

The Role of Authenticity in Relationship Marketing

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of authenticity as it applies to relationship marketing. The rationale for this paper is the belief that authenticity is a key variable to consider in the context of successful relationship marketing. As such, it has received scant scholarly attention from business researchers. This paper examines the ways in which scholars from other disciplines have engaged with authenticity. Some of the constructs that are related to authenticity include trust, integrity and heritage. Furthermore, it identifies several key components of an authenticity framework that are applicable widely to relationship marketing, such that authenticity is considered to be a process rather than a state. Authenticity is intrinsically about the individual and is experienced at that scale. Most importantly, the process is reflexive and emergent, such that authenticity is never finished, but is always being made and remade. The paper closes by arguing that the process of establishing authenticity needs to be carefully validated as a variable, in order that its importance in relationship marketing can be measured.

Keywords: relationship marketing, authenticity, trust, integrity, process

The Role of Authenticity in Relationship Marketing

Introduction

This paper explores the concept of authenticity in relationship marketing. It is believed that authenticity is a very important variable within marketing and specifically relationship marketing. However, the construct has had relatively little scholarly attention. This paper explores the definition of authenticity in the context of relationship marketing, how it has been elucidated by others in the field, how it can be framed analytically and conceptually, and provide some signposts to how it might be empirically tested. The paper approaches this in two ways. First, it provides a sound grounding of authenticity in a relationship marketing context, where relationship marketing as an approach came from, how it has evolved over time, and how it has been deployed in the field. The purpose of doing this is to demonstrate why the idea of authenticity, as a key marketing variable, is best explored within the framework of relationship marketing. Second, it is acknowledged that there are many authentic-like concepts in relationship marketing, such as notions of trust, integrity or honesty, but it is argued that none of these concepts quite encapsulates all of the variables within relationship marketing. It is then argued that authenticity is perhaps a better framework for understanding the complexity of relationship marketing, and a definition of authenticity is offered.

Relationship marketing emerged as a recognized discipline in the later part of the twentieth century. However, it has assumed increasing attention by marketing scholars with the advent of emerging communications technologies that have changed the relationship between buyer and seller. This section briefly introduces the relationship marketing concept, so that a more substantive discussion concerning authenticity can be launched.

One of the first notable uses of the phrase “relationship marketing” was concerning the marketing of services (Berry, 1983). However, Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) are universally recognized for identify relationship marketing as a distinct construct:

“Despite the importance generally ascribed to the idea of exchange, marketing research has largely neglected the relationship aspect of buyer-seller behaviour, while tending to study transactions as discrete events. The lack of attention to antecedent conditions and processes for buyer-seller exchange relationships is a serious omission in the development of marketing knowledge” (p. 11).

At its root, relationship marketing is essentially an evolution of the marketing concept away from a focus on transactions to a focus on the lifetime value of a customer. In order to adopt this long-term perspective of the customer, the seller must thoroughly understand the buying behavior and motivations of its customer base. Relationship marketing represents a radically new way of thinking about the relationship between the customer and the seller. The buyer and the seller each evaluate their satisfaction with the relationship not through a single transaction in isolation but through the prism of an inter-connected series of transactions.

Relationship marketing initially surfaced in direct response marketing but it has now migrated across virtually all marketing strategies. The concept refers to a wide range of ‘relationship type strategies’ that have emerged in product as well as service markets (Kanagal, 2009). The emergence of new technologies, such as customer relationship management (CRM) software programs, has also assisted in the adoption of a relationship marketing philosophy. Relationship marketing works in its purest form when the product or service is something that needs to be, or can be, purchased at intervals, and the customer has a range of choices for his/her purchase (Fontenot & Wilson, 1997; Morris, Brunyee, & Page, 1998). Although there are variations on the theme of relationship marketing, the defining feature is the unfolding of the relationship over an extended time.

This very simple definition belies what is in fact a very complex approach to business. Relationship marketing is based on collecting information about customers, such as their behaviors and motivations, and using this to develop a personalized relationship with them. Researchers have focused their attention on the nature of this personalized relationship. There have been numerous theories advanced that seek to identify the key variables in creating and maintaining the relationship. It is argued herein that while many of these theoretical approaches have provided insight into the relationship, none of them quite managed to capture the relationship in its entirety.

What has accelerated this style of marketing over the last few decades is the development of communications technology and, in particular, the rapid development of several generations of Customer Relationship Management systems (Gummesson, 2008; 2004). In tandem with this, the growth in online commerce has provided a technological context to collect information on customers as they access online stores. In addition, new forms of social media are remaking the practice of relationship marketing, as people come into contact with brands in a whole new variety of ways, and in particular, ways that involve the influence of their peers and feedback loops (Meadows-Klue, 2008). These technological advancements have made it very easy to collect huge amounts of data about customers. Moreover, these innovations have shifted the challenge of relationship marketing away from the collection of information to methods of interpreting the information. By interpreting buyer behavior accurately, marketers can create an authentic experience for the customer. The results of relationship marketing become more powerful as more information is collected and the seller gets a clearer picture of its customers.

While relationship marketing began as the desire to build a long-term, mutually beneficial, relationship with a customer, it has evolved to become an entire approach to organizations and business processes. The key to successfully retaining and building relationships with customers is to understand their behaviors, needs, wants, dislikes, and other key variables. Some researchers argue that the traditional approach to marketing, through manipulating the marketing mix, might not be the best mechanism for building these relationships. The traditional method is too rigid and organizations need to deploy themselves in a way that allows them to assess and respond to customer relationships (Gordon, 1999). In particular, these researchers argue that rather than organize around functions such as sales, marketing, operations and so forth, successful organizations should organize themselves around customer experiences and procedures.

The next section of the paper addresses why relationship marketing makes a good grounding theory for authenticity. Although there has been considerable work done on 'authentic-like' notions within marketing, none of them quite encapsulates all of the diversity of the variables within a relationship marketing scenario, so it is necessary to offer a new theoretical approach. Other social science disciplines do address the notion of authenticity as a construct. This is the foundation or grounding for developing an initial model of authenticity in relationship marketing. In doing this, the model of authenticity does contain most of the elements of authentic-like constructions discussed in the next section; chief amongst these are notions such as trust and heritage. These concepts are ultimately quite nebulous and are not adequately captured by traditional marketing models such as the marketing mix. These concepts need to be explored in the context of a relationship between a buyer and seller that evolves over time. That is not to say that authenticity can only be explored through the prism of relationship marketing; however, to unpack authenticity itself, rather than just apply it as a variable, is best done through relationship marketing.

Before trying to suggest ways of testing authenticity, it is necessary to produce a credible definition of it. What follows is a review of the various ways that academics have approached authenticity and authentic-like concepts. The literature on authentic-like constructs in

relationship marketing is examined through a series of interlinked themes. The purpose of doing this is to demonstrate the need for a more carefully thought out and holistic approach to the relationship, and one that can be tested rather than assumed. The literature on authentic-like concepts is vast, so the following discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, but more an efficient means of drawing together the key ways that other academic disciplines have sought to engage with and define these types of behavior.

The Case for Authenticity: Authentic Like Approaches to Relationships

As noted earlier, authors have examined the variables of the relationship between buyers and sellers within relationship marketing framework from a variety of perspectives. These attempts have been very valuable exercises in shedding light upon the workings of these relationships. However, while they have identified a series of key factors that influence relationships, none of them quite captures everything or offers a broader explanatory power. This section of the paper discusses these approaches in a thematic fashion, exploring the key means by which other academics have sought to engage with this relationship, and the gaps that exist as a result. The specific themes discussed in this section refer to ideas of trust, honesty, integrity, and ideas of 'knowing.'

The constructs of trust, honesty, commitment, and integrity are often considered part of the nomological net associated with relationship marketing. Authors have approached this in a variety of different ways, and this has led to some of the most interesting insights into relationship marketing. Morgan & Hunt (1994) approach this in the most direct, if rigid, manner with their assessment of trust and commitment in relationship marketing. They offer a 'key mediating variable' model of trust and commitment. They conclude that trust and commitment are important factors in any viable relationship. Other authors have sought to offer a slightly more nuanced view of trust and commitment. There is a concept of general trust between the buyer and seller/brand in question, as Morgan & Hunt (1994), Berry (1995) and Doney & Cannon (1997) argue. Trust has also been examined from the other side of the dyad---from the perspective of the buyer. As mentioned earlier, relationship marketing is highly reliant on the ability of the seller to collect and use data concerning customer behaviors. In order to use this information, the customer has to accommodate the seller's need to access this data (Luo, 2002; Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002). Garbarino & Johnson (1999) theoretically distinguish between the constructs of satisfaction, trust and commitment by establishing discriminant validity and indicate where each construct might best be deployed. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler (2002) and Nevin (1995) offer useful discussions on the specific idea of integrity in the relationship. Harker (1999) goes much further than this, and suggests that there are 26 key terms such as trust within relationship marketing that require further analysis. He indicates that the divergence of models in relationship marketing cannot be brought under any meaningful theory until there is a common vocabulary. Doney & Cannon (1997) focus solely on the idea of trust, and how trust can be built within a relationship. They suggest a five stage cognitive process, which they elevate to a full model, and then test empirically to understand the interaction between buyer and seller. What is particularly interesting about the Doney & Canon (1997) study is that they temporalise trust to an extent, by using their theoretical approach to identify the antecedents of trust, and the future outcomes of changes in trust. Furthermore, they do not just examine trust between two people, but also examine trust between organizations, in the context of networked approaches to business.

There have also been specific areas where people have attempted to deploy the notion of authenticity in conjunction with the idea of trust, though they have not attempted to define the term authenticity. Farrelly & Quester (2003) provide an excellent analysis of the core role of trust and commitment in establishing a relationship between sponsors and the Australian Football League. Their findings indicate that there are both economic and non-economic

benefits for both sides of the dyad. Sharma, Tzokas, Saren, & Kyziridis (1999) have approached this in a broader manner, through their analysis of the mechanism in which relationships are established in the marketing of business-to-business services. Their analysis points to the fact that the creation of an authentic and successful relationship is accomplished through the two-way interaction of people. It is not a case of projecting authenticity as such, it is manufactured through the interactions of two people over time. Central to that process is the idea of trust and respect. Murphy, Laczniak, & Wood (2007) have approached this through trying to understand what might constitute the idea of 'authentic trust' within relationship marketing and how that might be tested. They also place this in the context of ethical marketing. Groves (2001), in his examination of building authenticity into the relationship with consumers in the British food industry, has noted the ways in which authenticity can be created through trust in the manufacture and provenance of goods. Pfaffenberger (2000) demonstrated ways in which an authentic relationship can be based on emotions, such as fear. He examines this in the context of the information technology industry where the consumer thinks they have authentic, genuine, protection from disasters, such as data loss and computer failure, and they trust the supplier to deliver.

From these efforts to explore and define trust, a number of elements that can be taken forward can be discerned. Trust is essentially a construct of social relations that shifts over time. Trust exists not only between individuals but also embedded in the context in which that they interact. What constitutes trust changes over time, as actions and situations change. It is arguable that this construct of trust is a subset of a wider construct of authenticity, and the notion of changing through time is something that is important to a wider definition of authenticity.

These efforts to engage with notions of trust and kindred concepts within relationship marketing have been very useful in understanding some of the dynamics of the buyer/seller relationship. However, they do not go far enough. Trust, honesty, and integrity alone do not explain the relationship between buyer and seller. Another authentic-like facet of relationship marketing is longevity. Longevity is a positive aspect in relationship marketing and it indicates that ideas such as trust are built up over time.

The work of Grönroos (1997) and Buttle (1996), in elucidating the basic premise of relationship marketing, have noted that one of the key defining characteristics of relationship marketing is the development of the relationship over a much longer time period than was previously considered. The factors that they identified as crucial in sustaining a relationship over time included a myriad of things concerning both the brand in question, as well as the marketing and sales processes employed in selling it. Ravald & Grönroos (1997) take this one step further by arguing that things like trust, integrity and value shift in definition over time, and any understanding of the dynamics of relationship marketing will necessarily hinge on understanding how key variables shift in definition and meaning over time. This idea of variables shifting over time is a key concept returned to later in this paper.

It is important to understand why this is an authentic-like behavior; it is authentic because longevity on its own is not that significant, it is the qualities associated with longevity that are more important. One of the key parts of trust in a relationship is that it is durable and has been tested over time. Doney & Cannon (1997) confirm this in their analysis of the cognitive processes involved in establishing trust amongst actors. However, longevity also affects relationships, in that longevity also imports a sense of 'knowing' both the customer and the seller.

Much has been made of the different kinds of data that can be collected on customers, and the data that can be collected on sellers, and which kinds of data allow you to better 'know' each party, trust each party, and approximate what they will be likely to do. Most of this

research has focused on the data the seller can collect on the buyer, which ranges from the initial calls of Khalil & Harcar (1999) that relationship marketing needed to harness growing IT capabilities to collect ‘timely data’ on the customer, the market and products in order to develop properly. Ryals & Knox (2001) comment on how this need to pursue timely data has changed organizations, particularly with regards to CRM applications. However, there has also been a growing band of work that has focused not on collecting data, but on analyzing which data is most useful from the plethora of data that can now be collected relatively easily. Key examples of this include the work of Rud (2001) on how to model and deploy the data collected and the work of Shaw, Subramaniam, Tan, & Welge (2001) on how to discern behavioral patterns in customer relationships. Again, the difficulty that this literature stream has is that it does not give much in the way of wider explanatory power to relationship marketing. There is no doubt that the ability to gather and interpret data is a vital part of maintaining a successful customer relationship, but it is only one element of it. There is a need for an notion that seeks to both recognize the importance of ways of knowing in the relationship, but also has the ability to offer a wider analytical framework for studying relationship marketing.

Having now established a number of ways that academics have sought to conceptualize the relationship in relationship marketing, it is necessary to establish where authenticity fits as a construct. The passages above note that there have been a diversity of attempts to understand the relationship, but none of them captures everything in a comprehensive fashion. Each attempt has generally focused on a single facet of the relationship, and it is not really possible to gain a broader understanding of the relationship between buyer and seller from them. Therefore, the rest of this paper argues that the concept of authenticity could be profitably deployed to try and draw all of these different aspects of analysis together, and offer a lens with broader explanatory power for examining relationship marketing.

Defining Authenticity

What is immediately obvious about the literature on relationship marketing is that authenticity has not been a prominent theme. However, where authenticity has been deployed there seems to be an element of confusion between relationship marketing and authenticity in some respects, and thus authenticity is not often considered as an independent variable within relationship marketing itself. This paper is a first step towards trying to understand authenticity in more precise and wider terms, though there are other elements of the literature that bear examination.

Before analyzing the way that other academics have tried to use authenticity, we will set out our definition of authenticity, and then explore how this has been created through the work of other authors. We take authenticity to be a reflexive process, whereby the seller indicates to the buyer that it is acceptable to engage in business. We cast authenticity as a process because the way in which the seller signals to the buyer that it is acceptable to engage shifts over time. Moreover, it encompasses all the aspects of authentic-like models describe above: trust, longevity, and knowing. Understanding of each of these themes of trust, longevity, and knowing are continually negotiated over time, and the relationship builds through continual cycles of the process. The cited literature in the preceding literature has sought to demonstrate the fragile nature of constructs like trust and knowing the customer, and particularly, the way that they are strengthened over time. Authenticity is not a state, but the way in which all of these constructs are intertwined and made real through the day-to-day interactions of business. Authenticity is not just about trust or longevity, or knowing, it is about the dynamic way in which they all fuse together in a reflexive process.

Researchers in other disciplines have devoted attention to defining authenticity and have come up with a variety of ways in which to conceptualize the construct. This section begins with some of the more abstract, philosophical, approaches to authenticity, before moving on

to some more applied approaches. Handler (1986) has offered a three-point view of authenticity, built on the philosophy of Toqueville (1835). The first perspective casts authenticity as a socially constructed concept. Second, he views it from the individual level. Finally, he examines the “bonds that unite authenticity and individualism.” Specifically, anthropological bases of authenticity. This often leads to questions of authenticity as being based around various aspects of culture, which is a collective notion. Much has been made of the work of Heidegger, who has focused on authenticity as an existential concept, which draws on the second point made by Handler (1986), with the notion that authenticity is ultimately to be understood through the existence of the individual, and their attempts to bring meaning to that existence (Park, 2006). The idea of authenticity as a social construct is a powerful one, but it is important to recognize that authenticity is not a static state, but something that is constantly evolving. This last point has been developed across a variety of disciplines, and notes that authenticity is not a state or static notion, but is in fact a continual process of maintaining and remaking authenticity.

These ideas have been explored, particularly in tourism studies, where authenticity is a significant element of commercial advantage. For example, the work of Pearce & Moscardo (1986), which attempted to build on the work of Heidegger and that of MacCannell (1973), develops a framework of multiple authenticities, chiefly to express this through a dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity. This indicates that any kind of conceptualization of authenticity is, to an extent, a social construct and will entertain elements of fakery and embellishment designed to create the impression of an authentic experience where one may not genuinely exist. In the particular case of marketing and relationship marketing, there is a disjuncture between the commercial sensibilities of the company and the image that they market to customers.

One of the best examples of this literature is the work of Beverland & Luxton (2005) who have analyzed ways in which companies in the commercial wine sector deliberately decouple the images that they project of their organisation from the commercial activities. They argue that this results in something of a conflict for managing the relationship of the brand with the consumer, because the relationship is based on the creation of the concept of authenticity in their wine, and this is wedded to ideas of the past. This is constantly under threat of the consumer becoming aware of this disjuncture and the relationship being destroyed. What makes this relevant to relationship marketing is that the customer does not find authenticity in the wine per se but in their perception of the relationship between them and the producer, as well as the trust they invest. What constitutes an authentic relationship will shift over time, as the terms of what makes a real, authentic product change and the seller strives to maintain that relationship.

Another way of teasing apart the construct of authenticity is found separately in contexts and people, and that the creation of successful authenticity is achieved through both. This somewhat simplistic approach to developing authenticity has been taken further by more modern works such as that by Chhabra (2005; 2008). Chhabra (2005) develops the notion of authenticity as a four stage process that goes from the originator to the consumer, and has developed this in later work to be a full stage authenticity continuum (2008). The stages of this process move from stage one at the originator through a series of liaisons to the consumer in stage four. This author would suggest that authenticity is not a closed process or continuum, but is a reflexive process that is manufactured and maintained by both the producer and consumer. This is most powerfully demonstrated by Cranton & Carusetta (2004) who have elucidated how teachers develop authenticity as a fluid process that moves through different contexts and participants. They choose to take their philosophical inspiration from Jung rather than the existential authenticity of Heidegger. Key here is the idea that what constitutes an authentic relationship, and the constituents of that such as trust

and understanding, shift in both different contexts and with different peoples. A further method of approaching this comes from Rahm, Miller, Hartley, & Moore (2003) who have used Piaget's thought and systems theory to cast authenticity as perpetually *emergent*. This notion of emergence and fluidity is compelling and should be the foundation of any resulting definition of authenticity.

Management scholars have devoted some attention to trying to define authenticity as a facet of modern leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005). Scholars of learning have also attempted to define and understand the role of authenticity in learning and learning technologies (Herrington Oliver, & Reeves, 2003; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996). These studies are an extension of the idea developed earlier that authenticity is a concept that is centred on the individual, that it is a fluid state, and that it is an experiential phenomenon. That is, it is something that is experienced rather than something that has a physical manifestation. This is developed excellently by Shamir & Eilam (2005) who focus on the idea of authenticity being built around self concept clarity, self knowledge and self concordance and that authentic leadership is built entirely around the self.

This idea that authenticity is a fluid, reflexive process is crucial to understanding its importance within the context of relationship marketing. There are a number of facets to the literature in this manner. While this idea of authenticity is vague, longevity or perceived longevity is one of its defining features. Clearly, if authenticity were defined as a process that continually evolves over time, this couples very neatly with the mechanic that governs relationship marketing. However, there is a considerably more nuanced way of approaching time and authenticity in relationship marketing.

Much of the work in the tourist literature demonstrates that authenticity, however it is defined, does tend to rely on notions of history, a historical view of the past, and particularly the notion of heritage. This can be considered in light of the idea of longevity discussed in the preceding section on the authentic-like idea used to explore relationship marketing. This is something much more complex than the acknowledgement that authenticity and relationship marketing develop over protracted periods of time. This has largely been explored in the context of marketing tourism attractions, but the points are valid across any area of marketing. Goulding (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis concerning ways in which heritage is actively marketed and how authenticity is crucial to that. There is some work involved in transplanting this to the specific setting of relationship marketing, but it is necessary. This analysis of authenticity in the marketing of history needs to be inverted in a sense, such that there is a consideration into the role that history plays in the marketing of authenticity. That is not to say that some work in this area has not already been done, such as that by Nancarrow & Nancarrow (2002). They demonstrate ways in which Coca-Cola develops the relationship with its customer with a crucial emphasis on authenticity. The relationship is incrementally developed through through protracted periods of time but also through manipulating the experience of time through idealized heritages and so forth. This is authentic branding and is developed through many iterations of a reflexive process between customer and seller.

Moving Forward

The preceding sections of this paper have sought to demonstrate two things. First, there is a body of work that focuses on concepts and constructs that are similar to authenticity, but do not quite capture all the variability of a relationship between customer and seller. This work has concentrated heavily on the notion of trust in the relationship, but has also explored the notions of longevity and ways of knowing the customer. This work does provide valuable insight into relationship marketing and ways in which authenticity plays a role. Second, to offer a definition of authenticity, as a means of encapsulating all of these individual

constructs and discussing the dynamic way in which they intertwine to become the relationship between customer and seller. The concept of authenticity was defined as a reflexive process, whereby, the concepts of trust, longevity and knowing are incrementally built up through multiple iterations over time. Each party is able to change the terms of what each construct means, as the relationship evolves. This was then supported by a literature review of the various streams that flow into the authenticity construct.

There remains much work to accomplish moving forward. First, the nomological net associated with authenticity has to be specified. Much of this has been accomplished herein. Second, a theoretical model has to be specified in which independent and criterion variables need to be identified. This model needs to integrate contributions from relationship marketing. Finally, the model needs to be empirically tested. If it is accepted that authenticity is a process, then it is will be challenging to test it without developing a new research methodology. One method would be to follow the lead of work such as that by Smith (2007) who has acknowledged that is not possible to excavate a process as a traditional research environment, but what is possible is to take a series of 'snapshots' in action over time. This provides evidence of how that process is developing over time and how individual constructs such as trust are working within it.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the notion of authenticity in relationship marketing and to set out where there are gaps in the current literature that need to be addressed. The rationale for doing this was to demonstrate that authenticity is an important and distinct variable in the relationship marketing framework and as yet it has received little concerted academic attention. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that authenticity has been explored in a variety of academic settings. The paper began by establishing why relationship marketing was the right venue for discussion authenticity in its widest sense, before focusing on the literature in this sub-discipline, and how it examines authenticity. The paper demonstrated that authenticity has several key components, and rather than being a singular state it is a reflexive process. Beyond this it was argued that there a need to develop a way of separating out authenticity as a distinct variable in the relationship marketing process, in order that further the research agenda. It was also argued that this needs to develop into a way of looking at authenticity in a wider context as well as at the individual case study level. Hopefully, the defining of authenticity in this paper will open furtive scholarly discourse.

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