

TARGETING RETAIL CONSUMERS THROUGH RELATIONSHIP MARKETING STRATEGIES:

What Consumers Want and What They Will Give to Get It

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Overview

Relationship marketing has been described as the hottest topic on the practitioner level. Some see it as the new holy grail. The basic premise is that by incorporating certain incentives and rewards, a retailer might better be able to attract, maintain and enhance customer yield. While there is evidence of positive consumer response to relationship marketing strategies in the service industry, little is known about receptivity in consumer markets.

This study focuses on attributes that consumers consider important in selecting a retail store. A wide range of store attributes are evaluated. Most are commonly seen in shopping mall stores but a small number are more prevalent in non-mall retail stores.

Approximately 700 shoppers in three large Northeast shopping malls were interviewed. They provided information on the importance of certain retail strategies, and how much information they were willing to share with merchants. Data were also collected on store type and consumer demographics in order to identify any viable segments.

Consumers are not particularly interested in engaging in long term relationships with merchants as measured in this

study. When asked to evaluate the importance of retailing variables, shoppers chose store hours as being the most important to them, followed by on site help, an 800 telephone number and free delivery. Strategies closely associated with relationship building theory such as receiving thank-you notes from merchants, gifts for frequent patronage or personalized mailings were rated as relatively unimportant by mall shoppers.

When queried about their willingness to provide retailers with information, the resistance to relationship building was again evident. Shoppers will share product preferences, but report a general reluctance to share information about birthdays or special occasions, ages of family members or level of income.

Demographics had little effect on consumers' interest in relationship marketing. Further research might examine psychographic attributes of shoppers and their willingness to participate in these marketplace relationships.

The study presented here sought information on importance of attributes in store selection. It may be that relationship marketing is better suited to maintenance or enhancement of consumer relationships.



■ Executive Summary

- Most shoppers in this study evaluated retailing store attributes usually associated with relationship marketing as relatively unimportant to them in selecting a store. Further they report a reluctance to share personal information currently being sought by merchants engaging in relationship marketing campaigns.
- Shoppers consider hours of operation, the availability of on site help, the convenience of an 800 telephone number and free delivery to be the most important of the retailing variables associated with relationship marketing. Some of these may not be typically offered in a mall setting.
- Most consumers report product information, gifts, written expressions of gratitude and personalized mailings to be relatively unimportant to them.
- While men and women, various age segments, income groups, and consumers of different educational backgrounds yielded some significant differences, the final list of variables by mean scores were virtually identical to each other and to the aggregate population.

- Most consumers report a willingness to share product preferences, their gender, age or shopping habits. They are less willing to share hobbies, educational background and their preferred method of payment. They are least willing to tell retailers about birthdays, anniversaries, or other special occasions, ages of family members and their income.
- The order of the list of information consumers are willing to share remains constant across demographic segments.
- Store type had no effect on consumers' evaluations. Hours of operation, on site help, the availability of an 800 telephone number and free delivery topped the list of important features for department stores, discount stores and specialty stores. Shoppers were willing to share product preferences, gender and age but reluctant to share birthdays, ages of family members or income.

■ Introduction

The basic premise of relationship marketing is simply that it is easier and less expensive to keep existing customers than to recruit new ones. Further, a percentage of customers accounts for a disproportionate share of sales. The goal becomes to identify, maintain and increase the yield from the best customers through long term, interactive, value-added relationships. This strategy redefines target marketing, as it depends not only on identification but on consumer participation to be effective. The concept has been applied to industrial marketing, marketing for not-for-profits and most recently to retailing.

Relationship marketing has been described as everything from "prehistoric marketing" (Alonzo, 1994) to a "new holy grail" (Mitchell, 1995) for marketers. The literature includes work on the subject under the terms relationship marketing (Berry, 1983), data base marketing (Alonzo, 1994), one-to-one marketing (Vavara, 1992), retention marketing (Schultz, 1995), and loyalty or affinity marketing (Barlow, 1994). It has been the subject of several books (see especially Vavara, 1992; Peppers and Rogers, 1993) and has been called the hottest topic in direct marketing at the practitioner level (Schultz, 1995).

Leonard L. Berry is generally credited with introducing the term relationship marketing in 1983 in the context of services marketing. He described it as "a strategy to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships" (Berry, 1983). Gonroos proposed a more formal definition in 1989, which included the goal of yielding a profit "through a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises."

The fascination with relating to customers individually rather than *en masse* has attracted the most influential marketers. Philip Kotler (1991) wrote, "we are witnessing today a movement away from a focus on exchange and toward a focus on relationships." The topic has been examined by scores of popular business magazines and in at least three books, the most popular, by Terry Vavara, called *Aftermarketing: How to Keep Customers for Life Through Relationship Marketing* (1992). Much of the current literature on the subject consists of "how to" primers and an abundance of anecdotal information on the miracles attributed to the implementation of relationship marketing strategies.

One academic journal editor noted that while relationship marketing was the hottest topic at the practitioner level, it was virtually ignored by the academic community (Schultz, 1995). As if in response, a special issue on relationship marketing was published by the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* in the Summer issue, 1995.

The focus of that issue is an article by Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) in which they contend that the fundamental reason consumers participate in marketing relationships is that they want to reduce their choices. While many of the authors debate the question of why consumers are attracted to these campaigns, there is no serious examination of the possibility that some consumers may have no interest at all in having long term relationships with a business. Sheth and Parvatiyar mention in passing (on page 256) that, "...advantages of relationship marketing can accrue to a firm if, and only if, consumers are willing and able to engage in relationship patronage."

Virtually all the authors in the special issue acknowledge that extant research explicitly focusing on relationship marketing has centered on business-to-business relationships, and little is known about relationships in consumer markets (Peterson, 1995). Leonard Berry cites a long list of topics for further research and lists as number one, an investigation of what types of consumers are most receptive to relationship marketing (Berry, 1995). This would seem to indicate the need for empirical evidence of consumer receptivity (or lack of receptivity) to relationship marketing strategies.

There is at least one study that disagrees with the underlying premise of most relationship marketing articles. The Henley Centre (Gofton, 1995) interviewed consumers regarding use of the strategy by retailers and uncovered a widespread fear and suspicion of company motives. They report that members of the public do not see themselves as having an ongoing relationship with a company, and don't want one. The Henley Report warns that retailers may be jumping on a bandwagon, and that relationship marketing might be no more than a fad. Instead, they advise retailers to focus on their products, a strategy that will ultimately keep consumers coming back.

It is with this in mind that the following questions are posed to guide this research:

1. Do consumers desire to enter into long term relationships with retailers? If so, do they seek these relationships with all kinds of retailers, or only certain ones?

2. What, if anything, are consumers willing to give retailers in the form of personal information that would help retailers create a data base?

3. Are some consumer segments more receptive to relationship marketing campaigns than others?

This investigation will provide information on consumer receptivity (or lack thereof) to specific retail strategies commonly used in relationship marketing campaigns. Additionally, consumer attitudes toward relationship marketing in different venues and industries will be examined in order to provide retailers with specific information about variations in receptivity.

Importance of the following retail variables will be studied: Telephone ordering, delivery service, an 800 telephone line, extended hours of operation, availability of product information, personalized mailings, alterations, lessons/seminars, expressions of gratitude, gifts for frequent patronage, etc. Willingness of consumers to provide the following kinds of information will be examined: Age, gender, educational background, income, ages of family members, dates of special occasions, hobbies, product preferences, buying habits, and frequency of shopping trips.

All these variables have been suggested either in the theoretical model employed for this study or from the literature available on effective relationship marketing strategies.

■ Methodology

A non-experimental survey design and mall intercept methodology was utilized to investigate target marketing through relationship marketing strategies. This design and method are particularly effective for securing attitudes and opinions from consumers while allowing for interaction in an appropriate surrounding. Three large Northeast shopping malls provided the researchers with a table and chairs in the mall proper for the eight-week study period.

A convenience sample with a systematic random selection procedure was conducted. Every fifth shopper was approached and asked to participate. Declines were replaced by the next available shopper. Interviews were conducted on a variety of days including weekends, and at a variety of times in order to generate the most representative sample. The final sample included 684 shoppers (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE*

Sex	
Male	297 (44%)
Female	372 (56%)
Age	
18–25	272 (41%)
26–35	143 (21%)
36–45	117 (18%)
46–55	66 (10%)
56–65	39 (6%)
over 65	30 (5%)
Marital Status	
Married	230 (35%)
Single	397 (60%)
Income	
under \$15,000	89 (14%)
\$15,001–\$19,999	46 (7%)
\$20,000–\$29,000	99 (16%)
\$30,000–\$39,999	107 (17%)
\$40,000–\$50,000	97 (15%)
over \$50,000	202 (32%)
Education	
8th grade or less	12 (2%)
Some high school	45 (7%)
Graduated high school	154 (23%)
Some college	215 (32%)
Graduated college	180 (27%)
Postgraduate work	70 (10%)

*Please note that the large Northeast mall used for data collection is located less than one mile from a major University which might explain the large number of younger shoppers.

Each interview consisted of the shopper filling out a detailed three-page questionnaire. The first page asks the respondent to evaluate the importance of particular strategies consistent with the theoretical framework and often mentioned as components of relationship marketing, such as free delivery, extended hours, personalized mailings, etc. The second page focuses on the consumer's willingness to provide information often sought by relationship marketers such as dates of special occasions, shopping preferences, and hobbies. The final page includes general questions about relationship marketing and demographics.

■ Theoretical Framework

Several definitions of relationship marketing have been proposed (see especially Berry, 1983 and 1995; Gonroos, 1989; Kotler, 1991), but only

one attempt has been made to operationalize the concept for empirical study at the consumer level. A recent marketing study (McCort, 1994) made use of Carl Rogers' theory of interpersonal relations, in order to define and evaluate the extent of a relationship marketing campaign implemented by a non-profit organization. Based on Rogers, McCort operationalized the concept of a relationship marketing campaign.

Carl Rogers is a humanistic psychologist best known for his person-centered theory of psychology. He is concerned with the development of strong relationships with his patients as a means of fostering well-being. Rogers proposes that individual behavior is directed by three basic needs. The first, *maintenance*, is the desire to maintain the status quo and must be overcome to establish a new relationship. This is accomplished through a commitment to sincere and honest communication, and by being accessible and accountable. Rogers' second need, *enhancement*, refers to one's desire to grow and learn. Education and training are examples of relationship enhancement. The need for *positive regard* completes Rogers' list. A relationship should leave the participants feeling loved, liked and accepted. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation would foster feelings of positive regard.

According to McCort, for a relationship to develop consumers must be receptive to these new overtures from retailers and must view the components (as described by Rogers) as important in order for the relationship to flourish. Using this study as a model, each element of Rogers' theory was operationalized either as in the McCort study or consistent with it. The only variations in measurement from the McCort study involve strategies specific to service organizations replaced by corresponding retailing strategies. (See Table 2 for details on operationalizing a relationship strategy.)

Maintenance

In order to begin a new relationship, one must overcome the individual's need to maintain the status quo. This is done initially by developing a posture of accessibility and accountability, and by personal communications. Accessibility is operationalized by the availability of an 800 phone number, extended store hours, delivery service and ability to order by telephone. Store hours and the availability of delivery service were added for this study based on their use as indicators of accessibility in the marketing literature (Wells, 1996).

Accountability is expressed by offering consumers access to information and responding to consumer needs. Providing product information such as nutritional information at a restaurant or product information relating to country of origin are examples of an organization's attempt at accountability. (This replicates the McCort measure on this dimension.)

TABLE 2. OPERATIONALIZING A RELATIONSHIP STRATEGY

Maintenance	Enhancement	Positive Regard
Accessibility	On site service department*	Written expressions of gratitude
800 phone number	Alterations*	Gifts for frequent patronage
Extended store hours*	Lessons and Instructions	
Delivery service*		
Telephone ordering		
Hours of operation*		
Accountability		
Product information on nutrition/country of origin etc.		
Commitment		
Personalized mailings		
Reminders of special occasions*		

*indicates replacement of a service (not-for-profit) strategy used in the McCort study with a similar retail strategy

While commitment might be implicit in being accessible and accountable, a direct measure of commitment is included in the McCort study. Frequency of personalized communications is considered an indicator of commitment to a relationship in the service sector. The study presented here solicits consumer response to personalized mailings regarding special sales promotions as well as those related to birthdays, reminders of special occasions, or notification of the availability of new merchandise. (The addition of reminders for special occasions is often cited in the literature as a component of relationship building.)

Enhancement

Retailers can enhance their relationship with consumers by providing training, education, and value-added services such as alterations. On site service departments, free lessons, and knowledgeable sales people can all be viewed as enhancement. (The McCort study also focused on training and education but looked specifically at volunteers as the target of a relationship strategy in a service organization.)

Positive Regard

A relationship strategy suggests that, to foster positive regard, retailers demonstrate their appreciation for customer patronage. Thank-you notes, expressions of gratitude or gifts for frequent patronage might be

perceived by consumers as a display of positive regard. (This is the same measure used in the McCort study.)

The McCort study rated campaigns based on their inclusion of all the strategies mentioned. Not-for-profits that did not send thank-you notes or gifts, for example, were negatively evaluated. Like most of his predecessors in the field, McCort also assumes that consumers want the kind of interpersonal relationship described by Carl Rogers.

■ Findings

Importance of Relationship Marketing Variables

If a relationship involves all of these dimensions as Carl Rogers and McCort surmised, consumers interested in relationships with retailers should deem all of them to be important. In the first part of the study presented here, consumers were asked to rate the importance of each of the fourteen variables in the model on a four point scale where 4=very important, 3=important, 2=unimportant, and 1=very unimportant. Mean scores are presented with the final ratings in Table 3.

The results indicate that Carl Rogers' dimensions of accessibility and enhancement (as operationalized here) are considered the most important to consumers. A closer look at the mean scores of specific variables reveals a list of very traditional retail strategies that consumers consider important.

TABLE 3. IMPORTANCE RATINGS
(with mean scores based on scale from 1-4) N = 684

1. Hours of operation (3.407)
2. On site help (3.370)
3. An 800 telephone number (3.261)
4. Free delivery (3.191)
5. Lessons/instructions (2.948)
6. Early openings (2.909)
7. Personal communication (notification of new merchandise, reminders of special occasions) (2.904)
8. Personalized mailings regarding specials of particular interest to you (2.904)
9. Gifts for patronage (2.892)
10. Thank-you notes (2.837)
11. Product information (2.696)
12. Order by telephone (2.685)
13. Alterations for a fee (2.513)
14. Delivery with a fee (2.278)

Hours of operation is considered the most important of the 14 variables. The second most important is the availability of on site help. The convenience of an 800 telephone number and free delivery complete the top four, which share mean scores of over 3.0 on a 4.0 scale (all rated as important or very important).

Three of these four variables describe accessibility, while on site help is an example of an enhancement. It is interesting to note that the lowest mean scores were assigned to the variables in the categories of accountability, positive regard and commitment. Consumers report product information, gifts, written expressions of gratitude, and personalized mailings to be relatively unimportant to them. Unfortunately these are the very strategies now being touted as the linchpins of a relationship marketing campaign.

Consumers rated accessibility (hours of operation, an 800 telephone number, free delivery), and enhancement (on site help) above all other variables in this study. When demographic segments were examined, the same pattern continued. While men and women, various age segments, income groups and consumers of different educational backgrounds yielded some significant differences, the final list of variables by mean scores were virtually identical to each other and to the aggregate population. Hours of operation, on site help, an 800 telephone number and free delivery continued to top the list of important variables regardless of demographics.

There are some statistically significant differences in the way different segments responded. Note that women rated delivery, an 800 telephone number, personalized mailings, and gifts for frequent patronage as more important than did their male counterparts. Men, however, rated product information as more important than women did. Younger consumers rated hours of operation, expression of gratitude, gifts for frequent patronage, and personal communication as more important than did older consumers. Older consumers rated ability to order by phone and availability of product information as more important. See Tables 3 and 4 for importance ratings of the 14 variables discussed and significant demographic differences.

Willingness to Provide Information

The second part of this study examined consumer willingness to provide retailers with information required to generate data bases and interact with consumers in more meaningful ways. Shoppers were asked how willing they were to provide each of 10 pieces of information to their fa-

TABLE 4. SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN IMPORTANCE RATINGS BY DEMOGRAPHICS

	Sex	Education	Marital Status	Income	Age
order/phone					*
free delivery	*				
del.. w/fee				*	
800#				*	
hours					*
early opening					
prod. information	*	*	*		*
personalized	*				
alterations/fee					
lessons		*			
on site help					
thank-you notes			*		*
person. comm.					*

*indicates significant differences on chi-square tests where $p < .05$

favorite retail store. All responses were recorded on a four point scale with 4=very willing, 3=willing, 2=unwilling and 1=very unwilling. Mean scores for the entire population yielded the list in Table 5.

Consumers reported strong willingness to share product preferences, their gender, age or shopping habits. They were less willing to share hobbies, educational background and their preferred method of payment. They were least willing to tell retailers birthdays, anniversaries, or other special occasions, ages of family members and their income. Retailers eager to build data bases filled with a consumer's special occasions in order to generate personalized mailings might take heed, since all 700 shoppers in this study reported a reluctance to participate in that plan.

Again, demographics play some role, although the order of the list remains constant across segments. Statistically, women were more willing than men to provide ages of family members, dates of special occasions and product preferences. Consumers with at least some college were significantly more willing to provide their income, ages of family members and dates of special occasions. Married shoppers were more willing to share their educational background and ages of family members, while singles were more willing to reveal dates of special occasions, product preferences and buying habits. See Table 6 for significant demographic differences in ratings on consumer willingness to provide information.

TABLE 5. WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION

(with mean scores based on scale from 1–4) N = 684

-
1. Product preferences (3.215)
 2. Gender (3.121)
 3. Your age (3.024)
 4. Shopping habits (3.018)
 5. Hobbies (2.945)
 6. Preferred method of payment (2.800)
 7. Dates of special occasions (2.710)
 8. Ages of family members (2.650)
 9. Income (2.257)
-

Store Type

Each respondent was asked to consider the answers within the context of a particular store type. One third of the surveys focused on department stores, one third on discount stores and one third on speciality stores. The following examples were provided as a description of each type in order to avoid any misinterpretation:

Department stores: Filene's, J.C. Penney, Sears

Discount stores: K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Ames

Specialty stores: The Gap, Radio Shack, Bed & Bath

Mean scores were compared for the store types using a T-Test. No significant differences were found between department and discount stores in terms of what consumers viewed as important or what information they were willing to share with retailers. Significant differences were found in the case of specialty stores. Extended store hours was not considered to be as important as in the other store types nor was receiving gifts for frequent patronage. There was also more willingness to report one's age in a specialty store environment. With the exception of these variables, the final ranking of mean scores for all three types of stores were identical to those for the aggregate sample. Hours of operation, on site help, the availability of an 800 telephone number, and free delivery topped all three lists of important features. All shoppers were willing to share product preferences, gender and age but reluctant to share birthdays, ages of family members, or income.

Relationship Marketing by Industry

Shoppers were asked how important it was that different types of retailers get to know more about them in order to serve them better. Six industries were evaluated on a four point scale where 4=very important,

TABLE 6. SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION BY DEMOGRAPHICS

	Sex	Education	Marital Status	Income	Age
your age					
gender					
education			*		
income		*		*	
ages of family	*	*	*		*
dates of spec. occ.	*	*	*		
hobbies		*			*
prod. preferences	*	*	*		
method of payment		*	*		
shopping habits					

*indicates significant differences on chi-square tests where $p < .05$

3=important, 2=unimportant, and 1=very unimportant. The overall response for the entire population was that it was more important in the apparel industry, grocery stores, and in consumer electronics, but less important in the automotive industry, home furnishings, or furniture stores for retailers to know more about them. It is important to note that the mean score(s) for importance in all cases were between 2.0 and 2.7. There is certainly not a strong endorsement here for relationship strategies across industries. See Table 7 for the importance of relationship marketing by industry.

■ Implications and Conclusion

Consumer response to the notion of engaging in long term relationships with retailers appears to be less than enthusiastic. Twenty four variables derived from the theoretical and pragmatic literature were evaluated by

TABLE 7. IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING BY INDUSTRY

(with mean scores based on scale from 1-4) N=684

1. Apparel (2.809)
2. Grocery (2.593)
3. Consumer Electronics (2.541)
4. Home Furnishings (2.488)
5. Automotive (2.423)
6. Furniture (2.397)

approximately 700 mall shoppers from three different locations, over two states. Respondents rated extended store hours, on site help, an 800 telephone number and free delivery as being of greatest importance to them. The more interpersonal relationship-inducing variables such as receiving expressions of gratitude, personalized mailings, etc., were rated as being relatively unimportant.

This resistance continued to be evident when shoppers were asked to rate their willingness to provide retailers with information. They reported some willingness to share product preferences, their age or gender. They were, however, most reluctant to report birthdays or special occasions, ages of family members or income levels.

When they were queried about different retail venues, their answer remained the same. Consumers do not see relationships with retailers as important. The words of Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) take on greater significance in light of these findings:

“...advantages of relationship marketing can accrue to a firm if, and only if, consumers are willing and able to engage in relationship patronage.” (p.256)

This study does not support the wholesale plunge into relationship marketing currently being promoted in the business literature. It would be foolish to deny that merchants who make an effort to know and service their customers better will be more successful. Gonroos (1994) quotes a Middle Eastern proverb, “As a merchant, you’d better have a friend in every town.” The wisdom of those words still applies. The real issue is whether or not consumers at large have the time or the inclination to participate fully in relationships at retail stores.

Consumers clearly reported in this study that they want accessibility and assistance. They have said plainly they do not want to share personal information about their families or finances. Perhaps the Henley study offered the best advice after interviews with consumers had yielded similar results: focus on your product.

The results reported here support that notion of retailers spending time and effort on more traditional retailing strategies. It may not be prudent to go down the road of creating data bases and engaging in personalized mailing campaigns with the hope of building long term relationships. Relationship marketing between retailers and consumers might prove to be a case of unrequited love.

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