An Exploration of Consumer Forgiveness Following Marketer Transgressions

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Research has identified several psychological benefits of forgiving relational partners following a transgression. We extend research on forgiveness into the consumer realm, examining if and how consumers forgive marketers following a transgression, and the consumer benefits of doing so. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted to reveal various forgiveness processes and outcomes. Although forgiveness may take place following a transgression, consumer-brand relationships often transform and evolve as consumers re-enter into renegotiated relationships with the marketer. The study of relational phenomena such as forgiveness extends existing knowledge to provide insights into consumer-brand relationships and the transformations that occur following marketer transgressions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12439/volumes/v33/NA-33

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Do consumers forgive and forget marketer transgressions? Transgressions are defined as violations of relationship-relevant norms, and refer to the breaches of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluations (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Although existing research provides some evidence to support the service recovery paradox, i.e. a successful recovery can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002), there is conflicting evidence that suggests service recovery efforts cannot compensate for poor service delivery, and that consumer perceptions of the brand and future repurchase intentions are lower than they would have been if the transgression had not occurred (Andreassen 2001). This suggests that the service recovery paradox occurs less frequently than thought, and that some consumers hold grudges against marketers following a transgression (Andreassen 2001; Aron 2001).

Research on the role of consumer-brand relationships within the context of marketer transgressions also remains inconclusive. It has been suggested that consumers in close relationships with marketers are more willing to forgive marketer transgressions (Mattila 2001). It is also believed that relationships provide a ‘buffer effect’ when failures occur, with prior positive experiences mitigating consumer evaluations of service recovery (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). However, a recent longitudinal study found that consumer-brand relationships suffered in the wake of transgressions (Aaker et al. 2004). This suggests that relationships can both buffer and magnify consumer responses to transgressions. Given that no service system is perfect, transgressions are possible within service encounters (Mattila 2001). Furthermore, as the frequency of interactions between the consumer and brand increases within the course of a long-term relationship, so does the likelihood of a transgression (Aaker et al. 2004). This leads to the question of whether and how consumers forgive firms for transgressions that befall their shared relationships.

The existing literature captures some aspects of consumer responses to marketer transgressions through studies on consumer complaint behaviour, service recovery and subsequent consumer evaluations of the marketer. However, none explicitly examine the phenomenon of whether and how consumers forgive brands that transgress relationship norms. A transactional focus, and an overemphasis on the concept of satisfaction and its behavioural outcomes related to service failure and recovery, has resulted in the neglect of the rich array of emotional experiences and emotional coping strategies that consumers may adopt in response to marketer transgressions (McCullough, Sparks, Stephens, and Gwinner 2003; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

In identifying the triggers, processes and outcomes associated with the experience of marketer transgressions, revealing themes that represented the triggers, processes and outcomes associated with the experience of marketer transgressions. The findings show that marketer transgressions extend beyond core service failures. For example, transgressions include service failures of expressed and implied relationship norms. Following a transgression, consumers adopted various coping strategies and processes in re-evaluating the brand relationship. These were: service recovery, re-evaluations of the brand’s trustworthiness, apportioning blame, and reinterpretations of the brand into stereotypes. Consumers’ conceptualisations suggested forgiveness of a brand essentially involves the release of negative emotions associated with the transgression and becoming motivated to act constructively toward the relationship. A number of transgression-related outcomes were revealed, including strengthened relationship, renegotiated relationship, forced stay, exit, avoidance, revenge, and loss of faith. The results also provided evidence of various consumer benefits associated with the experience of forgiveness.

In identifying the triggers, processes and outcomes associated with consumer forgiveness, this exploratory study makes several significant contributions to theory. It is, to the authors’ knowledge, the first empirical study conducted to observe the phenomenon of consumer forgiveness. In doing so, we respond to the limitations of existing marketing literature by extending the study of consumer reactions to marketer transgressions beyond product and service shortfalls. We also respond to the need to understand consumer emotions associated with marketer transgressions, including consumers who do not voice their complaints. The findings offer a new, relationship approach to understanding consumer reactions to marketer transgressions that is lacking within most existing studies. The study of relational phenomena such as forgiveness extends existing knowledge to provide insights into consumer-brand relationships and the transformations that occurs following marketer transgressions. Furthermore, this study extends the Hirschman (1970) model, which is often utilised to explain
outcomes of marketer transgressions (and service recovery), beyond the three behavioural outcomes of exit, voice and loyalty. The study of forgiveness therefore contributes to an improved understanding of consumer responses to marketer transgressions and provides important foundations for future research. Marketers can benefit from assisting consumers to achieve forgiveness even though exit may occur. Such activities reduce harmful word-of-mouth and ongoing ill feeling towards the brand. We suggest that future investigations should extend these insights to benefit consumers in a move toward transformative consumer research.

REFERENCES