

Narrative Analysis of a Marketing Relationship: The Consumer's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article uses narrative analysis to study a marketing relationship elicited by means of a phenomenological interview. The focal point is the consumer's perspective, and the single incident of a marketing encounter is treated as a core event in relationship marketing. The narrative is derived by means of a phenomenological interview, which provides an in-depth account of a relationship that ends in brand switching. The consumer's role is studied by means of narrative analysis, which exposes the consumer's script for the relationship. Marketing implications are discussed in terms of the importance of the single encounter, consumer role enactment in a relationship, and the consumer's desire for relationships based on emotional satisfaction. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Relationships can provide a sense of belonging, feelings of warmth, and help in coping with difficulties. Unfortunately, our dealings with others can also lead to conflicts, disappointment, and jealousy. Whether they be good, bad, or a mixture of both, relationships are a central part of the human experience (Perlman & Duck, 1987, p. 7).

The concept of relationship marketing, introduced in the services literature by Berry (1983), has been found useful in the study of the business-to-business market (Peterson, 1995) and organizational management. However, attention is now turning to the study of "relationship marketing in the consumer markets" (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995, p. 254) to discover the forces that drive consumers to establish, maintain, and dissolve relationships (see Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Sheth and Parvatiyar have systematized the approach to understanding why consumers "engage in relational market behavior" (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995, p. 256) by identifying underlying personal, social, and institutional factors.

The article proposes an extension of this approach, focusing on a marketing encounter—a discrete transaction engaged in by a particular individual—as a building block of long-term relationship marketing. The point of studying what Bitner calls "one encounter at a time" (1995, p. 246) is to look closely at the consumer's perception of a single marketing experience as a conduit to learning more about what makes relationships work over time. That is, the article follows Bagozzi's (1995, p. 275) suggestion to begin conceptualizing "what a marketing relationship is" by starting with the smallest unit—a consumer-seller transaction. To examine this in depth, an extended interview (the phenomenological interview) that elicits consumer-generated narrative as data is conducted. The rationale is that a consumer's story is a repository of information about cognitive and affective responses to brands, advertising, and interpersonal exchanges.

The way has been paved for the use of consumer stories by focus group interviews (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991), ethnographic studies (McGrath, Sherry, & Heisley, 1993), projective techniques (Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992; Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1992), and, most notably, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Bitner et al., 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). CIT interviews ask consumers when the incident occurred, what circumstances precipitated it, how the service provider conducted it, and whether the outcome generated satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Bitner, Nyquist, & Booms, 1985).

The phenomenological interview (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1996) complements the CIT (Bitner et al., 1990) by eliciting information about the antecedents and consequences of a single incident, moving backward and forward in time to situate a single incident in the individual's life history. This adds a contextual dimension as another perspective from which to view consumer behavior. When a consumer describes a single incident embedded in his/her life context, she or he reveals a personal assessment of expectations in a relationship (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991) and the thoughts and emotions (Gardner, 1985) that accompany its development.

The use of narrative text as data is justified in the interpretive par-

adigm as a contribution to better understanding of the consumer's perspective (Arnould & Price, 1993; Lutz, 1989; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992; Sherry, 1990; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). As Arnould and Price point out, "the narrative of the experience is central to the overall evaluation. For these experiences, participants may access an array of culturally informed, preconscious scripts or narrative themes" (1993, p. 42). Researchers can examine narrative representations of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with relationships (Riessman, 1993) by identifying standard elements such as plot, themes, character, interaction, and language (Levy, 1981; Stern, 1989).

The application of research on narrative form (Bakhtin, 1981) to consumption stories contributes to the study of the consumer's quest for satisfaction in relationships central to marketing exchange processes (Derrida, 1967/1982; Foucault, 1972). Close reading of narratives maps onto previous research on consumer expectations of sales interactions as dramatic performances (Grove, Fisk, & Bitner, 1992), dyadic role enactments (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985) and consumer-salesperson relationships (Bitner et al., 1990). It also extends prior research on emotional influences in unique service relationships (such as dating services, river rafting, sky diving, and so forth), which has found that consumers seek personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993), social support (Thompson, 1996), social connectedness (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; McGrath, Sherry, & Heisley, 1993), and alleviation of loneliness (Forman & Sirnan, 1991). This article begins with an overview of the interview and the narrative it yields. Next, it presents a case study that demonstrates the dynamics of the marketing relationship. The analysis provides a close reading of a case study to demonstrate the psychological forces that drive the consumer's behavior. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for relationship marketers.

GENERATING THE NARRATIVE: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW

Whereas critical incident interviews elicit responses to a series of researcher-driven questions (Bitner et al., 1985), the phenomenological interview elicits free-form consumer-driven text. It is designed to give primacy to the informant's perspective rather than to the researcher's expectations (Polkinghorne, 1989) by encouraging the informant to describe significant incidents in the context of his or her life history (Husserl, 1970). Since 1985 it has been used to study experiential themes in consumer behavior (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) such as ownership of special possessions (Myers, 1985), impulsive buying (Rook, 1987), compulsive buying (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), everyday consumption and shopping activities (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990), addictive consumption (Hirschman,

1992), and individual responses to advertisements (Mick & Buhl, 1992). By using this technique to elicit a narrative of a consumption relationship, researchers step back and encourage consumers to reveal perceptions of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, evaluations of quality, and switching behavior.

These revelations emerge over the course of an interview in which consumers contextualize a marketing relationship in their life histories. That is, the interview technique facilitates the phenomenological study of *lived meaning*, defined as higher-order meanings captured by a single experience set in the context of personal history over time (Giorgi, 1986; Kvale, 1983). Narratives are obtained by unstructured and open-ended researcher–informant dialogues with consumers, who are asked to describe their understanding of consumption experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989; Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). The researcher audiotapes the interview, which is then transcribed as a verbatim written text and given to the informant for checking. After narrative analysis has been performed, the informant is again given the manuscript and asked for feedback.

The point of open-ended dialogue and informant participation in the writing process is a “research partnership” (McGrath, Sherry, & Heisley, 1993, p. 285). The interview is allowed to go where the consumer takes it (Giorgi, 1986; Kvale, 1983; Thompson et al., 1989) by means of free-ranging dialogue in which the researcher formulates questions in response to the informant’s reflections. These recollections emerge naturalistically (Giorgi, 1986) as consumers discuss memories of consumption experiences and researchers ask questions that call for fuller description. For example, if a respondent were to say, “I had a wonderful relationship with store X. . . .” the researcher would follow up by asking, “Can you tell me a little more about how you came to feel that way?” The researcher strives to understand the informant’s perception, asking questions that result in a narrative unit encompassing past, present, and future. In this way, the unstructured interview foregrounds a consumption relationship in the informant’s personal meaning system and encourages description of the personal and social influences that form the incident’s background.

ANALYZING THE INTERVIEW TEXT: NARRATOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

The researcher interprets the interview text by iterative readings, moving back and forth between the parts and the whole (Gadamer, 1975). Understanding develops in the course of iteration, and the researcher discerns the thematic and structural aspects of the consumer’s described relationship (Thompson et al., 1989).

Narratology—the study of the theory, language, and techniques of narrative (Greimas, 1971; Martin, 1986; Prince, 1982; Scholes, 1981)—

provides an analytical tool for examination of the content, structure, and context of this description. It is drawn from literary criticism, and its aim is “identification of structural elements and their diverse modes of combination, with recurrent narrative devices, and with the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told” (Abrams, 1993, p. 123). This mode of analysis treats consumption narratives in terms of familiar literary elements—plot (the action), characters (the players), structural pattern (the organization), and language (the verbal expression).

By looking at a narrative not as a given but as an entity to be studied (Iser, 1978), researchers can gain insight into the consumer and the marketing “others” refracted through the lens of the former’s perceptions (Bruner, 1987; Pratt, 1977; Prince, 1982; Scholes, 1981). Attention to narrative patterns (Stern, 1994, 1995) contributes to deeper understanding of consumer behavior by focusing on the way that individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize or leave out; their roles as heroes, villains, or victims in the plot; their self-talk; the way they talk about others. In this sense, narratives can be viewed not simply as “a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 1), but, more holistically, as way of telling about one’s relationship to others and the reasons behind them. The case study will now be presented to analyze the narrative for information about the teller’s relationships with marketing others.

PAUL’S NARRATIVE: CONSTRUCTING THE RELATIONSHIP

The text is constructed out of a transcript of a phenomenological interview with Paul, a 34-year-old graduate student at a major southern university. It consists of six verbatim excerpts that begin with Paul’s response to an open-ended question: “Can you think of a shopping experience that you would like to talk about?” Each verbatim is numbered for ease of reference. During the interview, Paul’s perceptions of relationship quality, conflict, the breakdown of trust, dissatisfaction, brand switching, and dissonance were revealed in the experience that he chose to talk about.

From a narratological perspective, Paul uses the structural elements of plot, character, and language to represent his understanding of the distinction between a good versus a bad service relationship. He is the central character (the narrator) speaking in the first-person singular; his relationship with the sales clerk and the brand comprises the plot (the what and why); and his language reveals the figurative and structural systems (the how) that he imposes on the plot. Note that Paul is both the narrator and the main character (as is Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*).

What this means is that the story is enclosed in his perspective—he is the *I* talking about the *I*, and others with whom he interacts are reflected through his consciousness. That is, the relationship is seen from his point of view only (Chatman, 1978; Genette, 1982), for he is the one who defines the characters, presents events in a temporal arrangement, and describes success or failure in achieving his consumption goal (Ricoeur, 1984). Perspectival subjectivity allows the researcher to get inside the narrator's head and experience things as he does. By focusing on the consumer's perception of a relationship (as distinct from that of other participants or marketing institutions), researchers can gain deeper insights into his/her self-concept and world view.

The Background

Paul describes a shopping experience—a service encounter in a sporting goods store—that turns on a pivotal relationship with the salesman. The narrative includes background information, called “exposition” in literary works, that reveals several significant bits of information about the personal factors influencing his consumer behavior. To begin, Paul is highly involved in the purchase, for he invests a considerable portion of his identity in a personal fitness routine. He characterizes himself as someone who is serious about aerobics and who views the purchase of aerobics shoes—the goal of this trip—as relevant to his self-concept. Further, the purchase is high risk, for Paul is recovering from an ankle injury and does not want to reinjure himself. In addition, the plot contrasts the memory of an earlier positive relationship with the negative one he now experiences—conflict with the “salesguy” and “lousy service.” The brand switch (from Reebok to Avia) is colored by his feeling that the salesperson is insensitive to his personal needs and that the marketing institution (the store) is opportunistic:

Excerpt 1: I went in to the store planning to buy Reebok's newest shoe, no matter what it cost, because I was having some ankle problems and I wanted the best shoe they had. I had an impression that Reebok was the better shoe for aerobics and I had been using Reeboks for three or four years but, when I started looking, I got the impression that the Avia shoe might be better. The new Reebok shoe seemed to be designed more for an all around work-out, weight lifting, aerobics and things like that. This shoe [the Avia] was an older model that seemed to be specialized just for aerobics, it was lighter and didn't seem to be constructed for all around exercise. It was cheaper also. It was \$49 and the others were like \$79. I was planning to pay \$79 because I thought the more you pay the better the product is going to be. So that was sort of a negative thing. The fact the price was lower. I also had lousy ser-

vice in the store. The salesguy seemed to be trying to sell me the cheaper shoe to get me out the door. He was continually pushing the cheaper shoe thinking I would just buy the cheaper shoe and get it over with. But I was trying to make a smart decision and so I tried them on several times and it took me twenty, maybe even thirty minutes, to make the decision. Really when I made the decision I felt relieved. It's funny how something as minimal as that can be a major decision.

The Conflict

The narrator's revelation of the way the action unfolds profoundly affects its meaning (Cronon, 1992). The most important characteristics of a plot (Chatman, 1978) are the imposition of chronological order and causality on an experience. Plots progress toward a goal (an end) by providing temporal arrangement of events (what things happen) and indicating relationships among the participating characters (why they happen) (Ricoeur, 1984). Goal-directedness is a narrative convention in Western culture's story stock, and plots often turn on the conflict between a central character (the protagonist) and an opposing character (the antagonist) who blocks achievement of the protagonist's goal.

Here, Paul is the protagonist, and his goal is the purchase of the newest and most expensive model of the best brand of aerobic shoe. Paul's perception of the quality of the experience hinges on his relationship with the salesperson, whom he positions as the antagonist thwarting his desires at every turn. From Paul's perspective, the relationship evidences the salesperson's insensitivity to the customer's psychological concerns— anxiety about further exercise-related injuries, desire to buy the best shoe available regardless of price, emerging doubt about which brand is best, and the need to explore alternatives.

Paul experiences tension between his feeling that the salesperson is pushing him to buy quickly and his own need to take the time necessary to make a smart decision. He feels that the salesperson is pressuring him simply to make an expedient sale and get rid of an indecisive customer. The negative interpersonal dynamic emanates from Paul's feeling of rejection (the salesman just wants "to get me out the door"), and he reacts by blaming the salesperson for not taking a genuine interest in helping the customer. Even more significant, Paul condemns the salesperson for failing to respect him as a knowledgeable shopper and for ignoring Paul's desire to buy the best product regardless of price:

Excerpt 2: They just tried to sell it on price because they assumed that was all I was shopping for. They seemed annoyed that I was taking so long in making the decision. The thing that irritated me was that I thought I was a fairly

knowledgeable shopper and I thought that they should understand some of these things and not just be looking at what is the cheapest shoe for you to get. They weren't very knowledgeable. They seemed like they could have been selling shoes in J. C. Penney's or some place like that. I got the impression that they didn't like their jobs. They were there just because that was the job they had. Poor service irritates me in stores like that [a sporting goods store]. I remember back when I was into running, there was one store that a local runner owned and he had people in there that knew about running. They were always friendly, they were always at the [running] races and they were always very knowledgeable. If you went in there and said, "I just started running. What kind of shoe should I buy?" They would go to the trouble to decide what you should buy based on your build and the kind of running you were going to do. They wouldn't try to sell a shoe just because it was a particular color or a particular price.

Paul interprets the salesperson's emphasis on Avia's lower price as a sign that he is not alert to Paul's values. Rather, he has the disinterested attitude of someone doing a job just for the money. Note that this is Paul's interpretation, for a salesperson who tries to sell a lower-priced product may be expressing concern for the customer's pocketbook or clarifying an erroneous high-price/high-quality correlation. However, Paul's hostility is motivated by his feeling that the salesperson is rejecting him by not respecting his values—recall that Paul believes that "the more you pay the better the product is going to be." Perceived disrespect causes Paul to question the salesperson's expertise (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990), a key factor in a successful relationship. To Paul, a salesperson's specialized knowledge is associated with respect for the consumer, and his sense of disrespectful treatment colors his assessment of poor service quality.

This is made explicit when Paul compares his current encounter with a prior experience at a running store he previously patronized. In contrast to the aerobic shoe salesperson, the salespeople at the running store are described as eager to help customers by matching their needs to the available products. The store is owned by a runner, and his staff is committed to the serious runner's well-being as well as to product expertise. Whereas the aerobic shoe salesperson appears to care only about objective brand attributes such as price or construction, the running shoe salespersons cared about customers. They knew about running and were intent on finding brands with attributes that best met their customers' needs.

The meaning that Paul assigns to the interpersonal relationship resonates with the meaning that he assigns to brands, for Paul's description of brands/promotion flows out of his opinion about customer-ori-

entation (the customer is king) versus profit orientation (take the money and run):

Excerpt 3: I really had the opinion that Avia was just trying to catch a bandwagon. Just trying to plug their shoe. Like when Brooks was selling a running shoe as a walking shoe. I guess I have the feeling that some companies make an effort to put out a quality product and others are just looking for a way to make a few extra bucks and are not really concerned about the customer that is getting the shoe. They're just money hungry I guess. Like when Brooks says their running shoes would be good for walking. Well, my impression is that's a misapplication of their product because running shoes don't have very good lateral support and you would be better off buying a Rockport or somebody that specializes in walking shoes. It just disappoints me in a company when they just try to hawk their products anyway they can.

For Paul, specialization equals customer orientation, as opposed to mass marketing's profit orientation. In his personal positioning map, a multiuse shoe is an ambiguous offering that increases the risk of injury for serious exercisers. Elsewhere in the interview Paul says: "One of my major concerns in buying a shoe has always been the amount of injuries that you get if your [running] mileage goes up or your attendance at aerobics goes up." He feels that a specialized shoe helps him engage more seriously in aerobics by diminishing the physical risk.

The Turning Point

As the battle of brand meanings (Avias versus Reeboks) plays out, it turns on the binary opposition of light/heavy, and Paul's negative evaluation of Avias as faddish begins to shift. A turning point occurs when his previously positive perception of Reeboks as specialized is challenged by the salesperson's emphasis on its heaviness and multi-use versatility:

Excerpt 4: The difference I saw was that the Reebok was a heavier shoe and the salesperson was telling me, as one of its benefits, that it was designed for weight lifting and aerobics and other kinds of exercise. And when I tried it on it was a heavier design. It felt heavier than the other aerobic shoes I was used to. The Avia felt better on my feet. They felt lighter and pretty sturdy. I was interested in heel stability and they seemed to have that. It just seemed to be specialized for a purpose.

However, the salesperson's assurance that Reeboks are heavier is

counterpersuasive, for it reinforces Paul's ambivalence about the brand, already fueled by his feeling of being rushed by an uncaring salesman. Paul's negative impression of the salesperson's attitude halos into a negative perception of the brand whose benefits the salesman praises (at this point, Reeboks). Paul's positive feelings about his newly preferred brand—the Avia felt more like a shoe designed for aerobic exercise—echo the salesperson's original pitch, praising the cheaper shoe. In this way, the bad relationship that Paul experiences enables him to reconfigure the formerly negative meaning he attributed to Avias. Ironically, the salesperson's shift (in an apparent attempt to follow the customer's preference) pushes Paul toward a new preference for the lower-priced brand originally pushed by the salesperson. The positive transformation in Paul's view of Avias runs on its own track, more related to his own personal script (including reference group influences) than to the salesperson's efforts to persuade:

Excerpt 5: I think beforehand my impression was that Avia were pretty good shoes that were being promoted very well. Now, my feeling is that they are shoes that are well designed. Probably more people were stressing that they liked the Avia shoe a lot more than people who stressed that they liked the Reebok. I guess people who had mentioned to me that they were wearing that type [Avia], before, I thought they were wearing because it was a trendy thing to do. Now my feeling is that it is a good shoe and promotion is just a part of it.

Whereas Paul once condemned Avia wearers as trend followers manipulated by advertising hype—a negative reference group—he now recategorizes the users as serious aerobicists capable of judging a quality product. Paul's transformed product and user meanings reinforce his evaluation of Avias as well designed rather than merely well promoted.

Yet despite Paul's revised view of Avia wearers as a positive reference group, one that he has symbolically joined, his brand switch does not give him a sense of closure. Rather, he experiences continued anxiety in the form of postpurchase dissonance, and the final evaluation of his purchase remains ambivalent until the correctness of his decision is confirmed by actual product use. The positive outcome leads to post hoc framing of his service encounter as a success, for even in the face of a bad relationship, he was still able to make a good decision. Thus, his narrative ends with a recollection of postpurchase satisfaction—a reduction in cognitive dissonance—in which the shoes perfectly meet his needs:

Excerpt 6: I felt partly relieved and had a little apprehension of am I making the right decision. So until I had actually worn them to class a few days, I was concerned if I had made

the right decision. I knew if I wore them and started having problems with my legs that I would have to go back to something else but I've been able to go to aerobics without any problems in my legs. I haven't been having any Achilles problems. They seem to be perfect for what I was looking for.

The Triumph

Paul's relationship with the salesperson ends with triumph over adversity, for the plot is resolved when the protagonist achieves his goal despite the antagonist's blocking maneuvers. That is, despite Paul's experience of poor service, he spent half an hour enduring a bad relationship with the salesperson and ended by making a purchase. Note that he did not cut short the unpleasant scene by walking out and going to another store. The question that arises is, why not? The clue lies in the narrative, for it reveals Paul's ambivalence about aerobics and his need to resolve it. One way of understanding his behavior is to view it in terms of the conventional plot expectation of a happy ending. Looked at this way, Paul's ability to graft a happy ending onto a miserable story allows him to redeem his emotional equilibrium by buying a needed item despite poor service. He resolves his ambivalence by achieving his goal, even if he has to reconstruct reality to retain his position as the hero and avoid becoming his antagonist's victim.

Paul's ambivalence originates in his status as an ex-runner, forced to take up aerobics as a result of an ankle injury. Injured runners who must replace a preferred exercise with a less-preferred one are likely to project their feelings of anger onto others (doctors who do not care about their psychological well-being, salespeople who convince them to buy incorrect shoes, municipal authorities who allow streets to deteriorate) to avoid facing the emotional wrench of an unwanted change in fitness routines. Paul ascribes callousness and insensitivity to salespeople, manufacturers, products, brands, and other consumers engaged in aerobics. His ambivalence about dedication to his new exercise drives his positioning of the salesperson as antagonistic, someone whose "take the money and run" attitude is perceived as a deliberate means of frustrating Paul. However, Paul overcomes the obstacle, and the narrative has a happily-ever-after ending despite an unpromising beginning.

RESOLUTION OF BINARY OPPOSITIONS

The development of the plot—the way it progresses to a resolution—provides information about the narrator's identity and his relationship with others. That is, the way that Paul tells the story reveals as much about his psychology as it does about the marketing exchange. It is

important that Paul's narrative develops along nonlinear lines, for this structure is counterconventional and the temporal movement is nonconformist. The convention of linearity is so dominant in Western stories that departures are noteworthy. Recall that the predominant cultural expectation since Aristotle's day is that plots proceed from a beginning through a middle to an end (Fergusson, 1961). Linearity is the backdrop against which deviations stand out, and Paul's narrative moves in hesitant, discordant, and jagged fashion, rather than in a straight line. His departures from linearity represent breaks in the narrative flow that signal the disruption of "normal" temporal order.

To examine the interrupts, consider three binary oppositions that structure Paul's ambivalence in nonlinear fashion: past/present, human/object, and product reality/advertising promise. Ambivalence is signaled from the outset, when Paul characterizes himself as "fairly serious" about aerobics. The phrase turns on itself, undercutting dedication ("serious") with denigration—the diminutive modifier ("fairly"). Paul's wavering opinion about the role of aerobics in his life is expressed in the phrase's backing and filling, for even though aerobics is not Paul's first choice, he is nonetheless determined to take it seriously.

The binaries occur in three flashbacks, each of which presents a piece of information that is important not simply because of what is said, but also because it disturbs the orderly flow of time. The first flashback is personal—it is about time and identity; the second is social—it is about relationships with others; and the third is institutional—it is about marketing and advertising. Each is indicated by grammatical (Greimas, 1971) time words (adjectives, adverbs, and verb tenses), reliable indicators of a chronological move backward or forward in a story (Hamburger, 1973). The first two flashbacks are introduced by the word *when*, and the third by the word *beforehand*. They serve as statements of oppositions that reveal the narrator's identity concerns.

The Self and Time. The personal flashback (Excerpt 2, line 11, "I remember back when") concerns the self in time, where the current sales exchange is positioned as an unsatisfactory echo of the nostalgically recollected past encounter when Paul was younger and "into running." The assumption that running is a superior sport grounds Paul's behavior, for the conflicted relationship between the narrator and the aerobic shoe salesman appears to predate the actual encounter. That is, Paul walks into the store with an attitude. The source of his attitude is nostalgia for the past—when his ankles were strong, when he was a runner, when he entered races—which he associates with friendlier, more informed, and more helpful salespeople. In contrast, he experiences the present as an inferior time when uncaring salespersons provide "poor service." Thus, the present relationship begins badly because of antecedents in Paul's personal life—he is motivated by preference for the past.

The Self and Others. The second flashback (Excerpt 3) concerns the self in relation to others, where Paul's personification of objects indicates his tendency to personalize evaluations of others. He projects his feelings about liked/disliked activities onto brands and manufacturing firms associated with those activities. Projection is evidenced by Paul's attribution of human traits to inanimate objects, a linguistic figure known as *personification* because it endows nonhuman things with human feelings (Abrams, 1993). Personification first appears in his comment (italics added) that "you would be better off buying a Rockport or *somebody* that specializes in walking shoes." It is continued in other product references ("Avia was just trying to catch a bandwagon"; Avia was "trying to plug their shoe"; and Brooks was "just money hungry"). Paul's consistent use of metaphors and personification in reference to athletic equipment (but not in reference to anything else) suggests that this part of his life is emotionally charged.

The Self and Marketing. The third flashback (Excerpt 5) concerns product attributes in relation to advertising symbols and reference groups, and it points toward a resolution of Paul's ambivalence. Paul revisits his evaluation of Avia as merely a "trendy" brand, now expressing the belief that "it is a good shoe." The shift in brand meaning indicates that Paul no longer categorizes Avias as poorly designed but well promoted. Rather, he recategorizes the brand as "good," ending his narrative with a change in brand preference that dictates his purchase decision. Despite Paul's conflict, ambivalence, and service dissatisfaction, he ends up with a successful purchase by means of a brand switch. That is, the structure of Paul's narrative tells not only what happened (Riessman, 1993), but also how things happened as they did. In so doing, it lays bare the values that guide Paul's expectations in a sales relationship.

Salesperson empathy is the most salient value, for the locus of Paul's dissatisfaction is the salesperson's lack thereof, which functions as the chief determinant of poor service quality. The theme of customer satisfaction as a result of salesperson empathy has previously been identified in unique retail/service encounters such as dating services (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995) and gift returns (Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1992). Here, Paul's narrative suggests that it may be generalizable across mundane encounters as well. The Adelman and Ahuvia study of dating services found that empathy was defined as the provider's social and psychological support—sensitivity to the client's anxieties, bolstering the client's self-esteem, and engaging in meaningful conversation about the client's selection criteria. The clients valued emotional support, which was significantly related to their satisfaction with the service. Similarly, the Sherry et al. study of gift returns found that the act of returning a gift is marked by strong feelings of internal conflict symbolic of a complex emotional relationship between the giver and receiver

(1992). The retailer functions as an emotional moderator who resolves the conflict by diminishing the customer's fear of being rejected and by supporting his or her self-esteem.

Paul's narrative suggests that empathetic/nonempathetic relationships also influence customer perceptions of satisfaction across a broader range of service encounters. That is, Bagozzi's suggestion that "emotion is a central aspect of many marketing relationships" (1995, p. 274) and that consumer satisfaction "must originate from within" (1995, p. 275) may be keys to the conceptualization of what a marketing relationship is. Better understanding of a marketing relationship may lead to better understanding of relationship marketing.

Paul enters the marketing exchange with expectations based on his personal needs in a service relationship: He expects emotional support and moderation of tension from someone who understands his ambivalence and can help resolve it. His expectations reflect a combination of biological, emotional, and moral concerns—his physical injury combines with the desire to be understood, with strong feelings about the (im)morality of advertising, and with reference group aspirations. He evaluates the present encounter in light of past experiences in a running shoe store, where the salesperson's empathy was tied in with knowledge of running.

Central to this perception is the notion that customer-salesperson bonding occurs as a consequence of shared interest in products and experiences (participation in the same races). It seems evident that "given consumer desire for a personal interaction with their marketers," satisfactory single-level transactional bonding is a prerequisite for corporate bonding (Sheth & Parvityar, 1995, p. 265). When Paul was a runner, he and the salespersons at his favored store developed an empathetic bond that enabled Paul to evaluate the salesperson as trustworthy. But that was then and this is now. At present, Paul feels that the aerobic shoe salesperson shares neither common interests nor experiences. His ambivalence about aerobics is made manifest in the representation of a single encounter as a Proustian moment that unfolds to color the present relationship with traces of past meanings.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The purpose in eliciting and analyzing a consumer narrative is to gain insight into the consumer's view of a marketing relationship. The limitation of a single case study/single product category can be overcome by future research on interviews with multiple informants/multiple product categories. Further, the limitation of a single-method approach can be overcome by multimethod research that supplements analysis of consumer narratives with observation of actual service encounters. A more encompassing methodological perspective and larger informant

samples would provide greater breadth of understanding. Nonetheless, the study fits into the tradition of assessment of idiographic detail that provides the basis for insights into larger psychological and sociological processes (Giorgi, 1986; Levy, 1981). The implications that these insights have for marketers will now be discussed, especially in terms of motivations that drive consumers to enter and to remain in relationships (Peterson, 1995).

The Single Encounter. Insofar as customer relationships are built and destroyed one encounter at a time (Bitner, 1995), the challenge to marketers is to extract the maximum amount of information from lengthy stories that customers tell about single incidents. Any encounter can be a critical one, and Bitner points out that more research is necessary to explore “the relative impact of discrete service encounters on relationship continuation or relationship potential” (1995, p. 250). Paul’s narrative reveals that a discrete encounter is rich in significance to consumers (Price, Arnould, & Deibler, 1995), capable of evoking an elaborate self-narrative that spans concerns across a person’s life.

Paul’s narrative is especially rich in commercial meanings and imagery, for they have become interwoven with his personal history. The single act of buying a pair of running shoes evokes positive memories of previous service encounters, opinions about price/quality relationships, brand meanings associated with service quality, evaluations of advertising, and acknowledgment of reference group influences on preference. Marketers can maximize the opportunity to learn from a single narrative by viewing it as a locus for perceptions of the self and others crucial to relationship development.

Narrative Information. Each narrative provides insight into the way that consumers make sense of events in their lives, long considered the major function of stories in human experience (Bruner, 1987). The importance of consumer narratives in experiential evaluations appears to be applicable in abbreviated service contexts as well as extended ones (Arnould & Price, 1993), including conventional retail transactions. Paul’s narrative reveals his need to make sense of the encounter by drawing on reflections from past experience to differentiate between satisfying/dissatisfying service encounters. Marketers might want to add the phenomenological interview to the Critical Incident Technique interview (Bitner et al., 1990) to encourage consumers to contextualize a specific encounter in terms of their broader life histories and to reveal their patterns of sense making. In so doing, marketers can gain insight into the consumer’s inner self by examining the meaning encoded not only in events, but also in the way they are narratively structured.

Heroic Consumption. One of the most common narratives in Western culture is the story of perseverance in the face of adversity (see Arnould

& Price, 1993). Marketers can understand more about consumers by attending to the marketing relationship as a locus of role enactment. The network of personal life associations that an encounter evokes reveals that customers position themselves in accordance with the roles they play. Just as relationships provide practical benefits (simplifying customer choice) and emotional benefits (stress reduction, social support), so too do they provide a stage for consumers. Positive relationships allow the consumer to be a hero, which is likely to contribute to well-being (Bitner, 1995) and bolster self-esteem.

Paul's narrative indicates that a relatively short encounter with a salesperson can be experienced as an emotionally charged and meaningful plot. Paul wants to interact with someone who is as highly involved with the product as he is, as well as one who shows genuine concern for his needs. He sought a relationship with someone like himself, so that they could problem solve jointly and arrive at a perfect choice. His poor service story is structured as a tragedy-avoidance narrative, pitting himself against an uncaring salesperson with a "take the money and run" orientation. However, he achieves a happy ending by dint of his perseverance in the face of adversity—he takes on a heroic role in overcoming the salesperson's lack of concern. Interestingly, his dissatisfaction with the encounter heightens his satisfaction with the positive outcome. This suggests that marketers ought to consider the consumer's position in a story as important as the product/brand position, if promotion is to do the best job of matching products to desired benefits.

The Value of Relationships. The benefits to consumers of marketing relationships sustained over time appear to be more emotionally driven than mere choice reduction (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995) or choice augmentation (Peterson, 1995). Paul's narrative suggests that his goal in a commercial relationship relates as much to his desire for a good relationship *per se* as to cognitive streamlining. Recall that Paul idealizes his youthful relationship (when he was a runner), and he wants to recreate a similar one in the present. His experience of brand choice is colored by his desire for a relationship partner—someone who understands him, who cares about him, and who will reinforce his values. Marketing relationships may work best over the long term when they satisfy the consumer's needs for nurturance, empathy, and caring. From this perspective, marketers might want to approach relationships with consumers not from the vantage point of exchange theory, but from that of intimacy theory (Wiersema, 1996).

In sum, the stories consumers tell about service incidents reveal information in both structure and theme. The marketing challenge is to access the narrative meanings that people use to make sense of daily realities, to frame service encounters as symbols of consumer success,

and to view the relationship in terms of personal fulfillment rather than quid pro quo exchanges.

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