

Making Sense of Customer Relationships

A Consumer Perspective

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Abstract

Previous research (Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Park, Eisingerich and Park, 2013) suggests that the subjectivity of consumers' motivations in customer relationships is not yet fully understood. More theoretical advancement is needed in order to "see customer relationships through the consumer's eyes". Accordingly, this study explores how consumers perceive and make sense of customer relationships in their everyday lives.

Drawing grounding from self-based theories (Belk, 1988), the study advances a map of multiple selves illustrating consumers' lives as contexts of everyday sense-making. In line with self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982), the study suggests that the subjective meaning of and motivation for a customer relationship can be derived from how it links to a consumer's sense of self on the map. This is conceptualized as 'self-relationship (S-R) congruence'.

The discoveries originate from an empirical study of 10 consumers and their 201 customer relationships. A total of 30 in-depth interviews were conducted during a three month period in 2010 in Finland. Various techniques ranging from visual elicitation to breaching experiments were utilized to accumulate data. The data were first explored through applied grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which revealed consumers' intricate S-R congruencies. To understand these congruencies, the data were revisited from an ethnomethodological angle (Garfinkel, 1967). This produced a process view of how meanings emerge and how consumers sustain motivation in customer relationships.

The findings illuminate aspects of customer relationships that contemporary theories have thus far neglected. The map of multiple selves, the S-R congruence conceptualization and the process of how consumers make sense of customer relationships contribute to the advancement of a consumer-centric perspective in relationship marketing research.

The study is limited to insights pertaining to consumers' perceptions of customer relationships in card-based customer programs. Further studies are called upon to address validity in other empirical settings.

Keywords: Consumer, Customer Relationship, Ethnomethodology, Map of multiple selves, Motivation, Self-relationship congruence, Sense-making

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