

Beyond the frills of relationship marketing

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Abstract

This paper presents an empirical study of UK consumers' perceptions and experiences of their relationships with commercial firms. The study considers how the relational strategies pursued by organizations have led to a deterioration of consumers trust. Three main areas of concern are: the relational rhetoric employed by firms; the motives behind customer care and loyalty programs; and the use of marketing techniques considered to be intrusive and unacceptable. Consequently, relationship marketing (RM) strategies may have the unintended consequence of making consumers more distrustful of organizations than before such strategies were adopted.

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1. Relationship marketing (RM) in consumer markets

RM is currently accepted by many academics and practitioners as “the new orthodoxy” (Petrof, 1997) within marketing and is now considered appropriate in low interaction exchanges (Dwyer et al., 1987; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). The adoption of RM by mass marketers was primarily driven by practitioners (Copulsky and Wolf, 1990; Blattberg and Deighton, 1991; Shani and Chalasani, 1992) in the belief that it would offer increased profitability through customer retention (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Relational strategies in this context are communicated through advertising, customer care, and customer loyalty programs and are managed thorough direct and database marketing techniques.

The objective of RM is to establish, develop, and maintain relationships with customers and other stakeholder groups (Berry, 1983; Jackson, 1985; Morgan and Hunt, 1999; Grönroos, 1994). Relationships are held together by normative as opposed to contractual methods (Heide and John, 1992; Gundlach and Murphy, 1993; Weitz and Jap, 1995) and, therefore, trust (Crosby et al., 1990; Anderson

and Narus, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1999), commitment (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1999), and mutual benefit (Czepiel, 1990; Heide and John, 1992; Grönroos, 1994) are integral relational elements. Consequently, contemporary firms espouse as their aim the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships with their customers.

The roots of RM are metaphorical in nature (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; O'Malley and Tynan, 1999) and theory is influenced largely by analogies with close personal relationships and, in particular, marriage (Levitt, 1983; Dwyer et al., 1987). Thus, values and concepts from social exchange theory are regularly employed in making sense of interaction in the contemporary marketplace. In contrast to other dominant metaphors in marketing, which variously highlight victory, conquest, and self-interest (Desmond, 1997), the “relationship” metaphor emphasizes cooperation, mutuality, and trust (O'Malley and Tynan, 1999). As a result, within this “new paradigm” (Grönroos, 1994), contemporary marketing is argued to have shifted “from manipulation of the customer to genuine customer involvement; from telling and selling to communicating and sharing knowledge; from last-in-line function to corporate-credibility champion” (McKenna, 1991, p. 68). Thus, in contrast to a transactional approach, marketing within the RM paradigm is represented as “helpful” and “fair” with “win–win” outcomes increasingly possible for both consumers and marketers (Kotler, 1991). Moreover, Sheth and

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Parvatiyar (1995, p. 265) argue that RM represents “enlightened self-interest” and enhances the image of marketing in society. Furthermore, it is posited that RM results in more focused marketing strategies, increased customer loyalty, decreased price sensitivity, and the creation of opportunities for up-selling and cross-selling (Dwyer et al., 1987; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Grönroos, 1994; Pine et al., 1995), all of which result in improvements to marketing’s effectiveness and efficiency (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). As a result, relationships have come to be regarded as an important source of competitive advantage. However, as Polonsky et al. (1999, p. 43) argue, because “firm–stakeholder relationships change over time. . . strategy may have unintended or undesired consequences.” In particular, because marketing occurs “in society, with society’s permission and support, and purportedly, in part for society’s benefit” (Camenisch, 1991, p. 246), the societal impact of RM is worthy of further investigation.

The majority of studies focus on the organizational motivation for RM and, as such, the consumer side of the equation has attracted less consideration, representing a significant limitation within the RM discourse (see Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000; O'Malley and Tynan, 2000). Indeed, few empirical studies have been initiated, which critically consider the consumer’s point of view, and those that do, suggest that contemporary approaches to operationalizing RM are inappropriate and may actually inhibit successful relationship development (O'Malley et al., 1997; Fournier et al., 1998). Furthermore, there are suggestions that in mass markets, the tools and techniques employed are more representative of stalking and rape than they are of courtship and love (Tynan, 1997). Indeed, critical theorists argue that RM does little more than provide a cosmetic moral face for marketing (Alvesson, 1994; Desmond, 1997) with statements of ‘trust,’ ‘commitment,’ and ‘mutuality’ dismissed “as either simulations without content, or alternatively sentiments driven by the instrumental desirability of the relationship” (Smith and Higgins, 2000, p. 87).

This paper reports an attempt to seek views of consumers towards RM and to conceptualize their perceptions from a broader, societal perspective. In so doing, this work enhances our understanding of the problems inherent in the operationalization of RM in mass markets. Specifically, it is our contention that deliberate attempts on the part of firms to engender closer relationships with consumers have had unintended and largely undesirable effects. We argue that the RM discourse lacks meaning for contemporary consumers because they are inherently distrustful of organizational activities and organizational motivations.

2. Methodology

This study relies upon the real world of everyday thought and experience as a basis for theory development. This world is composed of the terms and ordinary language that people

use in order to give meaning to the world and to their lives (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gordon and Langmaid, 1998; Thompson and Hytko, 1997). Nineteen phenomenological-type depth interviews (Mick and Buhl, 1992) were conducted to gain access to informants’ subjective meanings and to generate understanding, while six phenomenological group discussions (Calder, 1977) were employed in order to assess the degree to which these experiences, attitudes, and/or values were shared (Hedges, 1985) with others. The data were collected during the spring of 1999 in the UK. Details of informants are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Two trained interviewers conducted the interviews, with the initial choice of informant theoretically motivated and additional informants recruited via snowball sampling techniques. Each interview lasted for approximately 2 hours and was based upon an unstructured open-ended interview guide intended to access the private feelings and language used by informants. Interpretive and judgmental skills were employed throughout the interview in choosing which avenues to pursue and which to curtail. Such decisions were made as a result of the stated themes and priorities of the research, with a concomitant emphasis on maintaining the contextual meaning of informants’ responses. Interviews were treated as extended conversations, in which the researcher interacted with interviewees as an “insider” to the research (Jones, 1991).

Each interview was audiotaped with interpretation based upon full transcripts. Interviews were reviewed and considered in batches of four and subsequent interview schedules were amended to address emerging themes. Because the flexibility or rigidity with which opinions are held is better exposed in a group setting (Goldman, 1962; Basch, 1987), the depth interviews were supplemented by six phenomenological group discussions (Calder, 1977). Group participants were recruited using theoretically motivated purposive sam-

Table 1
Details of informants

Name	Age	Occupation
Andrea	30	Office worker
David	45	Teacher
Hazel	34	Full-time mother
Janet	47	Psychologist
Jerry	32	Unemployed
Joanne	24	Nurse
Julian	36	Management researcher
Kay	27	Postgraduate student (Journalism)
Margaret	61	Retired school teacher
Mike	27	Administrator
Neil	32	Works in health service
Pippa	42	Secretary
Richard	37	Bank clerk
Rosemary	45	Administrator
Samantha	30	Hair stylist
Sarah	25	Engineer
Stafford	65	Retired senior bank employee
Stewart	18	Apprentice electrician
Tim	45	Engineer

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