

RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TWO: CUSTOMER ATTACHMENT STYLES' INFLUENCE ON CONSUMERS' DESIRE FOR CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AND LOYALTY TO THE FIRM

Martin Mende, University of Kentucky
Ruth N. Bolton, Marketing Science Institute
Mary Jo Bitner, Arizona State University

Many firms invest heavily in customer relationship management to create close customer bonds. However, not all consumers welcome close relationships. We develop a framework that predicts why consumers differentially prefer close relationships with a firm and how they respond to closeness-enhancing activities.

Our framework – tested with data from the insurance industry - links customers' attachment styles with (a) customers' desire for closeness and (b) loyalty.

Illustrative insights:

- Customer attachment *anxiety* is positively linked and attachment *avoidance* is negatively linked with the preference for a close relationship.
- Customers of low attachment anxiety and avoidance indicate the highest loyalty potential, whereas avoidant customers signal the lowest loyalty.
- Managers can focus cross-selling efforts on customers of low attachment anxiety and avoidance to leverage repurchase likelihood.
- An attachment-informed manager might use high levels of attachment avoidance as early indicators of loyalty-averse customers.

The results provide managers with novel customer segmentation criteria and actionable guidelines that can help the firm tailor relationship marketing activities.

Research Categories: Service Branding and Selling

* This article is based on research with The Co-operators. The paper appeared in the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) Working Paper Series, 09-112.

BRANDED CUSTOMER SERVICE: HOW ALIGNING FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR WITH THE BRAND PERSONALITY IMPACTS CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

Nancy J. Sirianni, Arizona State University
Mary Jo Bitner, Arizona State University
Stephen W. Brown, Arizona State University
Naomi Mandel, Arizona State University

We examine how service brand positioning and brand equity are impacted by personal interactions between employees and consumers through branded customer service, which refers to the strategic alignment of consumers' service experiences with brand promises.

In a series of experiments, we demonstrate that aligning employee behavior with the brand personality positively influences brand equity and we identify consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity as the underlying explanation. Results indicate that employees' brand-aligned behavior is most influential in shaping unfamiliar brands' equity when these brands perform successfully, and conversely, most influential in shaping familiar brands' equity when these brands fail consumers. We also find that the believability of employees' brand-aligned performances is important to consumers.

Our results have implications for the recruitment of frontline staff that credibly fit with the brand personality, as well as the design of internal marketing programs that can help brand managers strategically position service brands from the inside out.

Research Categories: Service Branding and Selling

Working Paper

THE COORDINATION STRATEGIES OF HIGH-PERFORMING SALESPEOPLE: INTERNAL WORKING RELATIONSHIPS THAT DRIVE SUCCESS*

Michelle D. Steward, Wake Forest University
Beth A. Walker, Arizona State University
Michael D. Hutt, Arizona State University
Ajith Kumar, Arizona State University

This article explores the process that salespeople follow in coordinating the activities of ad hoc team members during high-opportunity customer engagements in the business market. Depth interviews were conducted with salespeople and a survey was administered to sales managers from a *Fortune*-100, high-technology firm identify the processes involved in the coordination of expertise.

The study reveals that higher-performing salespeople are more likely to (1) consider relational as well as technical skills when matching team members to customer requirements, (2) attract their preferred experts to the team, and (3) define the appropriate time in the sales cycle to initiate contact with the customer and deploy the team to the customer organization. Key implications for account management are detailed.

Research Category: Service Branding and Selling

* This article is based on research collaboration with a CSL member firm. The paper is forthcoming in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

WEARING COMMUNITY: WHY CUSTOMERS PURCHASE A SERVICE FIRM'S LOGO PRODUCTS*

Mark S. Rosenbaum, Northern Illinois University
Drew Martin, University of Hawaii, Hilo

The purpose of this research is to investigate customer purchase of a service organization's logo/branded merchandise. The article employs three separate studies; two are conducted with customers of Curves, the world's largest fitness franchise, and the other is conducted at a gym. Two empirical studies test a proposed mediation model. The third study shows the social influences that encourage customers to purchase a firm's logo products. The results show that a customer's integration into a service-based community encourages him or her to purchase the firm's logo merchandise. In addition, a customer's ability to identify with the firm mediates this relationship. The immersion of customers' self- and social identities in a firm emerges as a factor to enhancing their appreciation of the firm by purchasing financially lucrative logo consumables. Managers should understand that a key to selling organizational logo/branded merchandise is to encourage customers to form relationships with other customers and employees.

Research Category: Service Branding and Selling

* This article is forthcoming in the *Journal of Services Marketing* (2012).

UNDERSTANDING UNETHICAL RETAIL DISPOSITION PRACTICE AND RESTRAINTS FROM THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE*

Mark S. Rosenbaum, Northern Illinois University
Ronald Kuntze, University of Tampa,
Barbara Ross-Wooldridge, University of Texas-Tyler

This research expands marketing's knowledge regarding unethical retail disposition (URD). URD is a type of consumer fraud, whereby consumers purchase an item of merchandise with the intent of using it and returning it to a retailer. The authors develop a framework illustrating why consumers engage in either URD participation or restraint; next, they demonstrate support for the framework. The authors support and augment previous URD research by reporting that URD offenders employ eight neutralization techniques to remedy personal guilt associated with committing the fraudulent behavior. This research also takes a novel approach by illustrating that consumers describe six motivations underlying URD restraint. Most concerning for retailers is that four of the six reasons for restraint are tenuous. Thus, consumers who refrain from URD may be easily swayed to participate in this illicit behavior. The authors posit that URD may represent a means by which consumers express disdain and mistrust for retailers.

Research Category: Service Branding and Selling

* This article appears in *Psychology and Marketing*, 28(1), 29-52 (January, 2011).