companies remember these details and respond with personalized solutions, customers feel important and cared for. According to Liu & Lee (2018), trust in logistics services grows through repeat, reliable, and thoughtful

interactions. A CRM system helps maintain this consistency and makes every customer interaction feel personalized and genuine. When customers feel special, they are more likely to recommend the company to others.

Lastly, marketing messages should not focus only on speed or low prices. Companies should also share meaningful stories about how they helped a customer in a tough situation, solved a major shipping issue, or stayed connected during difficult times. These real and heartfelt stories, when shared online or through customer testimonials, help build a brand that feels human and kind. Chen et al. (2021) and Walsh et al. (2024) explain that stories with heart make people believe in a brand more, and inspire them to want that same caring experience.

Growing a freight forwarding business is not just about being fast or affordable. It's about making people feel genuinely cared for. This study shows that benevolence is the strongest reason why customers give positive referrals. By focusing on human service, emotional value, and messages that show real care, companies can build a network of loyal customers who promote the business through trust and that kind of growth is strong, lasting, and real.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores what drives customers to refer others in the ocean freight forwarding industry. It focuses on service reputation, specifically technical quality, functional quality, and trust. Among all these factors, only *benevolence* a part of trust showed a strong influence on customer referrals. Even if the service is fast and accurate, that alone is not enough to make customers talk about the company. What truly encourages referrals is when customers feel that the company genuinely cares for them through kind communication, personal assistance, and sincere engagement. The regression test confirmed that benevolence has the greatest impact on encouraging loyalty through referrals. This highlights the importance of emotional connection in the service industry, especially in fields where trust and long-term relationships play a major role.

Based on these findings, the study offers several recommendations for freight forwarding companies that want to grow through customer referrals. First, businesses should focus on building emotional relationships with customers. Staff should be trained to speak with empathy, listen attentively, and offer a personal touch. When customers feel that the company truly cares not just about the business transaction they are more likely to stay loyal even after the service is completed.

Second, companies should integrate benevolence into their service systems. It should not just be a slogan like "we care," but a real part of company rules, service standards, and employee evaluations. When everyone in the organization follows a culture of care, emotional trust becomes stronger, and referrals naturally increase.

Moreover, companies should maintain communication even after a delivery is completed. Following up, sending thank-you messages, and asking for feedback are small but meaningful actions that show the customer is still valued. These gestures help deepen the relationship. When designing referral programs, companies should not rely only on financial rewards. Emotional rewards like recognizing a customer's story, publicly saying thank you, or making them feel part of the brand can be even more powerful. These actions make customers feel proud and appreciated, not just rewarded.

Marketing strategies should also highlight real stories. Share examples of times when the company went above and beyond to help a customer. These stories can be used in advertisements or on social media to show that the company operates with heart, not just efficiency. This helps build a brand image based on trust and kindness, which attracts customers who value emotional connection.

If freight forwarding companies want to grow in a meaningful and lasting way not just through promotions, but through genuine customer support they need to build relationships that are strong, kind, and caring. When customers feel this emotional connection, they stay loyal and are more likely to refer others. These types of referrals are the most powerful because they come from the heart and that is how a company wins in the long run

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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