Gendered Copmunication: Te:<Finl Analysis of Letters Writte[n to Filene's Basement
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[to cite]:

[url]:
  http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15676/gender/v05/GCB-05

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a textual analysis of letters written by women to an off-price retailer in response to a sale in which they had participated. The retailer solicited the letters by offering a contest whereby customers were asked to recount the story of their best bargain experience at the store. The majority of letters were from women who had purchased their or other brides' wedding gowns at one of the stores' quarterly bridal gown sales. These letters further our knowledge of the relationship between gender and marketing by displaying the women's willingness to impart thanks and advice to the company that provided them with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In addition, these letters provide insight into the factors that have sustained the sale's success over time. In light of the company's financial troubles, we recommend to management a marketing message based on these testimonials as a more powerful strategy than their current "can't beat the thrill" campaign.

The act of letter writing has a long and distinguished history. Before telephones and computers, letters were the primary forms of communication among families, between lovers, and with corporations and customers. Letters take many forms; they can be written or typed, they can be produced for public or private purposes, and they can embrace many tones. For example, a love letter is decidedly different in both tone and content from an interoffice memo or a letter of resignation (Gornick 1994, Rieck 1998).

The act of letter writing was transformed into an art form through several channels. The epistolary novel, which simply put is a novel comprised of letters of correspondence among the characters, flourished as a legitimate literary form in the 17th and 18th century, with its American heyday occurring around the turn of the century. Also, when famous authors such as John Donne and Virginia Woolf extensively engaged in letter writing to other authors, these letters were later published in series for all to enjoy. These letters provided "a more delicate image alive and presents us with a subtler likeness of the writer than we can find in the more formal achievements of authorship (Howard 1998, p. 106). " In his discussion of E.L. Mayo's collection, "Letter to Too Many People," Howard provides three major benefits of letters over other forms of written communications. First, the letter allows
its writer the freedom to express the moment. The moment, however profane, is permanently captured for the reader. Second, Howard states that the letter allows the writer to "reveal his whole soul (1998, p. 109)." The character of the writer is never more apparent than in a personal letter. Finally, letters act as an "act of self-disclosure (p. 110)." In other words, the letter reflects those exact revelations that the writer wants the reader to know. As Law and Singhal argue, letters are both a "medium of communication as well as the message (1999, p. 359)."

In modern day life, letter writing is "on the critical list (Sauter 1998, p. 75)." Only 2% of all mailings traversing the United States through the U.S. Postal system are personal in nature (Hiaasen 2000). Most "letters" that appear in our mailboxes are promotional in nature. In fact, most of the academic work done on letter writing in a marketing context deals directly with the genre of promotional letters (Rieck 1998).

Interestingly, almost no attention has been given to the analysis of customer letters to marketers, even though it is commonly accepted that customers are considered one of the best sources for product and service feedback and new product ideas (Gustke 1997). The only letters that seem to receive any notice from marketers are letters of complaint or letters organized around a boycott. As public relations departments can attest, successfully answering customer complaint letters requires thorough research of the problem and the capacity to deal with complaints as individually as possible (Thorpe 2000). A recent letter writing campaign proved successful when Starbucks changed their bean purchasing policy to reflect the demands of the activist group, Global Exchange. Other forms of written communication in marketing have received far less attention and often enter the company only to be filed away and ignored forever.

**LETTER WRITING AND GENDER**

As mentioned previously, letter writing became a legitimate literary form through the popularity of the epistolary novel and the publication of letters among famous authors. In many cases, it was women who created literature using these two forms. Before women were permitted to engage in professional writing activities, letters provided the necessary outlet to develop ideas, share intimate thoughts, and even raise consciousness (Gring-Pemble 1998). Virginia Woolf, in her essay on Dorothy Osborn's letters to William Temple, suggests that letter writing provides the stepping stone for women authors out of the private and into the public realm:

> Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527 she would have never written at all. But she was born in 1627 and at that date though writing books was 'ridiculous' for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter (The Second Common Reader, p. 51).

In the United States, this bridging role was prevalent in the Appalachian folklore tradition. Letter writing gave the women of this region the tool to preserve their oral narratives, as well as provided them with a "vehicle for achieving tranformation on two levels--the personal and the cultural (Robbins 1997, p. 140)."
Letters have also served the rather powerful purpose of raising consciousness. In her discussion of letters between two women who figured prominently in the 19th century women's rights movement, Gring-Pemble (1998) explored the empowerment that occurred through the rather private discourse. This private discourse between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown served as a safe and alternative space for hashing out their socially unacceptable ideas regarding women's role in politics, education and religion. As Gring-Pemble states, "letters...provided women a forum to test and refine their ideas in a transitional space that bridged their public and private lives (p. 13)." For marginalized groups or individuals who were denied (or afraid of) public space for matters of collective concern, letters afforded them the opportunity to develop a shared consciousness, thus empowering them to take rather public steps toward gender equality.

It is this bridging of public and private spheres that leads us to the current role of letter writing in modern society. Written correspondence still remains a woman's domain:

"Why is it that the married women of America are supposed to write all the letters and send all the cards to their husbands' families? My old man is a much better writer than I am, yet he expects me to correspond with his whole family. If I asked him to correspond with mine, he would blow a gasket."

Letter to Ann Landers

Women are primarily responsible for written correspondence because of their leading role in "kinship work (di Leonardo 1987)." Di Leonardo describes kin work as the "conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters (emphasis added), telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin (emphasis added)(p. 341)." Kin work is described like housework and childcare: "men in the aggregate do not do it (p. 342)." Therefore, it is primarily women who create and maintain the images and messages that are put forth across households.

Yet, in general, it is unclear to marketers as members of the public domain, whether these letters, which germinate within the private realm, namely the household, are serving any of the purposes described above. Are those letters that consumers write to companies a means of empowerment, whereby they feel more in control? Do they write letters as a form of expression, of a moment in time, to bare their soul? Or are they merely performing the networking function that they have learned within the context of their own kin worlds? The letters analyzed for this study may shed some light on these issues as well as assist marketers who are interested in understanding the nature and process of the letters they receive from their consumers.

THE DATA

The data consisted of 53 letters written to Filene's Basement in response to promotional contests the store held in 1988 and 1993. The contest was promoted in-store as well as in the Boston Herald, one of Boston's two
daily newspapers (Boudrot 1999). Entry forms, as printed and published in the paper, asked shoppers to:

**TELL US YOUR BEST BASEMENT STORY!**

Bostonians have been bragging about their Filene’s Basement bargains for almost 85 years – now it’s your turn! In 100 words or less, tell us about your greatest find and you could win a $500 Shopping Spree at the world’s greatest bargain basement.

Fifty-three letters were received, all but one of them from women. Letter writers’ ages could in some cases be inferred from letter content (e.g., when their “best bargain” was purchased), and appeared to range from early 20’s to 70’s or older. Because of the mode of distribution, contest entries came primarily from consumers in the Boston metropolitan area.

The majority (35) of the letters described bridal gown purchases, with an additional 4 letters focusing on wedding-related (mother of the bride, wedding guest, etc.) purchases. The remaining letters varied considerably, with some describing “everyday” Filene’s Basement bargains and others focusing on other regularly held Basement sale events. Despite the entry form instructions, some letters did not describe a particular purchase, but rather reminisced about unusual store policies (e.g., the successive markdown plan) or the writer’s initiation into the intricacies of consumer culture in this retail institution.

**METHOD**

The letters were analyzed as text and subject to a hermeneutical analysis (McCracken 1988, Spradley 1979, Sherwin 1988). Specifically, Sherwin (1988) proposes a three-step method for data collection and analysis: 1) focus on the personal experience throughout the analysis, 2) focus on the details of the experience, and 3) provide the particulars of the experience within a broader, theoretical analysis. The letters represented a personal experience that was relayed without any interviewer interaction. Therefore, they represent the actual words of those consumers who were motivated to win a contest at their favorite store. Each author read the letters individually and outlined emergent themes. Then, each author read the other's analysis and resolved differences in interpretations. These themes were then subject to a broader theoretical analysis informed by the extant literature on letter-writing and gender.

**EMERGENT THEMES**

Reading the data reveals themes familiar from previous studies of Filene’s Basement and the Bridal Event (Dobscha and Foxman 1998, Foxman and Dobscha 1997). As might be expected given the particular retailer and the contest, most letters celebrate the bargain, especially value for low price. Several writers took extra steps to authenticate the extraordinary savings and value they had gotten. One woman wrote,

[I] ... picked up a French lace over satin wedding gown full train, bustle and all, rolled in a ball under the ... stairs. I took the gown home ... decided to have it cleaned for $18.00 –
fitted and tailored for $20.00. I have enclosed copies of the white and red tags, the original price was $100.00 a fair price for a gown back in 1952, that I purchased for $2.99 in Filene’s Basement. [emphasis added]

She also enclosed a photo of her in her $2.99 wedding gown.

Another common theme is that of the fantasy, fairy tale, or dream. Writers exult in finding their “dream gown,” refer to themselves as “Cinderella,” and even imbue their gowns with a mysterious and powerful life force:

... I saw the dress from a distance. It was not on the rack with the other dresses – it was hanging by itself .... It shimmered and I felt it draw me closer. I touched its edges, it felt incredibly smooth and sleek as if my hand were sliding along a procelain [sic] vase – cool and clear. It was my first encounter with my dress. The dress responded to my touch.... I knew this would be my wedding dress, no matter how long the wait, no matter what the season, no matter where we finally exchanged vows.

As this letter suggests, accounts of the “best bargain” purchase also often include elements of predestination, fate, and serendipity. A woman moves from New York to a rented house in Boston, finding it entirely empty except for a note on the counter: “Don’t forget the Filene’s Basement Suit Sale.” A woman looks “everywhere” for her gown but cannot find the right dress. She decides “to relax by going downtown to Filene’s Basement to look at regular clothes.” When she gets there the first thing she sees is a rack of wedding dresses, and that’s where she finds her “perfect dress.”

Writers also reference the web of women’s relationships. Women include in their letters the roles other women friends and relatives have played in the purchase of their “greatest bargain,” describing them as co-shoppers, helpers, confidants, and even bad (and good) influences on the purchase decision:

... a co-worker who accompanied me talked me out of buying it.... So I left without it and was thoroughly disappointed. I went home and told my mom about the gown and she talked me into going back down on Saturday morning to see if it was still there.

Women’s relationships are also referenced generationally, in writers’ descriptions of who wears the gown in addition to the original purchaser. The bargains acquire greater value, in both economic and personal terms, the greater the duration of use and the more that buyers find additional use occasions:

... 40 years ago ... I bought my wedding dress for $19.95. The following year my sister borrowed the gown.... Twenty years later my daughter wore the gown ... [and] currently her daughter ... wants to wear my wedding gown. My wedding gown has been considered economical, beautiful and traditional with each generation.
A small token perhaps, but a magnificent semblance in bringing all the generations together in a memorable event.

Lastly, many “best bargain” stories refer to the special knowledge or skills required to negotiate the Filene’s Basement retail environment successfully. Elements representing ordeal and initiation appear as well. One woman writes about her first experience shopping at Filene’s Basement with a similarly inexperienced friend, and both of them not understanding the markdown policy or how to read the merchandise tags until they bring huge armfuls of clothes to the register. She and her friend remember this experience for years. It evokes not only the laughter of shared embarrassment, but also the transition from naïve shopper to initiated bargain huntress.

CHARACTERIZING THE DATA

As discussed in the Introduction, letters come in many different forms and serve many different purposes. On the face of it, the letters that constitute the data for this study are utilitarian business letters—consumer responses to a marketing promotional effort with the intent of winning a prize. Perhaps because of the nature of the request (your “best bargain”) and Filene’s Basement’s distinctive history, however, these letters are much more than just utilitarian. Several letters are written in verse, one as a quasi-scientific timeline of the Bridal Event and “perfect gown” purchase, and eight are in the form of thank-you notes, concluding with explicit thanks to Filene’s Basement for being what it is.

Indeed, the most striking feature of this data is how very personal it is—to what extent elements of private history and individual relationships are incorporated into a contest entry letter, written to an unknown person and potentially to be publicized in future promotions for the store. In addition to the account of buying her wedding gown at the Basement, one woman includes in her letter (which is far longer than 100 words!) the story of her husband’s earlier divorce and annulment, her interfaith romance with him, the marathons they have run together, where and how they were eventually married, that her father “was watching that day from heaven,” that she is currently recuperating from major surgery—and many more personal details. Another writer encompasses much of her life and significant life events and relationships in the very first sentence of her letter: “I purchased my WEDDING DRESS in February, 1950, for $59.95, and we were married for 42 very happy years until my hubby passed away in June of 1992.”

Many women affirm relationships, most often across generations within their own families, but sometimes with friends or new acquaintances. Husbands most frequently enter the narrative by being a “bargain” in themselves. One writer who met the man who eventually became her husband at Filene’s Basement characterized him as “the best bargain I ever found at Filene’s Basement.” Wedding gowns also serve to bind family and friends when the same gown is worn by different women in successive weddings. Motivations for gown reuse differ—some writers cite tradition, others mention poverty—but whatever the motivation, the reuse adds
additional meaning to the purchase and finds a place in people’s letters.

DISCUSSION

The letters that form the basis of this study clearly contain much more data than a simple description of a bargain purchase. Is such information useful to retailers? We think so. To the extent that these letters can be used to communicate positively about the retailer in consumers’ voices, promotions using them will possess greater credibility and communicate more effectively. Filene’s Basement, however, has used this material only in two limited ad campaigns linked to the 1988 and 1993 contests.

Would this form of promotion be viable today? If letter writing is indeed a dying practice, prospects do not look good for a third “best bargain” promotion. It might be possible to adapt the concept to currently prevalent forms of communication, e.g., email or voice mail. These, however, lack the coherent structure, personal reflection, and intention of correspondence of letters. Letter-writing empowers both the reader/marketer, through highly contextualized and powerful information regarding store behavior, and the writer/consumer, through reflective and emotional accounts of store or brand experiences. Therefore, it would behoove marketers and retailers to encourage letter-writing, even if the resultant content were largely negative, in order to gain a richer picture of their consumers. In light of marketing’s fascination with the practice of relationship marketing, letters provide a natural outlet for consumers to voice their opinion of the company and

furthermore serve as a means for creating and strengthening those bonds with consumers.

REFERENCES

Boudrot, Pat (1999), Public Relations Director, Filene’s Basement, Inc. Personal communication.


