Consumer Mourning and Coping With the Loss of Strategic Rituals: the Case of Marshall Field & Co.

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By exploring consumers’ reactions to the rebranding of Marshall Field & Co. as Macy’s, this paper explores consumer mourning and coping with the loss of a cherished retail store, one responsible for creating or co-creating strategic rituals (those designed to enhance customer relationships and profit) throughout consumers’ lives. By conducting depth interviews with fifteen consumers, we explore three research questions: 1) What cherished rituals did Field’s create or co-create with consumers? 2) What benefits of these rituals do consumers miss the most? 3) How do consumers cope with the loss of these strategic rituals?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is a well-supported assertion in the social sciences and in consumer behavior that rituals provide structure and meaning to people’s lives (e.g., Driver, 1991; Rook 1985). Furthermore, through commitments of time, energy and money, consumers demonstrate their attachment not only to consumer-generated rituals such as family holidays, but also to “strategic rituals”—repeated, dramatic events engineered by retailers and marketers in order to achieve key customer and profit objectives. Although current research on consumer/retailer relationships examines the importance of retail aesthetics and the ways retailers enhance brand meaning (e.g., Sherry 1998; Sherry et al, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), our understanding of the benefits consumers accrue from such relationships remains underdeveloped. In this paper, we focus on the loss of consumer mourning and coping with the loss of strategic rituals offered by a retailer. By focusing on the loss of these strategic rituals, we illuminate the specific benefits consumers glean from them, and the ways consumers cope with aspects of ritual loss.

Our interest in the topic was spurred by the outpouring of negative emotions accompanying the announcement that the landmark Chicago-based department store chain Marshall Field & Co. (hereafter, “Field’s”) would be rebranded as Macy’s as of September, 2006. The significance of Field’s as a venue for its own strategic rituals was well-documented in media accounts and on web blogs. In addition, Field’s was highly significant as a pioneering retailer in the United States, and offered many “firsts”—such as the first restaurant in a retail store, the first delivery, the first return/exchange policies, and one of the first stores to recognize the importance of the aesthetic experience of shopping (as evidenced by its Tiffany windows, fountain and large staff devoted to store display). We employed an interpretive approach, beginning with a few preliminary depth interviews with friends and acquaintances who confirmed that they were mourning the loss of Field’s. We then placed an ad on a Midwest university bulletin board, asking for volunteers to discuss their thoughts and feelings on the renaming of the store. Informants include key players involved in maintaining websites dedicated to the memory and/or resurrection of Field’s, such as fieldsfanchicago.com and darrid.com. Our fifteen informants (one was interviewed twice) were all middle- or upper-middle class in their 20s-50s, and were primarily white females. However, three were African-American females and two were men. Three of the four research team members, all women between their 20s and 40s, conducted the interviews. We conducted the first few in pairs to facilitate discussion among the research team of emergent issues, with the last half being conducted by single researchers. Transcripts of these interviews yielded over 125 pages of single-spaced text.

Three of the four team members participated in the analysis, reading and re-reading the data and focusing our research questions to those we believed could best help us understand the ritual mourning and coping we observed. These questions are: 1) What cherished rituals did Field’s create or co-create with consumers? 2) What benefits of these rituals do consumers miss the most? 3) How do consumers cope with the loss of these strategic rituals? The authors negotiated the interpretation of these questions and discussed the most salient issues to include in this paper, as well as other issues to pursue as our interviews continue. Our findings reveal that Field’s created or co-created at least six strategic rituals for consumers: selection of focal ritual artifacts (such as the first pair of high heels, prom dresses, and wedding gowns), enhancement of the Christmas ritual, customized shopping experiences, sources of iconic brands/gifts, inclusion on a tour of Chicago, and bargain shopping. Furthermore, consumers elicited five key benefits from these strategic rituals at Field’s. Specifically, the source provided a venue for aspirational but democratic consumption, a source of aesthetic pleasure, a source of civic pride given the importance of Field’s and the Fields family to Chicago, a locus for family traditions, and the quintessential shopping experience through the offering of unique, high-quality merchandise, unparalleled customer service and even a highly desirable work environment complete with rituals designed to enhance employees’ work experiences. Further, in coping with the loss of Field’s, consumers exhibit both avoidant and accepting behavioral coping strategies. Avoidant strategies include venting their unhappiness over the loss of Field’s, rejecting Macy’s and other alternatives to the strategic rituals Field’s had created, and distancing themselves physically and cognitively from the memories of Field’s. Active coping strategies include accepting the loss, but also engaging in more active civic-oriented strategies such as staging protests outside the store and boycotting Macy’s. Our paper reveals that consumers do find strategic rituals supported or co-created by retailers as meaningful experiences in their lives, and when the opportunities for these rituals disappear, must mourn and cope with these losses.

References available upon request.