Expressive Oriented Relationships: a New Type of Commercial Friendships

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This study examines a new class of commercial friendships that have not been addressed in the marketing literature. Using grounded theory, this study illuminates important theoretical differences underlying various types of relationships between consumers and firm representatives. The findings from this study demonstrate the importance of conceptualizing commercial friendships as multidimensional phenomena that are both determined and constrained by instrumental and expressive relational components. This study reveals that the nature of these relationships, at the time they are established, has a lasting and powerful impact on consumers. Identifying the underlying features of these friendships has important implications regarding how consumers perceive their relationships with firms and how they use them for consumption purposes. Additionally, explicating these relationships also reveals important ways firms might manage customers engaged in instrumental oriented and expressive oriented marketing relationships.

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A New Type of Commercial Friendships

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CONCEPTUALIZATION & THEORY

The development of relationships between firms and their customers has received considerable attention in the marketing literature. Interestingly, these relationships are not always limited to traditional commercial relationships. For example, in response to Bagozzi’s (1995) call for marketing scholars to identify additional types of relationships fundamental to marketing, Price and Arnould (1999) identified a new and important type of marketing relationship – “commercial friendships.” These relationships, which are characterized as friendships that form between customers and a firm’s representatives over time, as a result of economic transactions, move beyond the boundaries of traditional commercial relationships.

Interestingly, commercial friendships that develop as a result of ongoing economic exchanges (Price and Arnould 1999) aren’t the only type of commercial friendships operating between consumers and representatives of firms in the marketplace. As demonstrated by DiMaggio and Louche (1998), friendship relationships oftentimes exist between consumers and firm representatives, before a single transaction ever takes place. Such occurrences, in which consumers draw upon pre-existing friendship ties with a firm’s employees to make purchases, represent a new and important type of commercial friendship.

Surprisingly, this type of pre-existing commercial friendship has not been examined in the marketing literature. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate this new class of marketing relationships and demonstrate how such relationships impact consumption. Identifying and explicating the use of alternative types of commercial friendships provides a valuable backdrop against which other types of marketing relationships can be juxtaposed and understood. The framework that emerges from this study highlights important similarities and differences among the different types of friendships used in consumption contexts, which ultimately reveals important ways marketing relationships can be conceptualized, studied, and managed.

To demonstrate the impact of this new category of commercial friendships on consumption, and to develop a framework for understanding these friendships in the context of other marketing relationships, we draw upon social capital theory. Social capital theory asserts that individuals obtain benefits or returns as a result of their relationships with others (Lin 2001; Portes 1998). Social capital theory highlights how differences in the nature and the structure of relationships create diversity in outcomes resulting from their use. Given fundamental differences between the types of relationships used in the marketplace, social capital theory provides an effective and robust theoretical framework for understanding the friendships examined in this study.

METHOD

To investigate, explain, and develop this new category of commercial friendships in the context of existing marketing relationships, we utilized the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Straus 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). We conducted semi-structured depth interviews with 26 U.S. consumers, yielding 122 consumption experiences. Participants were purposively selected according to established theoretical sampling techniques (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). To ensure that the developing theory and framework were grounded in the data, we adhered to the constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Finally, to establish trustworthiness, we conducted member checks with all study participants, as advocated in previous research (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

As alluded to previously, our analysis of participants’ experiences reveals an exciting new category of commercial friendships used by consumers. Our data identify important differences between this new type of commercial friendship and previously documented commercial friendships (Price and Arnould 1999). Our analysis highlights instrumentality (Lin, Dean, and Ensel 1981), which represents the extent to which relationships are instrumental or expressive, as a key factor distinguishing different types of commercial friendships. Conceptually, instrumental relationships are those in which relationships are used to achieve an end that is distinguishable from the relationship itself, such as making a purchase. Alternatively, expressive relationships serve as both the means and the end and do not have any extrinsic purpose beyond the relationship itself, as in the case of friendship (Lin et al. 1981).

Participants’ experiences reveal that, by their very nature, commercial friendships involve both instrumental and expressive characteristics. Consequently, we develop a relationship continuum, anchored by instrumental and expressive motives at the extremes, to model these dynamic relationships. Using this framework, our analysis highlights the importance of conceptualizing commercial friendships according to their instrumental orientation or their expressive orientation, in order to account for the dynamic underlying factors driving these relationships.

Drawing upon this framework, our analysis also reveals that the nature of commercial friendships, at the time they are initially established, anchors the relationships as they develop and evolve in the future. Our data demonstrate that relationships that begin instrumentally will continue to be dominated by the instrumental dimension over time. Although they may move toward the expressive end of the continuum, they rarely make the jump and become expressive oriented commercial friendships. Alternatively, relationships that begin as expressive relationships, and are later introduced into consumption contexts, continue to be dominated by the expressive dimension of the relationship. Although they may move toward the instrumental end of the continuum and receive important consumption related benefits, they rarely become instrumental oriented commercial friendships, due to consumers’ efforts to compartmentalize, maintain, and protect their expressive relationships. These differences, ultimately derived from the nature of the relationships at the time of their inception, frame the
way consumers perceive, categorize, and use their relationships for consumption purposes, even as the relationships fluctuate and operate at different points along the relationship continuum over time.

CONCLUSION

The identification and examination of a new class of commercial friendships illuminates important theoretical differences underlying the various types of relationships between consumers and firm representatives. This study demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing commercial friendships as multi-dimensional phenomena that are both determined and constrained by instrumental and expressive components. Interestingly, we find that the nature of the relationships, at the time they are established, has a lasting and powerful impact. Ultimately, identifying the underlying features of these friendships has important implications regarding how consumers perceive their relationships with firms and how they use them for consumption purposes. Additionally, explicating these relationships also reveals important ways firms might manage customers engaged in instrumental oriented and expressive oriented marketing relationships.

REFERENCES


Impact of Mortality Salience on Advertising Effectiveness in a Commercial Pod

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A crucial media planning consideration is the nature of the program itself, as the program context influences the effectiveness of embedded advertising, with the context effect being maximal for the first ad in the ensuing commercial pod and minimal for the last ad in the pod (Murry, Lastovicka and Singh 1992). Terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986) posits that humans’ innate desire for perpetual life, coupled with awareness of their mortality, creates the potential for existential anxiety. Conscious death-related thoughts instigate proximal defenses (e.g., thought suppression/denial of one’s vulnerability to death; Arndt, Allen and Greenberg 2001), whereas unconscious but accessible death-related thoughts activate distal defenses (e.g., cultural worldview bolstering; Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon 1999). Recent research in marketing (Liu and Smeesters 2010) induced mortality salience (hereafter, MS) by exposing participants to epochal news coverage (9/11 terror attacks). MS-inducing programs caused participants to prefer domestic brands over foreign brands; due to enhanced patriotism. However, the authors do not find MS effects on ad evaluation. They suggest that ad evaluations are affected by program-induced mood, and since MS does not affect mood, MS will not influence ads. Based on extant literature, we expect program-induced mood effects to be independent of program-induced MS effects, in that moods influence the first few commercials in the pod, while program-induced distal MS effects manifest themselves on the later commercials.

We investigate whether (a) archetypal death-depicting television programs trigger death-related thoughts and whether these vary over an ensuing commercial pod, (b) if and when death-related thoughts turn from being conscious to nonconscious in the pod, and (c) do distal defenses impact advertising effectiveness in the pod, and if so, what is the process mechanism? We conducted three studies. Local news from an affiliate was recorded and edited before each study. The first three-and-a-half minutes of the MS and control videos contained information on local governance etc. The last one-and-a-half minutes of the MS video contained death-related information while the control video contained sports information. Pre-tests were done to select filler ads for all studies and the target ad for the third study.

Study 1: One factor, four-level between-subjects design was used with MS-content and ads at three pod positions: beginning (MS\textsubscript{beg}), middle (MS\textsubscript{mid}) and end (MS\textsubscript{end}) and a control condition. Death thought accessibility (DTA; Greenberg et al. 1994) was measured after