We Need Your Help!
The Influence of Company-Consumer Relationships on Consumer Responses to Requests for Help

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Abstract
Arts organizations are often placed in the position of needing to ask their consumers for help, particularly through requests for donations, volunteers, or responses to marketing research. In their requests, organizations often invoke societal-level norms of helping behavior, such as the norm of reciprocity, for example, by offering premiums or gifts in exchange for receiving help, or the norm of social responsibility, for example, by emphasizing the organization's dependence on the consumer's help. The effectiveness of invoking these norms has been shown to have mixed results, in particular, reciprocity has been shown to both increase and decrease willingness to help. This paper suggests that the effectiveness of invoking these norms is dependent on the relationship-level norms that have been built between the organization and the consumer. When the societal-level norms and the relationship-level norms match, the consumer's willingness to help increases, but when the norms mismatch, the consumer's willingness to help decreases. This suggests that to understand how to effectively request help from a consumer, an arts organization must understand that consumer's normative expectations for the company-consumer relationship.

Keywords
Helping Behavior, Fundraising, Development, Company-Consumer Relationships.

Arts organizations, like most companies, are often placed in the position of needing to ask their consumers for help. Many companies rely on their consumers as a source of information to help them make marketing decisions, which requires them to ask their consumers to help by responding to marketing research questions. Smaller retailers may need to ask their loyal customers to pay higher prices in order to help them survive in the face of larger, big box competitors. In internal marketing, companies may ask their employees to accept a cut in salary or benefits to help the company weather a poor sales season. Nonprofit organizations and charities ask their consumers to make donations of money, time, and possessions to help the organization further its cause and fulfill its mission. And as Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) recently pointed out, many companies view the ideal consumer-company relationship as one in which the consumer is not only a loyal purchaser of the company's product, but also acts as an advocate for the company, helping the company by actively promoting the company's products to others, spreading positive word of mouth, even displaying the company's brands as a means of "advertising" for the company.

Considering this widespread need to ask consumers for help, the question of what strategies are most effective in soliciting help from consumers has become an issue of interest to researchers in marketing. Drawing on the literature on altruism and helping from both economics and social psychology, marketers have examined consumer motivations to engage in helping behavior, the effectiveness of different request types and persuasive messages, and a number of social and environmental moderators that influence the likelihood that a consumer will engage in helping behavior when it is requested by a company (see Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi 1996 for a review). While this research stream is still new, and has reached limited conclusions as of yet, one area of investigation that has had a strong and lasting effect on the practice of asking for help has been the application of relationship marketing strategies.

Much of the literature that has applied relationship marketing to helping behavior has focused on the specific case of nonprofit or charitable organizations. In academic research, relationship marketing theory has recently been applied to charitable causes and nonprofit organizations (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and relationship marketing strategy has become prevalent in articles on fundraising strategies (Block 1998; Remley 1996; Selladurai 1998; Squires 1997) and in publications targeted to charitable organizations and professional fundraisers (e.g. Burnett 2002; Flanagan 2002; Greenfield 2002; Keegan 1990). Relationship marketing strategies have reached the practitioners in these fields as well. A recent survey of UK charities found that over 90 percent of charitable organizations were familiar with relationship marketing, and 85 percent reported using relationship marketing strategies (Weir and Hibbert 2000).

In these applications of relationship marketing theory and strategy to helping behavior, marketers have relied on a few basic tenets that have been associated with company-consumer relationships since the introduction of the term relationship marketing (Berry 1983). Specifically, they have made the assumptions that all company-consumer relationships are exchange relationships (Berry 1995) and that all company-consumer relationships are based on reciprocity (Bagozzi 1995; Bitner 1995). These assumptions seem fitting when the goal of the company-consumer relationship is an exchange transaction, such as a purchase, which was the situation for which the theory was initially developed. However, recent findings suggest that for both for-profit and nonprofit companies, when the goal of the company-consumer relationship is to solicit helping behavior, not exchange behavior, these assumptions may not hold (Aggarwal 2004). If this is the case, then the application of traditional relationship marketing strategies to situations in which the company is asking for help may not be effective.

Reciprocity and Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing was introduced as a concept by Berry (1983) in an article on marketing services. The term was originally defined as, “attracting, maintaining, and – in multi-service organizations – enhancing customer relationships” (Berry 1983, p. 25). Berry suggested that service companies were too reliant on customer acquisition, while ignoring the loyal customers who had long-term relationships with the company. By instead focusing on customer retention and on building stronger relationships with consumers, companies would be able to encourage loyalty among their customers and would be rewarded with higher purchase levels for lower marketing expenditures. These company-consumer relationships were viewed as long-term, relational exchanges, throughout which the company provided benefits to the consumer and in exchange, the consumer rewarded the company with loyal purchasing behavior. The fundamental assumption of relationship marketing theory was that in order for the relationship to work, it had to be reciprocal.

Bagozzi (1995) offers an excellent discussion of the concept of reciprocity as the core of relationship marketing, calling it, “an essential feature of self-regulation and the problem of coordinating mutual actions for parties in a marketing relationship” (p. 275). Bagozzi suggests that reciprocity serves a balancing function in a company-consumer relationship. While the consumer’s own self-interest initiates the relationship (as when the consumer has a need that can be met by the company’s product), the consumer then expects the company to maintain the balance in the relationship by reciprocating when the consumer acts in a manner that benefits the company, such as purchasing the company’s products. In turn, the consumer responds to perceived benefits offered by the company, such as discounts or rewards for long-term customers, by rewarding the company with loyalty and future purchases. This assumption that company-consumer relationships must exist in a cycle of reciprocal action with the end goal of an even, balanced exchange of benefits is in keeping with past conceptualizations of an exchange relationship in the marketing literature (Bagozzi 1975), and has resurfaced repeatedly throughout the relationship marketing literature (c.f. Grönroos 1990; Shani and Chalasani 1992).

Several studies have suggested that consumers also perceive a need for reciprocity in company-consumer relationships. Gwinner (1998) examined the various benefits that consumers received from company-consumer relationships, and found that consumers perceived the strongest benefit to be confidence that the company would fulfill its promises and provide them with benefits from the relationship. De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, and Iacobucci (2001) found that consumers’ perceptions of the company’s investment in the company-consumer relationship were linked to perceived relationship quality and behavioral loyalty. And using a path model, Odekerken-Schroder, De Wulf, and Schumacher (2003) found a direct link from a company’s offering of rewards to consumers’ perceptions of the company as being retention-oriented.

These findings suggest a potential dark side to relationship marketing as well. In a narrative study, Stern, Thompson, and Arnould (1998) found that when a consumer had a negative service encounter that he perceived to be not in keeping with the promises the company had made, his evaluation of the company and his relationship with the company decreased. And in their criticism of relationship marketing practice, Fournier, Dobscha and Mick (1998) argue that widespread consumer perceptions that relationship marketing tactics, such as collecting large amounts of marketing research, ask too much of consumers and give back too little in return have led to a consumer backlash against relationship marketing. The company-consumer relationship is no longer seen as reciprocal, the consumers feel they are being asked to give too much, and as a result, many consumers are expressing a desire to discontinue their relationships with companies. If company-consumer relationships must be reciprocal in order to survive, then it would seem that when a company needs to ask its consumers for help, it should be sure to reward its consumers with benefits of equal value to the help that is being rendered. This perception of a need for reciprocity in requests for help has begun to permeate the literature on helping behavior.

Reciprocity and Helping Behavior

In marketing, a behavior is considered to be altruistic or helping when the intent of the behavior is to provide a greater benefit to the recipient of the help than to the actor, and when the behavior enhances the recipient’s welfare (Bendapudi, et al. 1996). If helping behavior is by definition intended to benefit the recipient more than the actor, then it is difficult to imagine how a relationship that incorporates helping behavior could be reciprocal. But in adopting relationship marketing, which has at its core an assumption of reciprocity, companies whose goal was to solicit helping behavior have altered their strategies to incorporate reciprocal exchanges with their consumers. In some cases, this has taken the form of simple compensation, as when consumers are paid to participate in marketing research, or when companies hire their loyal, influential customers to participate in buzz marketing campaigns, spreading positive word of mouth and promoting their brands (Khermouch 2001). Other times, companies use indirect means to reward consumers for their help, for example, many nonprofit organizations and charities now offer gifts or rewards to donors, ranging from tokens like coffee mugs or tote bags to free tickets to performances or events to black tie fundraising dinners (c.f. Holmes, Miller and Lerner 2002). Popular literature on fundraising shows evidence of the belief that these rewards should be equal to the size of the donation. For example, Hank Rosso of the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University cautions the recipients of monetary donations that, "Gift making is based on a voluntary exchange…In the process of giving, the contributor offers a value to the nonprofit organization…In accepting the gift, it is incumbent upon the organization to return a value to the donor…" (Rosso 2002, p. 18).

Recent findings, however, suggest that perhaps reciprocity is not the best approach when the goal of the relationship is to encourage helping behavior, as opposed to exchange behavior. A recent study by Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) examined the effects of common relationship-building strategies on the likelihood of alumni to donate money to their alma mater and to engage in promotional behavior on behalf of their alma mater. Among these strategies was a measure of the consumer's (in this case, the alumnus) perception that the university would reciprocate if they received help, including various forms of both tangible and intangible benefits to the consumer. The study found that perceptions of reciprocity had no significant effects on either donations or promoting behavior. Aggarwal (2004) examined the effects of offering to reciprocate in exchange for help in both for-profit and nonprofit contexts, and concluded that the consumer's expectations for reciprocity and responses to offers to reciprocate in a helping situation are dependent on the type of relationship that the consumer has with the company.

Earlier research on relationship marketing had assumed that all company-consumer relationships would be exchange relationships, and not intimate or communal relationships (Peterson 1995). However, Aggarwal (2004) has found evidence to suggest that consumers can also have a communal relationship with a brand or company. Communal and exchange relationships were first conceptualized in the interpersonal relationships literature (Clark and Mills 1979), and in this literature, the term "exchange relationship" was defined differently than it is in the marketing literature. An exchange relationship in this context refers specifically to a relationship in which the assumption of equal exchange exists. In an exchange relationship, both parties have an expectation that in the end game, the relationship will be perfectly balanced, and benefits will have been distributed equitably (Clark and Mills 1993). In an exchange relationship, therefore, "benefits are given with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return or as repayment for a benefit received previously" (Clark and Mills 1993, p. 684). Communal relationships, on the other hand, are relationships in which there is not an expectation of equal rewards in the end game. In a communal relationship, "the norm…is to give benefits in response to needs or to demonstrate a general concern for the other person. In communal relationships, the receipt of a benefit does not change the recipient's obligation to respond to the other's needs. It does not create a specific debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit, as it does in an exchange relationship" (Clark and Mills 1993, p. 684).

In their research on interpersonal relationships, Clark and Mills found that individuals who were in communal relationships were more likely to engage in helping behavior and less likely to expect that their help would be reciprocated (Clark 1986; Clark and Mills 1979; Clark, Mills and Corcoran 1989). Aggarwal (2004) found that the same effect could be true for relationships between consumers and companies. Aggarwal theorized that consumers who had a communal relationship with a company would not expect monetary payment for helping the company, would prefer to receive noncomparable benefits in return for their help, and would not expect prompt repayment for their help. He found that when consumers were asked to participate in marketing research (helping the company), those consumers who had an exchange relationship were more likely to help if a payment was offered, if the payment was of a comparable value to the help they would be providing, and if the payment was to be made promptly. Those consumers who had a communal relationship with the company, however, were willing to help regardless of whether a payment was offered, were willing to wait to receive a promised payment, and were actually more willing to help if the payment that was offered was of a lower value than the help that was given by the consumer.

Given the expectations and norms of an exchange relationship, it makes sense that a consumer who has an exchange relationship with a company would only be willing to help if a comparable benefit is offered in exchange for the help. When a consumer has a communal relationship with a company, however, it seems that offering to reciprocate does not increase the likelihood that the consumer will help, and offering too large of a reward may even decrease the consumer's willingness to help. This result is of particular concern to the many charities and nonprofit organizations who are currently engaged in reciprocity-based relationship marketing strategies, because historically, these types of organizations have been the ones with whom consumers would be most likely to identify, and therefore who would be most likely to have a communal relationship with their consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) also suggest that the consumers who have a strong identification with a company are also those who are most likely to engage in helping behavior toward the company, for example, spreading positive word of mouth or actively promoting the company's brands. It is possible, therefore, that the most loyal customers, the advocates, the consumers who are most likely to help a company, may also be consumers who have a communal relationship with the company. If a company offers to reciprocate the help that they receive from these consumers, it may actually hurt their likelihood of receiving the help that they need.

Social Norms of Helping Behavior

This paper suggests that the reason that relationship marketing strategies may not be effective in soliciting donations is due to a mismatch in social norms. When an organization communicates a request for help to a consumer, the request may activate one of several societal-level social norms that are associated with helping behavior. Researchers have identified two primary societal-level norms that influence the individual's decision to engage in helping behavior, the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) and the norm of social responsibility (Berkowitz 1972). The activation of these norms has been repeatedly observed to lead individuals to engage in helping behavior. These norms have been found to encourage the helping of strangers (e.g. Feldman 1968; Latané and Darley 1970; Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin 1969) and unidentified others (e.g. Berkowitz and Daniels 1963; Thomas and Batson 1981), suggesting that these norms are society-wide and are not specific to the expectations within a particular relationship. The consumer will have different expectations depending on which norm is activated: if the request activates the norm of reciprocity, the consumer will expected to receive benefits in exchange for helping the organization, if the request activates the norm of social responsibility, the consumer will expect not to receive benefits. The consumer should be able to make a decision as to whether to help the organization based on this normative information alone. However, when organizations engage in relationship-building activities with their consumers, they also create relationship-level norms and expectations. If an organization's request for help activates societal-level norms that conflict with the relationship-level norms that the organization has built with a consumer, the consumer will react negatively to the request.

For example, if an organization has an exchange relationship with a consumer, the relationship-level norm is that benefits will be exchanged equally between the two parties. A request for help that offers to reciprocate will match the relationship-level norms, and elicit a positive response from the consumer. A request for help that activates the norm of social responsibility, however, and therefore does not offer benefits in exchange for helping, is likely to elicit a negative response from the consumer, since this one-way transaction would violate the norms of the relationship. The less intuitive prediction lies in the communal relationship. A consumer who has a communal relationship with an organization should be willing to help the organization without the promise of reciprocity, as this matches the relationship-level norms. However, traditional exchange theory would suggest that by offering to reciprocate, the organization would increase the overall benefits to the consumer, and therefore increase the consumer's willingness to help. This paper suggests that in fact, by building a communal relationship, the organization has essentially promised not to reciprocate when it receives help from the consumer, and making a request that activates the norm of reciprocity and promises benefits in exchange for help is likely to insult the consumer and result in a negative response.

The match between the relationship-level norms that a company has built with a consumer and the societal-level norm that is activated by the company's request for help will influence the consumer's likelihood of engaging in helping behavior. When the societal-level norm that is activated by the request, either the norm of reciprocity or the norm of social responsibility, matches the normative expectations of the company-consumer relationship, then the consumer is likely to help the company. When there is a mismatch, the consumer is not likely to engage in helping behavior. The effect of the mismatch between activated societal-level norms and relationship-level norms on the consumer's response to differently framed requests for help made by the company is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1:
Mismatch Between the Societal-Level and Relationship-Level Norms of the Company Consumer Relationship

		Relationship-Level Norms	
		Exchange	**Communal**
Activated Societal-Level Norm	**Norm of Reciprocity**	***Match Between Norms*** Consumer is Likely to Help Consumer will Expect to be Rewarded for Helping	***Mismatch Between Norms*** Consumer is Unlikely to Help
	Norm of Social Responsibility	***Mismatch Between Norms*** Consumer is Unlikely to Help	***Match Between Norms*** Consumer is Likely to Help Consumer will Expect not to be Rewarded for Helping

H1a: When a company has an exchange relationship with a consumer, the consumer will be more likely to help when the request for help activates the norm of reciprocity than when it activates the norm of social responsibility.

H1b: When a company has a communal relationship with a consumer, the consumer will be more likely to help when the request for help activates the norm of social responsibility than when it activates the norm of reciprocity.

Many companies regularly make requests for help from their consumers and activate the norm of reciprocity or the norm of social responsibility through the framing of their requests, usually with little consideration for the expectations of the consumer. Often there is an assumption that if the company is able to offer a reward for the help, this will be viewed positively as an additional benefit by the consumer, and will lead to increased helping behavior. However, this paper suggests that when the consumer has a communal relationship with the company, offering a reward will actually lead to a decrease in helping behavior. This has significant implications for companies, especially if the consumers who are the most committed to the company are the ones who are more likely to feel the effects of the mismatch. The most committed consumers are the last consumers whom the company should alienate, and the ones who are most likely to offer help. Companies that have cultivated communal relationships with their consumers would be better off saving the cost of the rewards and emphasizing their dependence, as this would actually lead to increased helping behavior on the part of their committed consumers.

The broader implications of this finding suggest that the influence of company-consumer relationships is stronger than previously thought. The relationship-level norms that are established between the company and the consumer shape consumers' expectations to the extent that they color consumers' interpretations of company communications. As company-consumer relationships become more complex, companies will need to be increasingly aware of the normative expectations that they are establishing and ensure that specific communications from the company are consistent with these expectations. By better meeting their consumers' expectations and avoiding the negative outcomes of the mismatch effect, companies will be better able to sustain their relationships with their customers.

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