

Enlightened Communication Is the Key to Building Relationships

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ABSTRACT. The role of communication in relationship marketing is often presented as crucial, and yet, specifics of theories and concepts from the field of communication are scant. Furthermore, despite the intuitive appeal and face validity of relationship marketing and its large-scale implementation, both the theory and practice of relationship marketing seem to be fraught with problems that limit its impact in the marketplace. Consequently, the relationship-oriented approach to marketing threatens to become a case of an espoused theory instead of a theory in use. The authors contend that the complexity of the relationship marketing process exceeds the capabilities of its theories in use and suggest the broadening of the theoretical foundation of relationship marketing and consequent enhancement of its practical application by incorporating theories and ideas from the field of communication. The predominantly relational orientation of communication makes it a depository of concepts and ideas that can illuminate the nature of relationships and add to the conceptual and empirical basis of relationship marketing.

KEYWORDS. Communication theory, dialogue, narratives, paradigm shift

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The field of marketing has long recognized the importance of the communication process in building relationships (Barnes, 2001; Blattberg, Getz, & Thomas, 2001; Curry & Curry, 2000; Evans & Laskin, 1994; McKenzie, 2001; Reichheld, 2001; Rust & Oliver, 1998; Temporal & Trott, 2001). The heightened role of communication in the new marketplace has prompted some authors to make the reflexive claim that marketing is communication and communication is marketing (Shimp, 1997), or to acknowledge the central role of communication in marketing (Drobis, 1998; Duncan, 1998; Holt, 2002; Hutton & Mulhern, 2003; McKenzie, 2001). Communication has become especially salient in relationship marketing (RM), which is focused on building relationships with customers and stakeholders and which is gradually being expanded into a systemic paradigm that encompasses relationships, networks, and interaction among various stakeholders.

For the purpose of this article, two observations warrant special attention. First, despite the crucial role of communication in RM, references in marketing and RM to specific ideas and research from the field of communication are rare. Second, despite RM's appeal and its large-scale implementation, in reality RM seems to be fraught with practical and theoretical problems. The relationship-oriented approach often becomes a case of the talk-walk gap, or an espoused theory instead of a theory in use. Although we do not intend to retrace the arguments raised by D. Morris (1995) in his polemic "Do Marketing Professors Really Know Marketing?" we argue that what many marketing scholars have used to understand the marketing process, namely communication and relationship building, is less than adequate to advance the field. In essence, the problem is that the complexity of the RM process exceeds the capabilities of its theories in use to adequately represent it (see Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; and Funkhouser & Parker, 1999, for treatments of incompatibility dilemmas). We contend that RM requires a much broader theoretical framework than the one that has traditionally been informed by sociological, psychological, organizational, and exchange- and transaction-based theories.

Our aim in this article is to introduce contemporary communication theory into RM and suggest the ways in which communication theories and ideas can contribute to developing RM to its full potential. The field of communication underscores relations and interaction (see Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2007; Kaplan, 1994; Makau & Arnett, 1997; Matson & Montagu, 1967; Shotter, 2000; J. Stewart, 1994) and provides a virtually endless repository of ideas that can contribute to understanding relationships and can add to the conceptual basis of RM. The advancement of

RM within the framework of the New Economy centered around relationships, networks, and interaction requires a strong and broad theoretical foundation. Without such a foundation, RM may remain trapped by conceptual and theoretical constraints of the old communication paradigm—a misstep committed by management and organizational theorists, as Axley noted back in 1984. Essentially, in this view, communication is a relatively facile process whereby a marketer acts as a sender and a target market, the receiver. The endeavor is to send the right message through the most effective channel to the target market to effectively elicit a purchasing response from consumers. In fact, even the concept of persuasion (an early conceptual foundation of communication) in the field of marketing has never grown very far past this traditional exchange view (see Tannen, 1995; G. A. Williams & Miller, 2002). Its metaphorical appeal notwithstanding, communication, when understood in this narrow way, can become an obstacle for further development of RM.

This article proposes ways to expand the theoretical foundation of RM and advance its practical implementation. In order to provide a basis for subsequent discussion, we begin by describing the relational orientation of marketing and the challenges that RM has been facing. Next we offer ways in which marketing's received view of communication can be emancipated from the conduit conceptualization by explaining the communication-as-process concept and examining specifically Reddy's toolmakers model. We then show how specific communication theories can help advance both the theory and practice of RM. For the sake of clarity and in order to avoid unnecessary conceptual incoherence, throughout the article we refer to RM as a perspective oriented toward building relationships with customers and provide examples that reflect such an orientation.

THE RELATIONAL WORLD OF MARKETING

The modern-day marketplace is rife with change and complexity. Message impact and credibility have decreased, customer expectations have risen and their expertise has been significantly improved, the customer base has been fragmented, and the number of "me-too" (or practically identical) products is growing (Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Hutton, 1996; Hutton & Mulhern, 2003). The larger social milieu has also changed, leading to more self-oriented customers in a fragmented, confusing, and highly complex postmodern culture. New developments have resulted in unprecedented competition and consequent efforts to build loyalty and retain the

existing customer base. Replacing defecting customers has been proven to be a costly endeavor (Barnes, 2001), and although there are new and viable strategies to execute replacement, they remain less cost effective than retaining existing customers. The strategy that has been proven to be the most effective in the long run is developing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with customers.

The idea of relationship building, supported by the reality of the new marketplace and promoted by conceptualization of the RM paradigm, has had a broad and intuitive appeal. Companies have realized that adopting principles of building reciprocal, long-lasting relationships with one's customers is an effective way of doing business (Deshpandé & Farley, 2002; Grönroos, 1998; Hutton, 1996; Johnson, 1998; McKenzie, 2001). The relational orientation can also be viewed as part of a broader approach to doing business based on the idea of interactions, relationships, and networks, which has led some authors (see Hutton & Mulhern, 2003; Johnson, 1998; McKenzie, 2001; Solomon, 2001) to refer to the 21st-century organizational model as the relationship-oriented enterprise.

Rethinking Relationship in RM

Over the years, it has become evident that building and maintaining relationships is a difficult endeavor. The relationship orientation and the implementation of RM strategies in business-to-customer relationships seem to be fraught with problems. In some ways, RM is still what Argyris et al. (1985), within their concept of action science, referred to as an *espoused theory*, that is, a theory that is professed as an actionable theory although the evidence of its viability cannot be produced. Theories in use, in contrast, are actionable theories that are used and tested regularly and reliably in the crucible of action.

Marketing literature addresses various problematic results of relationship-building efforts. Denove and Powers (2006), Johnson (1998), and D. W. Stewart (1998) noted that the number of firms that are truly customer oriented is small and that the relationships between companies and customers are in many instances troubled. Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick (1998) voiced the concerns of the customers when they described the present-day marketplace as "confusing, stressful, insensitive, and manipulative" (p. 44). They noted that in the new marketplace customers "feel trapped and victimized" (p. 44). Duncan (1998) pointed to the deleterious consequences of not following the right guidelines for managing customer interaction and developing a satisfying long-lasting relationship. Garcia de

Madariaga and Valor (2007) showed how relationships with the stakeholders in the companies they have studied have not been developed despite the official implementation of stakeholder management systems.

Real-life examples of a misguided understanding of building and maintaining relationships abound. One need only look at the teleservice industry as an example of how not to communicate with customers. The industry's metric of completed calls per hour illustrates how the conduit metaphor of communication has impeded relationship building. Value and reward are placed on ending calls quickly instead of adequately addressing each individual customer's needs. This is most recently illustrated by the rush to manage customer service offshore where cultural and language differences estrange customers and destroy the company-customer relationship. In another example, the senior management of a company decided to implement RM principles by simultaneously stepping up the visits of marketing and sales representatives to customers and customer contact via teleservice representatives (for mailings with response incentives and customer satisfaction studies, see Pettegrew, Midili, & McGuff, 2004). The message that the company wanted to send to its customers was this: We care about you, and we want to build a relationship with you. But, as has been noted by communication scholars (Axley, 1984; Fortini-Campbell, 1998; Redding, 1972), it is not the intended message that counts but what the receiver interprets the message to be. Customers were swamped with missives and attention they neither needed nor wanted. As a result of what customers perceived to be intrusive behavior on the part of the company, the previous exchange relationship between the company and its customers was now imperiled through high-frequency, low-quality communication, all in the name of relationship building.

In an era of the new RM paradigm (see Barnes, 2001; Grönroos, 1998; Gronstedt, 1996; Gummesson, 2002; Johnson, 1998; McKenzie, 2001; Schultz & Wang, 1998; Shimp, 1997; Varey & Ballantyne, 2005), similar blunders seem to be the rule rather than the exception. Despite the professed implementation of RM and efforts at relationship building, the actionable potential of RM has not been validated. The critique of RM, unfortunately, does not end with its unsavory application but must be extended to the very theoretical foundations that legitimize these practices.

RM has been criticized for its theoretical and conceptual shortcomings by a number of authors. Coviello, Brodie, and Munro (1997) and Petrof (1997) raised concerns as to the meaning of RM, whereas Barnes (2001) and O'Malley, Patterson, and Evans (1997) viewed it as a discipline with numerous unresolved critical limitations. A number of authors (Berry,

1995; Christy, Oliver, & Penn, 1996; Coviello et al., 1997; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; O'Malley & Tynan, 2000; Palmer, 2000) have pointed to the complexities of a transaction/relationship continuum rather than a one-size-fits-all relationship approach. Eiriz and Wilson (2006) discussed the tendency to discuss RM within the framework of utilitarian exchanges. San Martin, Gutierrez, and Camarero (2004) noted that customers' points of view have seldom been taken into consideration and that the RM literature "has paid little attention to the development of relevant theories or models that could serve as a basis for the analysis of long-term relationships" (p. 54). Gummesson (2002) deemed the visibility of relationships and the interest they have garnered encouraging, but he also found two major problems in implementing RM: insufficient knowledge of the RM foundations and the grounding of relationship techniques, for the most part, in marketing management rather than in RM.

It is our contention that the underlying problem begins at the theoretical level and becomes operationalized with taken-for-granted practices in a negative reinforcement cycle. An organization that espouses building strong consumer relationships normally uses outbound marketing methods to reach customers, who, in return, are not responsive and often feel overwhelmed. The organization responds by increasing its telemarketing and Web-based efforts. Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) characterized such communication practices as "more of the same" and believed they seldom lead to positive relationship development. The relationship reaches a negative reinforcement point when further misguided practices put the relationship beyond the point of salvaging. In order to prevent the negative reinforcement cycle from spiraling out of control, experts must examine and repositulate the underlying problem in such a manner that will allow for a positive reinforcement cycle to emerge.

COMMUNICATION AS A PROCESS

Until the mid-1900s, the dominant model presented communication as a means of transferring thoughts, ideas, and feelings from one person to another. Communication was perceived as a unidirectional flow of information through a specific channel, preferably with no noise or interference. The sender of the message was expected to craft a "perfect" message and direct it to the receiver, who would, it was hoped, receive the complete message and understand it in the manner in which it had been intended to be understood. Both the simplicity and the preciseness of the communication-as-transfer model may have contributed to its original appeal. It was logical,

unambiguous, and mathematically perfect, as if reflecting a formula from the Newtonian universe. Over time, it became clear that such a model lacked the vibrancy and the dynamics of the actual communication event that develops among interlocutors. Its popularity gradually waned as the idea of communication as process began to emerge.

Berlo (1960) was among the first to posit communication as a process consisting of mutually interdependent elements. Paralleling the developments in the physical sciences in the first half of the 20th century that brought about the process view of reality, Berlo described communication as “dynamic, on-going, ever-changing, continuous” (p. 24). The sequence of events in the communication process is not linear nor at rest. The events are in motion, and they interact with one another in such a manner that each element affects other elements. The effectiveness of messages is linked with “a complex of factors” that includes the receiver of the message.

According to Berlo (1960), there are three core elements to communication as process: (a) simultaneity—people have the capacity to be and usually are senders and receivers of messages at the same time; (b) temporal unfolding—like relationship building, communication is much more than a single interaction or exchange; it transpires and must be understood over time; (c) behavioral interdependence—each party’s behavior depends on other participants’ behaviors. Communication is, thus, a relational and interdependent process that is performed over time, has a distinct and influential history, and depends on all the participants involved in a series of communication events.

The differences between the communication-as-transfer model and the communication-as-process model are much more than a matter of theoretical distinction. They also have an impact on human thought processes and on human action. Understanding communication in too simplistic terms, as a transmission of a message from the sender to the receiver, may actually have negative consequences on relationships with customers. Axley (1984) showed that treating communication as a transfer of messages and, thus, disregarding the robust role of the receiver contributes directly to organizational ineffectiveness. In the conflict resolution arena, Krauss and Morsella (2000) explained that the unidirectional encoder–decoder model of communication is restrictive and can lead to misunderstanding and result in limiting one’s scope of action. Probably the most in-depth explanation of the differences between the communication-as-transfer model and the communication-as-process model and their respective implications can be found in Reddy’s (1979) juxtaposition of two models metaphorically presented as the conduit metaphor and the toolmakers model.

The Conduit Metaphor Versus the Toolmakers Model

According to Reddy (1979), within the semantic structure he referred to as the conduit metaphor, communication is viewed as a means of transferring human thoughts and feelings. The sender of the message applies his or her skills in crafting a message that best reflects his or her thoughts, ideas, or emotions and sends it to the receiver, who then extracts the meaning from the message. Reddy stated that the seemingly facile process that involves a proactive sender and a passive receiver is based on a logic that operates within an inherently faulty framework for conceptualizing communication. It objectifies meaning, as if thoughts were similar to tangible objects that have an external reality. It also simplifies communication as an almost effortless system. The result is the mistaken belief that “the more signals we can create, and the more signals we can preserve, the more ideas we ‘transfer’ and ‘store’” (Reddy, 1979, p. 188). The final outcome is less effective rather than more effective communication. He further suggested that the reason why there have been no “substantive improvements” in human communication, despite advancements in communication technologies, can be attributed to the limitations of the model. An explanation of a model Reddy used as a counterpart to the conduit metaphor—the *toolmakers paradigm*—can help illustrate the difference between the two approaches to communication and further illuminate the communication requirements for RM.

Drawing parallels with mathematical information theory, Reddy posited communication as a complex system that includes a nonrandom selection from a set of alternatives. The copy of the set of alternatives must exist both at the sending and receiving end of the system, as well as in a code linking the alternatives to physical signals. The resulting “a priori shared context” (Reddy, 1979, p. 181) makes communication possible. The message, as a sequence of alternatives, that is chosen at the transmitting end is related by the code in the form of signals. At the receiving end, the message will be recreated if interference levels are nonexistent or low. Because the receiving end possesses a copy of the original set of alternatives, or the “repertoire,” it can make the same selections that were made at the transmitting end. The signals, that is, the “marks and sounds,” serve for recreating the original message at the receiving end. The receiving end can make the same selections that were made at the transmitting end by using “the relationships of the code and the copy of the original set of alternatives” (Reddy, 1979, p. 181).

Communication is, thus, a rather complex process that requires effort on the part of all the parties. Rather than being an almost mathematically

precise and relatively undemanding activity, as the conduit metaphor suggests, communication requires considerable effort from all those involved in the process of creating meaning. Only if all participants take an active part in the interaction can communication become meaningful, intelligible, and rewarding.

Another aspect of the toolmakers paradigm warrants attention. Successful communication not only requires an effortful and active participation of all the parties, it also requires increased levels of organization. Reddy explained that the toolmakers paradigm is in accord with the principle of entropy as defined by the second law of thermodynamics. According to the second law, every organized system will start falling into disarray if left to its own devices. "Successful human communication involves an increase in organization, which cannot happen spontaneously or of its own accord," wrote Reddy (1979, p. 175).

The implications of the toolmakers versus conduit models for marketing are twofold. First, metaphorically speaking, RM is a toolmakers model. It is a process that includes the simultaneity of both parties as sender and receiver. Rather than being passive recipients of messages, receivers need and expect to participate actively in the communication process. Disregarding the active role of the message target may result in the ineffectiveness of the communication process and, consequently, negatively affect relationship development. The cost of this is customer dissatisfaction and disaffection—too high a price for a business to pay in the present-day marketplace in which many companies are vying for the same customers.

The second implication regards entropy and the need for infusing the communication system with new energy in the form of new sets of alternatives and corresponding signals in order to raise the levels of organization and, consequently, accomplish more successful communication. Many RM efforts have been made toward this goal, but, unfortunately, the underlying theoretical foundation based on the metaphorical conduit was an impediment to achieving higher levels of organization.

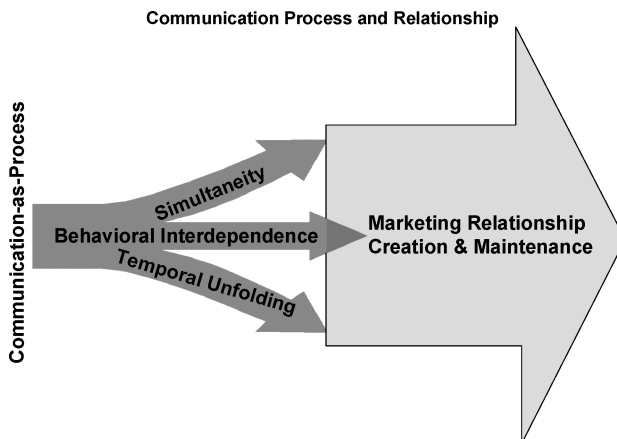
Incommensurability of Paradigms

Historically, the exchange view of marketing has been blind to the communication-as-process perspective. Marketing has traditionally been based on communication practices that disregard the input of the receiver of the message and the incredible complexity of the interaction. The field of marketing is replete with textbooks that treat communication in this

way (Hutton & Mulhern, 2003). Just as a skillful speaker, according to the conduit metaphor, knows how to capture a good idea into words or pack a thought in a way that can be easily transferred, a good marketer knows how to capture a good marketing pitch and transfer it to consumers as a unidirectional message. Even RM has all but disregarded the complexity and simultaneity of communication roles of parties in marketing relationships; it is as if vendors or consumers could not multitask the roles of both sender and receiver at the same time. In the times of mass production and advertising through the mass media, one-way marketing and the underlying unidirectional communication model seemed to work fine. Changing conditions in the marketplace and more savvy and self-conscious consumers, as noted earlier in the text, require not an incrementally different marketing approach but an altogether new approach based on a more enlightened and dynamic understanding of the communication process (see Figure 1). Any view of relationships based on the conduit metaphor is unable to provide a theoretical and practical basis for an in-depth understanding of essential relational development and maintenance features.

The problem, thus, can be viewed as one of what Polanyi (1958) referred to as the incommensurability of paradigms: The communication requirements of the old and new marketing paradigms are not congruent. In many cases, companies are simply adjusting the old communication

FIGURE 1. Implications of the communication-as-process theoretical foundation.



approach that worked well in the past to meet the requirements of the new marketplace. As a result, the anticipated “deep change” (Senge et al., 1999) or second order change (Argyris, 1994, 1995; Watzlawick, 1978; Watzlawick et al., 1974), with a leap in meaningful quality, remains out of reach, and relationships with customers are no closer at hand. In the communication literature this is termed a *pseudo-mutual* relationship and, as we have pointed out, the marketing literature is beginning to reveal that true customer relationships are fewer than companies espouse. This becomes the communication equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. The relational gloss looks and sounds good, but the relationship ship is still sinking. It is not surprising, then, that so many companies see the results of their RM efforts as unsatisfactory or nonexistent.

In order to enact a meaningful change and build rewarding customer relationships, companies need new perspectives that can offer an understanding of the principles of communication and relationship building and help provide a theoretical basis for establishing and maintaining relationships. A discipline that offers such perspectives is communication, with its interest in theory building and its orientation toward dialogue, interaction, and relationship building and maintenance.

THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Since the 1960s, the interest of communication scholars has been increasingly focused on relational processes (Bochner, 1984). Currently, the received view of communication is decidedly transactional, ongoing, and relational (see, e.g., Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Makau & Arnett, 1997; Matson & Montagu, 1967; Pålshaugen, 1998; Shotter, 2000; J. Stewart, 1994). The strength of communication as an applied discipline (see, e.g., Miller, 1995; Miller & Sunnafrank, 1984; Seibold, 1995; Wood, 1995) further expands the potential of communication to help elucidate the complex and dynamic world of relationships. The relational thrust of the field of communication and its strength as an applied discipline make it an admirable source for understanding the nature of relationships and a reliable foundation for illuminating relationship-oriented marketing. In order to substantiate the above claims, in the following section we address a rich and inherently communicative theory that is only beginning to draw attention from RM scholars and practitioners.

THEORIES OF DIALOGUE

Rooted in the teachings and practices of the Ancients, dialogue has taken on a variety of shapes and forms that in many cases depart from its original meaning of an enlightening intellectual pursuit aimed at discovering new meanings. Dialogue nowadays covers a wide range of concepts that more or less stem from the conceptualizations of three major theorists on dialogue. Probably the best known of them is Martin Buber, a European scholar and philosopher, whose view of dialogue included a strong ethical and spiritual dimension (see Buber, 1955, 1957, 1958a, 1958b, 1965, 1967; Friedman, 1986, 1994). For David Bohm, a physicist enthralled by the seemingly unencumbered dance of subatomic particles at the quantum level, dialogue was not only meaningful, open, and sincere communication, but also a means of enhancing consciousness and resolving ills that plague humankind (see Bohm, 1980, 1996). The third major theorist of dialogue, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), viewed dialogue as rule governed yet unfettered and as an endless potential of relations that exist both at the level of utterances and at the level of human relationships.

Over the past decade, the concept of dialogue has begun to make its way into organizational and marketing scholarship. Organizational theorists view dialogue as a vital means for effective communication in organizations (see, e.g., Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1999; Simmons, 1999; Yankelovich, 1999). Marketing theorists have also shown a considerable interest in dialogue. The word *dialogue*, either explicitly mentioned or implied by referring to the values it generally stands for—respect for customers, meaningful relationships, and synergy—is finding its way into the latest scholarship on marketing.

McKenzie (2001) cited dialogue as one of the three components of his relationship management framework. For him, dialogue is a means of creating relationships with customers based on conversations: “The objective of dialogue is to create the value that both the customer and the enterprise seek. Dialogue means working together, it means sharing resources, and it involves an offer” (p. 80). Gronstedt (1996) wrote that “integrating communication activities with the entire system of stakeholders requires a dialogic approach by which the stakeholders are recognized as receivers as well as senders of information” (p. 295). The concept of synergy, which is similar to Bohm’s (1980) notion of the power of collective thought, can be encountered relatively frequently in the marketing literature. For example, Lutz (1996), Duncan and Caywood (1996), and Shimp (1997) mentioned synergy as a powerful force that is more than the sum of its parts. The

most detailed explanation so far as to the meaning of dialogue and the relevance of understanding RM as a dialogic practice was provided by Varey and Ballantyne (2005). They proposed that marketing is dialogical in nature and provided details of dialogue that set it apart from monological communication.

For the most part, explicit or implicit references to dialogue and dialogic communication in the marketing literature address dialogue as an important ingredient in building relationships. More substantive and detailed explanations of what dialogue is and how it works are scant. Specifics of the applicability potential of various aspects and conceptualizations of dialogue are, as a rule, absent from marketing literature. In this respect, the field of communication can provide considerable assistance. Theories of dialogue in general are relationship- and interaction-based communication theories, with theoretical, explanatory, and transformative implications. They can provide a valuable theoretical basis for understanding the nature of human communication and the creation of meaning. Theories of dialogue can also have a practical application, especially by bringing to the fore ethical aspects of human encounters and suggesting ways to improve relationships. To illustrate the claim, in the following paragraphs we focus on two specific concepts from Martin Buber's and Mikhail Bakhtin's respective theories of dialogue.

Genuine Dialogue

Martin Buber conceived his notion of dialogue within the framework of his profound interest in humanity and his serious concerns about its future. The subtle beauty and the mysticism of national lore inspired him to posit the distinction between relationships that range from purely pragmatic to objectifying and even exploitative on the one hand, and genuine human encounters devoid of objectification on the other. The former relationship or the subject–object relationship helps science advance and knowledge accumulate, but when it involves human beings, it can be dehumanizing and lacking of spirituality. The latter relationship, or the I–Thou relationship, is an existential relation between human beings based on openness and mutuality (Buber, 1958a, 1958b, 1965; Friedman, 1986). It is in an I–Thou relationship that the world of *being*, or of a meaningful, sincere, and true meeting in a genuine dialogue, can arise as opposed to that of *seeming* or a false and impression-directed behavior.

At the core of Buber's theory of dialogue is respect for other human beings and an understanding of the world from another person's point of

view. Rather than treat customers or potential customers as objects that can be persuaded and molded at arm's length, marketing companies must learn to listen more deeply and genuinely to customers and offer the high-quality products and services that customers need and that will help them lead more meaningful, hassle-free, and enjoyable lives. Also, by employing the tenets of Buber's dialogue, marketers can learn to truly understand customers, to fully comprehend the relationship as it begins to unfold within a particular context, and to understand exactly what the customer wants out of the relationship, not just the 'sale' potential.

Addressivity of the Message

An essential marker of an utterance, wrote Bakhtin (1986), is its *addressivity*. Unlike words and sentences that are impersonal and not addressed to anyone—the norm in exchange marketing and still prevalent in the practice in RM—the utterance has a personalized author and addressee. As Aristotle stated some 23 centuries ago, there is no universal audience and, therefore, there can be no universal message. A dialogic utterance is always addressed to a defined addressee, whereas a monologic one is addressed to someone indefinite or unconcretized. “Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95). The concept of addressivity has a seemingly facile yet theoretically profound implication for revealing the relationship subtleties in marketing.

To the extent that message addressivity is imbedded in the design and execution of marketing messages, RM will be fully operational. If a message has been designed specifically for a concrete recipient in a manner that shows that the author or the sender of the message knows the recipient well, the recipient will be prompted to respond to the message. An example of this is *Parenting* magazine's ability to target different editions of its publication and the advertising therein to changing women's needs as they progress through the three trimesters of pregnancy and 1 year postpartum. In this case, the author's message is a dialogic one. If, however, the sender crafts a message that is focused simply on content, style, or stimulating exchange, with no particular recipient in mind, the message is inherently monologic, and response is neither invited nor reliably received. RM practitioners and theorists can, therefore, ask the following: Despite our intent, is our message really dialogic? Are we going to get a response to our

message that will begin to build engagement and an effective relationship? How can we make our message more dialogic?

An excellent example of monologic marketing is the 1996 Nissan “Toys” ad. The ad was a masterfully crafted and creative televised missive. It featured Barbie and Ken dolls in a miniature car that was a replica of Nissan’s 300Z car. The car had been discontinued 2 years earlier and was only available in the used car market. The rationale behind choosing an out-of-production car was that it looked like the type of car that Ken and Barbie would have (Beatty, 1998, p. A1). The problem with this creatively designed, award-winning piece of mass marketing was that it was not dialogic—it lacked *addressivity*. With whom was the ad trying to establish a relationship? Kids? Grown-ups who feel like kids? What was the promise of the relationship? Nostalgia? Does this category make up Nissan’s prospective customers? How are the recipients of the message going to understand it? Will they be able to associate the Nissan’s Z car with Nissan’s other existing models? As a result of the ad, customers started buying what the ad featured—toys and t-shirts—while the sales of Nissan cars skidded. The ad designers, swayed by their perfect creation, failed to take into consideration the way the recipients of the message think and act. In her critique, *Wall Street Journal* staff reporter Sally Beatty wrote the following: “The ad campaign seemed to have a life of its own, detached from the business of selling cars” (1998, pp. A1, A14). In other words, the ad was monologic and detached and therefore, unable to serve as a step toward building a relationship.

An example of a dialogic message and an excellent application of RM principles comes from a different car maker, Aston Martin, the venerable sports car manufacturer that had been eclipsed by the likes of BMW, Mercedes Benz, and Jaguar. Aston Martin decided to try to understand its market by venturing to sports car rallies around the United States, talking at length with sports car enthusiasts, and performing a reputational audit of Aston Martin both in the media and with targeted consumers. What they discovered was that their brand had been a cornerstone of old James Bond movies only to be replaced by BMW, and that the brand was seldom featured in newer media accounts. As a result, they took five action steps that doubled their market share in the United States in a single year. First, they got the Aston Martin back on two recent James Bond films. Second, they found out from their target market which media outlets were the most credible and influential and began heavily advertising the Aston Martin brand. Third, they designed a new model, the Aston Martin Vanquish, based on what sports car enthusiasts said they wanted in a luxury sports

car. Fourth, they carefully targeted 500 potential customers around the United States and sent them special invitations. The invitations entitled the prospects to bring in to the local dealer whatever car they were driving and get an Aston Martin to drive for the weekend. The dealers would detail prospects' existing cars and have them ready on Monday when the Aston Martins were returned. Fifth, knowing that every wealthy sports car enthusiast likes a deal, they had a personalized letter in the glove box of each Aston Martin they let out telling the drivers that if they liked the car and wanted to buy it when they came back to the dealership on Monday, the dealer would give them a credit of \$10,000 on their purchase of a new Aston Martin. The multistep dialogic RM approach worked so well that nearly 60% of customers traded their old automobile in for a new Vanquish S model. As a further example of how communication theory can be of help to RM, we address the potential role of applying narrative theory in RM.

NARRATION AND SENSEMAKING

Narratives or stories permeate human existence. They help us develop our individual and cultural identities, they bring us closer to other people, and they provide a basis for action. MacIntyre (1985) noted that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (p. 201). Departing from MacIntyre's notion of *Homo narrans* or the story-telling human being, Fisher (1984) developed the narrative paradigm to center around narration as the basic and essential genre for explaining human behavior. By *narration*, Fisher referred to "a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (p. 2). Of special interest to the field and enterprise of marketing is the role that narratives play in the process of making sense of events, people, and relationships in one's immediate and broader contexts.

The role of narrative in sensemaking has been widely acknowledged (see, e.g., Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Cooren, 2000; McCloskey, 1990; Postman, 1999; Weick, 1995). Weick wrote, "The stories are templates. . . . They explain. And they energize" (p. 61). Cooren drew on Greimas's narrative theory to explain that every narrative is structured or organized according to a limited number of universal forms and that, therefore, the narrative structure can serve as the core of the production of sense in all other contexts. McCloskey saw stories as the primary vehicle for answering "Why me?"—a question that resonates with consumers' natural response

to marketing efforts aimed at them. Narratives or stories that an organization presents to the public help the customers make sense of the company's efforts, values, and goals and directly impact the customers' relationship with the company. The following real-life examples illustrate the role of narratives in customers' sensemaking and the consequent influence on the relationship between a company and its customers.

The well-known story of Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol crisis is the quintessential example of ethical and decisive behavior in the business world. When faced with customers dying in Chicago after consuming Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson recognized that it had taken a century and billions of dollars to build a trusting relationship with consumers and pledged not to allow any earnings decline that accrued from withdrawing the product from the market to interfere with this relationship (Foster, 1995). Johnson & Johnson promptly withdrew Tylenol from the market, sustained their hard-won relationship with consumers, and became and have sustained the status of the most admired company in America. Gerber's case was similar but with markedly different relationship outcomes.

In 1985, a mother reported finding glass shards in a jar of Gerber baby food. Much like at Johnson & Johnson, Gerber's board gathered to assess the crisis. The relationship with Gerber's customers—young mothers—was ignored, and a decision to keep the product on the market was made based on dominant input from Gerber's Chief Legal Counsel and Chief Financial Officer. Gerber, from the safety of its corporate headquarters, issued a press release that said that the glass that was found did not exceed the Food and Drug Administration's guidelines on parts per million of foreign substance in food and that it would not withdraw the product. Despite the fact that Johnson & Johnson's case was much more serious—seven customers had died as a result of Tylenol poisoning—the company's story of overarching concern for consumers was reinforced by its actions and accepted as trustworthy. In contrast, Gerber's credibility was shattered, although no children died or were injured in the case of the contaminated baby food. Gerber's story, as understood by the public, was about protecting the company's financial profitability and avoiding product liability, and clearly not about protecting the safety of its consumers' babies. Gerber went on to lose 40% of its once-dominant market share and, decades later, still has not recovered.

Narrative theory can help illuminate and inform the relationship ebb and flow between a company and its consumers in a way that traditional marketing theories cannot. Johnson & Johnson told a story that drew on and cemented its reputational capital (Fombrun, 1996) from a long and

trusting relationship it had established with its consumers, whereas Gerber told a crass story of corporate profitability being given primary sway over consumer interest and lost the trusting relationship it had built with its customers. The fact that the latter story was statistically and scientifically accurate was beside the point. Something in the story was missing, and that something was sufficient to turn the customers away. Twenty years later, the Gerber story still persists. It is not uncommon for middle America's young couples who are expecting a baby to get advised by older family members against buying Gerber baby food lest they find glass shards in jars. The fact that Gerber's baby food is of high quality, very safe, and that since 1985 there have not been any instances of glass pieces in jars is being disregarded. The narrative structure possesses a magic of its own and a path that cannot be explained by facts, statistics, logic, or science. Grasping the laws that inhere in the narrative structure would open up a new world of possibilities for reaching out to the customers and meeting their needs. Sadly, most RM research fails to consider this critical aspect of narrative and, as a result, the story becomes little more than a vehicle of exchange.

Narrative theory can also help explain the popularity of some logos and, consequently, provide a heuristic basis for predicting the appeal of product logos and other symbols to consumers. Corporate brands and logos contain a story behind the visual symbol (E. Morris, 2004). For instance, the Nike swoosh logo is a powerful symbol that is recognized around the world. It is so distinctive that it is immediately recognized even when not accompanied by the word *Nike*. What is often overlooked by scholars and practitioners of RM is the fact that the Nike swoosh logo carries with it an enthymematic logic that when engaged by consumers completes the relationship between symbol and story. Likewise, Google's Webmaster *cum* artist Dennis Hwang has developed an ongoing series of artwork that feeds off the original Google logo. He says that the logos link to Google search results about the topic, which can drive a lot of traffic to unsuspecting sites and create interesting and unexpected stories for users he never intended to reach (D. E. Williams, 2006). Narrative theory can help understand the creative thought and language processes that make such transformations possible.

Narrative theory can also help scholars and practitioners understand and explain the lure of the marketplace. Holt (2002) and Kozinets (2002) showed in their respective studies that markets are omnipresent and that even those groups and individuals who resent markets are very much a part of them. The lure of the markets is apparently there. But what is it that makes

the markets so attractive and hard to resist? Narrative theory would suggest that markets do not simply or reliably trigger something in the *Homo Ludens*, but rather that they hypnotize through their “stories” and thus appeal to the *Homo narrans* in each one of us. In light of the recent interests in social networking, understanding markets from the narrative perspective would provide insights about the glue that holds social networks together and other relational aspects that might otherwise remain overlooked.

Finally, narrative theory could bring new and more humanistic insights into the ways the human mind processes marketing messages and provides transitional links from thoughts to attitudes and finally to consumer behaviors. Marketing scholars have identified various forms of cognitive and emotional self-generated responses stemming as a reaction to persuasive marketing messages (Shimp, 1997). Marketing scholars and scholars from several other disciplines have developed a variety of persuasive models. Looking at persuasion from a narrative standpoint can add additional qualitative insights to widely accepted persuasion models, such as Petty and Cacioppo’s (1981) elaboration likelihood model or MacInnis and Jaworski’s (1989) integrative framework model. As narrative theory evolves, researchers need to be open to the possibility that persuasion may have an inherent but overlooked narrative structure and that examining persuasion from the narrative perspective may open up new venues for building gratifying relationships with customers from their point of view.

CONCLUSIONS

We have addressed some of the challenges RM has faced since its inception and proposed ways to expand its theoretical foundation and practical application. RM’s reliance on traditional views and theories of communication and relationship suffers from its implicit treatment of communication between companies and their consumers as a metaphorical conduit. We have offered instead the view of communication as process that more robustly fits RM’s need for a strong theoretical foundation and a basis for action. Reddy’s notion of the toolmakers paradigm was used to illustrate the substantial difference between the traditional communication approach and relational communication theories and ideas. We have further shown how theories of dialogue and narrative theory can benefit RM by specifically addressing the dialogic concepts of genuine dialogue and addressivity and by addressing the central role of narratives in human deliberation and action.

FIGURE 2. Necessary communication components of relationship marketing.

- Communication is a process—it is simultaneous, takes place across time, is behaviorally interdependent, and focuses on enactment rather than results.
- All messages must invite dialogue between company and customer and promote understanding from the customer's point of view.
- All messages must have addressivity—a personalized author and addressee.
- All stories must have sequence and personal meaning.
- Narrative is the relational glue that holds social networks together.
- Narrative is a form of relational magic that cannot be understood through facts, statistics, or logic.

The role of communication in marketing has been widely acknowledged. We have taken the acknowledgment a step further by pointing out how communication theory can inform RM. We offer the following model that summarizes the major contributions of contemporary communication theory to RM (see Figure 2). We believe it includes the necessary but not sufficient communication components for RM to substantively advance the practice of using relationships between customers and companies as the cornerstone of the marketing process. The model is intended to offer RM scholars and researchers opportunities to test and extend its components in the hope of advancing theories-in-use in the field.

As a discipline that centers around interaction and relationships, communication offers RM a conceptually rigorous and methodologically demanding theory that can help expand RM's foundation and develop sound guidelines for building and sustaining effective future relationships. RM, when done correctly, is a sound business practice and a means to thrive and prosper in a highly competitive marketplace. Incorporating communication theory and practice into RM can help it truly become what it purports to be—a relationship- and communication-oriented approach to understanding markets.

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