

Guru's view

Establishing meaningful customer relationships: why some companies and brands mean more to their customers

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Abstract

Examines the nature of meaningful customer relationships to determine what contributes to meaningfulness and to explore ways in which companies can establish more meaningful relationships with customers. Explores and applies the social psychology roots of the concept of meaning in a customer relationships context. Gleans evidence of meaningful customer relationships from the consumer psychology and marketing literature and from research conducted by the author. Examines situations where a company or a brand clearly occupies an important place in the life of a customer and discusses the characteristics of such relationships. Examines the factors that contribute to meaningful customer relationships. Looks at the implications for further customer research and for marketing and brand managers.

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The nature of customer relationships

Despite the current organizational focus on customer relationships and on customer relationship management (CRM: a focus that centres largely on the application of technology), it is suggested that the concept of relationships in the customer context is not well understood (Barnes, 2001). Human relationships, including customer relationships, are special, emotional constructs. They are, therefore, not merely behavioural; they are more than retention and repeat buying. While many firms and authors confuse the concepts of customer relationships, customer loyalty, and customer retention (Reinartz and Kumar, 2002), they are not the same. It is entirely possible for customers to demonstrate repeated patronage and a high level of retention without a "genuine" relationship existing with the firm or brand. What is missing, of course, from the behavioural definition of customer relationships is any kind of emotional attachment to or connection with the firm; a necessary condition for a relationship to exist.

It is important that we consider relationships as viewed from the customer's perspective. Companies often delude themselves into thinking that they have a relationship with customers if those customers buy their products and services regularly. But customers understand the difference between repeat buying, which is often based on convenience, price or other non-emotive factors, and situations where they go back to the same companies and brands again and again because they feel something special toward them. In that sense, customers often feel toward certain companies and brands the same kind of emotional attachment they feel toward friends, family members, and colleagues. We can, therefore, learn a great deal about customer relationships by studying more closely the principles of human relationships in general (Berscheid and Peplau, 1983; Duck, 1994).

There is also a great deal to be learned about customer relationships with companies and brands from the work done by consumer psychologists on the attachment that humans develop toward certain personal objects and possessions



(Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Kleine *et al.*, 1995) and on the association of meaning with such objects. Certain things that we own that we associate with special events or that were handed down from parents or grandparents occupy a special place in our lives. We would be devastated if they were lost, stolen or destroyed. That same feeling is often associated with companies and brands. We feel a loss when a business with which we have been dealing for years closes its doors. We are disappointed or even angry when a brand is no longer available or when a trusted brand changes its formulation.

What has happened in the acquisition of this relationship status, this meaning, with firms and brands is virtually the same as transpires in building relationships with other people. Some of them become special to us. They occupy a special place in our lives. We adopt a possessive way of referring to them: "my hairdresser", "my dry cleaner", "my local pub". We develop a high degree of comfort with them; we trust them, we rely on them; and we may even get to the stage where we feel we cannot live without them.

Role of the brand or firm

Consumers do indeed establish close, meaningful relationships with many companies and brands. Some of these are more intimate than others; some are face-to-face, others more distant. Such close relationships are emotive, involving a collection of perceptions about the firm or brand (Fournier, 1998, p. 345). The extent to which meaning is present in a customer relationship depends entirely on the perceptions of the customer. As with so many concepts applied in marketing, such as service, quality and value, meaning exists in the mind of the customer (Fournier, 1998, p. 367). It is the customer that makes the emotional contact with the firm or brand. It is the customer that decides over time that some companies and brands are to be trusted and relied upon more than others; that some will come to occupy a central place in his or her life.

The single most important contributor to the beginning of the process that leads from customer satisfaction to retention and on to

loyalty and relationships is value. In fact, Drucker (1998) has defined the function of business enterprise as the creation of value and wealth. Without value having been created for the customer, there is no possibility that he or she will be satisfied to the point where a relationship might emerge. But, there are many ways in which a firm might create value for its customers (Barnes, 2001, Ch. 4). Some of these ways of creating value may be labeled functional and others emotional. Functional value is related to the firm's or brand's ability to be convenient, accessible, easy to use, and to its ability to save the customer time and money. On the other hand, emotional value is created through the interaction of the firm and its employees with the customer; the extent to which they make him or her feel important, valued, or special. Firms create emotional value for their customers to the extent that they create respect, appreciation, recognition, understanding and acknowledgement of the customers' value to the firm.

The strength of the customer relationship depends on the relative contribution of emotional and functional value created by the company or brand in the mind of the customer, the extent to which that company or brand is viewed by the customer as a partner (Fournier, 1998, p. 344). My work with clients in several countries and industries has demonstrated that the creation of close, meaningful customer relationships is dependent on the firm's ability to create emotional value. Many firms have become quite good at creating functional value, bolstered increasingly by technology that makes them more efficient. But, not nearly as many have paid much attention to the creation of emotional value. Where such value is created, the payback to the firm is considerable, in terms of repeat business, higher share of wallet, and much more longevity in the relationship and willingness to refer others. The role of the firm or brand in creating meaningful customer relationships, therefore, must be viewed as the creation of high levels of emotional value.

The meanings of meaning

To create meaningful customer relationships, relationships that will not only be more

satisfying and fulfilling for the customer, but also more rewarding for the firm, we need to have a better understanding of the notion of meaning and how meaningful relationships may be created in a business context. A review of the work of researchers and scholars in marketing and consumer psychology suggests three applications of the concept of meaning.

The first interpretation reflects a literal or linguistic bias, as in “what does the advertising mean to say?”. It references the clarity of communications, whether various messages sent by a company to its customers or prospective customers are received and understood as intended. This view of meaning is grounded in words, conversation and talk. It addresses how cues are interpreted, mechanically and efficiently. It deals with effective communications, not directly with relationships, although it can not be denied that communication is necessary for relationships to develop and thrive. To quote Drucker (2001, p. 341) again, “for communications to be effective, there has to be both information and meaning. And meaning requires communion.”

This literal or linguistic conceptualization of meaning may be viewed as a precursor to meaningful relationships. If a company or brand is unable to communicate effectively its characteristics, attributes or performance qualities, it may be in a difficult position with respect to eventually establishing a meaningful relationship with consumers. Brands, both corporate and product, evolve through a series of stages in their development from the situation where they are unknown to the stage where many customers exhibit genuine (as opposed to behavioural) brand loyalty and relationships (Barnes, 2001, p. 260). A brand must initially create awareness, establish its characteristics and attributes, create an image and eventually a personality (Aaker, 1997), before it can hope to create brand loyalty or an emotion-based relationship. Effective communication, or the communication of appropriate meaning, is essential if the firm or brand is to have a successful beginning to that journey toward a solid relationship with customers. But, attributes and characteristics do not represent the totality of the meaning that a brand or company can hold for a consumer.

The second approach to meaning is most commonly encountered in the marketing and consumer psychology literature and may be labeled the cultural or anthropological view (as best exemplified by the work of McCracken (1986)). It refers to the cultural meaning of a brand as communicated through advertising and other forms of marketing communications. It involves more than a literal statement of the company’s or brand’s characteristics or attributes. It is its essence, what it stands for, what values it espouses or reflects. It is the ultimate in differentiation in that it is central to how a brand defines itself and stands out from the crowd.

Many leading brands are quite clear in what they “mean” in this sense. They have done a very effective job of defining strategically what the brand is to stand for, what values it will reflect, and then they have consistently executed against that strategy. It is very important to realize, I believe, that the kind of meaning that is created in this context resides in the product or brand and is a result of its positioning or “branding” strategy – what it wants to stand for in the minds of customers. Thus, it is the management of the company involved that decides what meaning its corporate or product brand is to reflect; what they want it to mean to customers. Where this strategy works, the result is a universal, agreed-upon meaning that appeals to the collective of customers, some of whom will identify with the brand and what it stands for and others who will not. There can, therefore, be some consensus about what Nike means or what Harley-Davidson or IKEA stands for. This form of meaning is important in that it establishes a particular consistent image for a product or brand and differentiates it from its competitors.

The third approach to meaning in customer/brand relationships (and the principal focus of this paper) deals with how companies and brands can come to “mean” something special to certain customers. This deals with the acquisition of meaning in relationships, how companies and brands come to be distinguished by the degree of emotional (as opposed to behavioural) loyalty exhibited by some customers. The acquisition of such meaning takes time and in some cases results in loyalty that lasts a lifetime. Restaurants, retail stores, and brands of clothing and food products for some consumers take on special meaning,

relevance, and centrality in their lives. Many customers, however, seem to have relatively few such firms or brands in their lives. Their relationships with most brands are less meaningful, and in some cases border on meaningless – as is often the case with utilities and other businesses that are essentially commoditized. A focus group participant once describes his relationship with his electricity supplier as follows: “To me, they are just a bill.”

Where such meaning is present for a customer, as compared with the anthropological view discussed above, the meaning that a brand has for the customer resides not in the brand or the firm itself, but in the mind of the customer. This is very much an individualized and personal kind of meaning. There can be no broad consensus about what a brand means in this context; it is a personal thing relating to how central it is in the life of a particular customer. It is a meaning that is internalized by the consumer based on how closely the brand or company fits with his or her values and with the things that are important to him or her.

A related view of this approach to the consideration of meaning deals with what it means to a customer to be labeled a regular or loyal customer or user of a particular company or brand. In this sense, the brand derives meaning from the way in which it helps the customer define himself or herself. The brand or firm, in fact, becomes part of that definition. We can not conceive of a friend driving any car other than a Volvo or wearing any cologne other than Chanel No. 5. What is critical in this third view of meaning, which is the view that is of greatest interest because it represents enduring loyalty, is that the determination of whether or not such meaning exists resides with the customer.

Meaningful customer relationships

A company may communicate effectively, elucidate clearly what it means to say, have accurate and effective literal meaning in its communication with customers without creating meaning in its relationships with those customers. Many (possibly most) advertising messages are clear in that they communicate effectively the characteristics

and features of the advertised product. Marketing communications in the broadest sense may indeed create a clear meaning for a brand (that is, an unambiguous set of things that the brand stands for), without resonating or striking a chord with certain consumers. Thus, it is possible for a firm to get the first two forms of meaning correct, without ever achieving the third. “I understand your message and I see that your image is consistent and clear, but you don’t mean anything to me; you are not relevant, or an important part of my life.”

The central issue is that consumers feel closer to some companies and brands than to others. Some occupy a central place in their lives; they come to “mean” something to them. The implication being that there would be a void created if the company or brand were no longer present or available. To “mean” something to customers is to occupy a special place in their hearts and minds, to be more than just a provider of _____. This implies the addition of certain forms of value that transcend the provision of the core product or service. The company or brand becomes a partner, an integral part of the customer’s life.

To come to occupy such a meaningful position in the lives of customers there must first exist relevance of the product category for those customers. There must be an appropriate frame of reference. Thus, I may understand completely the message being communicated by Harley-Davidson, and even have a clear understanding of the values and images espoused by the brand, yet it will never be particularly meaningful for me unless I have an interest in motorcycles. Similarly, I may understand the product claims of Pampers, and appreciate the role the brand may play in the lives of young parents, but unless I am a young parent myself, there is little likelihood that the brand will be meaningful for me.

Once the relevance of the product category is established, what is it that causes some brands or companies to be in a position to establish meaningful relationships with certain customers? What is it about the interaction between the brand and the customer that leads to a situation where the customer will not even consider switching allegiance to a competitor?

What drives meaning?

In order for a firm to aspire to the creation of meaningful customer relationships, it must first have an appreciation for what contributes to such relationships, focusing largely on the creation of meaning through appropriate forms of value for the customer. Through the analysis of numerous focus group and one-on-one depth interviews with customers of business to customer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) companies, it has been possible to identify a number of themes that run through situations where customers have developed meaningful relationships with firms and brands. A valuable framework for the analysis and interpretation of this information relates to various forms of value that are created.

Some forms of value that are created by firms clearly contribute to efficient, functional customer relationships – convenience, access, timeliness, product quality, value for money, technical performance, responsiveness, accuracy, consistency, competency, and communications, for example. These are cited by consumers as factors that cause them to go back to deal with a firm or to buy a brand again and again. But these contribute to the creation of a vulnerable form of value, to the establishment of behavioural loyalty. For example, many customers will indicate that they shop at a certain supermarket every week, largely because it is conveniently located, close to home, open 24 hours, with lots of checkouts open, wide aisles, great selection, and a large parking lot. They speak of being able to do one-stop shopping, or of “getting in and out in a hurry”. While these customers who are driven largely by functional value do shop at the supermarket every week, they spend a smaller percentage of their grocery budget there, and they admit they would likely switch if another supermarket opened closer to home or if they were to move to a new place of residence.

Other forms of value are more central to the feelings and emotions of the customer – shared history, values, goals, interests, beliefs; sense of commitment, reliance, social support, intimacy, interest, respect, trust, etc. Where present and perceived by customers, these forms of value contribute to emotional loyalty and to more lasting relationships,

those that will stand up to competition from more convenient and efficient competitors. Meaningful customer relationships, therefore, are characterized by higher levels of emotional value. Such value is created through the addition of more than functional or instrumental components of the customer interaction (Miller, 1998, p. 19).

Where such meaningful relationships exist, customers speak of having a certain comfort level while shopping at their supermarket, to enjoying a chat with the salespeople, and to feeling relaxed. Where meaning exists in the relationship, a higher-order form of value has been created for the customer. The relationship takes on a status that transcends good quality, variety, service and dependability – all of which are critically important, but are increasingly taking on the status of “table stakes”. Closeness and a comfort level develop to the point where the customer forsakes all others.

The themes that run through customers’ discussions of firms and brands with which they have special relationships relate largely to sharing, comfort, borrowing, and an ability to relate. Fournier (1998) found that customers are able to speak eloquently and passionately about brands of ordinary household products that have come to occupy a special place in their lives. She is speaking about the relationships that customers have with and the meaning that they see in the branded products that they use every day.

The notion of sharing is central to the conveyance of meaning. People and entities to whom we feel closest and who mean the most to us are generally those with whom we have a great deal in common, those with whom we share a common history, values, interests, culture and beliefs. A company or brand often means more to customers with whom it shares things. They have roots in the same community. They are interested in the same activities. They subscribe to the same values. They demonstrate what Duck (1994) refers to as “shared meaning”.

Entities that come to mean the most to people are also those with whom they feel the most comfortable. There is an ease of contact and of interacting that is simply not present amongst strangers. Customers speak often of having a certain “comfort level” with those businesses with whom they deal regularly. This feeling of comfort results in part from the shared interests referred to above, from

increased familiarity that comes over time, and from regular and personal communications.

Meaning is also created in the minds of customers to the extent that the firm or brand is seen as someone or something to which the customer can relate. This is similar to the notion of comfort in that customers must feel at ease in dealing with or using the firm or brand in question.

Finally, the concept of “borrowed meaning” is also relevant here; that is, the extent to which a firm can create meaning in the eyes of its customers through its employees, spokespersons, sponsorships, associations and events. A firm or brand can contribute to the creation of a meaningful customer relationship by employing people with whom the customer will feel comfortable and by associating with events, spokespersons, and other entities that are central in the lives of the customers.

The need for strategy

While we have suggested earlier that it is the customers that ultimately decide which companies and brands will come to occupy a central place in their lives, those that will be seen to mean something special to them, it is possible nonetheless for a company to influence the likelihood of increasing the meaning associated with its brand. To do so requires a strategy that is not only directed towards the establishment of customer relationships, but also to the creation of high levels of meaning within those relationships.

To develop such a strategy requires that companies truly understand their customers. This sounds like a rather obvious and even trite observation, but it is a self-evident fact that many companies today have at best a superficial understanding of what is truly important to their customers. To create meaning for customers requires a great deal of insight into their lives, and not merely that part of their lives that involves the use of the company’s product or service. To unearth what is really important to customers, what issues they face in their lives, what gives them the greatest satisfaction, and what they really believe in requires insight that can rarely be obtained through survey research. Relatively unstructured depth interviews are, in my

opinion, far superior at unearthing such insight.

Specifically, if a firm is to begin to create meaning for its customers, we need to know something about what is important in their lives; what they enjoy doing, what they spend much of their time on, what they are most proud of, what gives them the greatest enjoyment. By doing so, we can better understand the relevance of these things to them and can identify how we might become associated with them.

At the same time, the firm needs to know a great deal about what concerns their customers, what they worry about, and what they find difficult to deal with. By isolating such issues, the firm may be in a position to identify ways in which they can help alleviate a problem or allow the customer to cope more easily with a challenge. Often, in my experience, depth interviews can reveal problems that customers are facing to which the firm can develop a solution.

The question to be addressed through such in-depth research is how can we help them deal with problems, and how can we get closer to them by associating with the things that they consider important; how can we come to mean more to them than just a supplier of ____? That is the objective; to rise above the role of a supplier of a particular product or service to become a partner in the creation of value, one on whom the customer can always rely to produce results.

Creating meaningful customer relationships

How then are meaningful customer relationships created? How do certain companies and brands come to mean something special to customers? Meaning in this context requires the creation of an emotional connection between the company and the customer; the creation of high levels of emotional value. Strategies for the creation of such value include:

- *The company or brand associates itself with and supports the things that are central in the lives of their customers, and particularly of those segments of interest. This strategy guides corporate decisions on community involvement, philanthropy, sponsorships, events, and other activities that will cast the brand in a good light. It is particularly*

important for the brand to be associated with causes and activities that are important to its target segments.

Examples include Tesco's Computers for Schools program, the Ronald McDonald House Charities, Tim Hortons children's camps, Avon's support for breast cancer research, the CIBC's sponsorship of the Run for the Cure, and Saturn's program to build community playgrounds.

- *The company provides information and partnering in activities in which the customer is personally engaged.* The company demonstrates relevance for the customer by being involved in various activities or by supporting the customer in things in which he or she has an abiding interest. Topics that research suggests are close to the heart of most customers include children, pets, gardening, personal health, education, books, cars and wine. One excellent example of this is the various programs that Tesco (www.tesco.com) offers to create involvement in activities that are important to their customers; its Baby and Toddlers Club, its Healthy Living site, and its World of Wine. Michelin's advertising features children to stress its role in family safety.
- *The brand or company "borrows" or trades on the meaning in the relationships that customers have with others.* All consumers have arms-length relationships with a variety of personalities in various walks of life. We respect and admire certain athletes, actors, business leaders and others who have achieved success. This represents an opportunity for companies to trade on those relationships when selecting spokespersons. The personality means something to the customer. The company or brand can borrow that meaning and transfer the emotional equity resident in the personality to the brand, provided that the customer sees the association as appropriate to its image. There are numerous examples of brands basking in the reflected glory of their well-selected spokespersons: Bill Cosby for Jello, Sir Edmund Hilary for Nissan, Tiger Woods for Buick, and Ricardo Montalban for Cadillac.
- *The company or brand shows that it has a lot in common with the customer.* They share things – a common history or background, interests, values, and beliefs. Advertising and other forms of communication suggest: "They come from the same place I do; they like the things I like; they are folks like me." Examples include Petro-Canada which is positioned as Canada's gas station who understands Canadian winters, General Motors advertising which shows that company's contribution to the US military effort during the Second World War, and the Ford Windstar advertising showing the team of female engineers (and mothers) who designed it.
- *The company or brand reminds the consumer of pleasant things.* The company or brand associates itself in the customer's mind with nostalgia and reminiscences, of pleasant times, good memories – camping with Dad, weddings attended, the high school prom, our first trip to Europe. In this sense, the company or brand is being rewarded for its role in contributing to such memories. Examples include Canadian Tire ads which suggest a tradition of kids shopping with Dad, the Campbell's Soup Kids, the Mercedes-Benz C-class ad that depicts life events, and the MasterCard "Priceless" campaign that often refers to major milestones or going back to one's roots – a trip to Ireland with Mom, crossing No. 7 off life's "to do" list (a trip to China), guaranteed dates with your husband (season tickets to the opera) – all priceless!
- *The firm or brand does more for the customer than anyone else does and more than the customer would normally expect from such a company or brand.* To achieve this form of meaning, the company or brand has to perform beyond the customer's expectations and do things that are not normally associated with the category. It involves the company doing more for the customer than would be expected, addressing unvoiced concerns, anticipating needs, not behaving as a typical _____. One hears comments like "Tesco is much more to me than just a supermarket." Examples include Saturn whose positioning is not to be a typical automobile company, and the food distributor Sysco that helps its food service clients with menu planning.

- *The firm is known for what it enables; what it makes it possible for customers to accomplish or to do.* If we can help the customer accomplish certain things in life and get credit for that contribution, then we are associated with a sense of accomplishment and are regarded as a partner in the achievement of certain goals. Examples include Home Depot where a well-meaning but unskilled Dad can go to get help to build a tree house for his son – the result is the son’s adoration. Visa Canada promotes the fact that it enables you to get more out of life, and its ads show you how.
- *The firm demonstrates reciprocity; shows customers that they mean a great deal to the firm as well.* This is another case of shared meaning or reciprocated meaning. Customer relationships are likely to be more solid and enduring if the customers feel truly valued by the firm. Unfortunately, many firms fail to demonstrate that they appreciate their customers’ business. Where a firm does make the effort to show that the customer really does mean something, it is usually rewarded with loyalty. Examples of companies that make an effort to send that message include Saturn again which has built a reputation for constantly demonstrating to customers that their business is appreciated. Small firms who know their customers really well are generally in a better position to acknowledge their loyal customers and to do little things to show that they value their business.
- *The firm or brand earns a reputation for being thoroughly reliable.* Like trusted friends and neighbours, customers come to rely on certain companies because they have earned a reputation for customer service and attention. Meaning is created through the fact that the customer comes to depend on the firm, much as he or she would a friend. The customer’s reaction is likely to be: “I can always count on them”, “you can never go wrong buying ____.” Examples of superior service providers who have earned the trust and respect of their customers include State Farm, Sears, Federal Express, Ritz-Carleton, and Honda.

Conclusions and implications

Because some customer relationships are closer, stronger and more meaningful than others, the development of strategies to create higher levels of meaning in relationships warrants the attention of management. To be able to develop such strategies, firms must gain a deeper understanding of their customers and the role that they and their brands currently play and might come to play in their lives. There has to be a deeper understanding of what Duck (1994) has termed “meaning systems”; the things that are central to the lives of people. Only through this understanding can a firm identify the things with which they should associate or the issues they can help address.

There must also be within the firm an appreciation for the concept of meaning and how meaning is conveyed through a brand. There must be an understanding of the value of meaning in a brand, how the meaning that is resident in the brand contributes to its value and how it is always at risk. For example, when companies merge or when brands are changed, there is always the risk that the meaning that exists is lost as well. Is there less value in a brand like Volvo or Jaguar once it becomes part of the Ford family? Do brands like Hewlett-Packard and Compaq mean something less or at least something different to customers after a merger?

To create real meaning for customers, firms must also have a better understanding of the expectations of customers. At present, most companies appear to have a rather limited view of customer expectations, tending to define them in fairly predictable and largely functional terms. Thus, firms believe that customers expect them to have superior quality, to deliver on time, and to address complaints or questions promptly. Some companies go to great lengths to quantify such expectations, determining that their customers expect service calls to be completed in three days or the phone answered within 24 seconds.

But the key to creating meaning for customers lies not in exceeding such predictable expectations, not in delivering the product faster, or by answering the phone more quickly, or even by increasing on-time performance. Real meaning lies in anticipation and in addressing issues that the customer does not expect you to address. Real

meaning is created by occupying a special place in the lives of your customers. To do so, a company or brand must strike the right chord with customers by becoming associated with things that really matter to them, and must achieve a status that extends well beyond “efficient supplier” toward something approaching “trusted partner”.

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