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Do Opposites Attract?

Stephanie M. Mangus, PhD and Ayalla Ruvio, PhD

There has been a long-standing debate as to what determines a successful relationship. Is it the existence of similar traits between two individuals or the differences between them? Assimilation and differentiation are two concepts that explain how individuals build relationships, and they are usually conceptualized as opposite ends of a simple continuum. However, these two characteristics are actually individual constructs that each plays its own key role in developing relationships, which are dynamic and ever-changing. Relationships are multidimensional and have external social factors acting on them to make them stronger or break them down. Therefore, it is imperative, especially in buyer-seller relationships, to utilize both similarities and differences between individuals to strengthen the relationship. Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) guides how assimilation and differentiation regulate how people behave with each other. According to this theory, an individual’s behavior is not static and adapts itself to situations based on social cues that call for more or less assimilation and differentiation, respectively.

Assimilation and Differentiation Theories

There are two needs that drive the success of a relationship. The first, assimilation, is driven by a need to belong or to be a part of a group in society. An individual will draw from similar traits, experiences, or characteristics in another person to find similarities with themselves. Assimilation is often formed due to a need to be part of the group. Individuals will formulate ideas and opinions from interacting with peers.

The second need, differentiation, is based on a desire to be unique and define one's own identity. Differentiation causes individuals to act or make purchases based on their desire to be different from the group or from their peers and to stand out as distinctive in a good way. This behavior is seen in any interaction between two individuals who, while exploring similarities between them, would pointedly state those factors that set them apart in a crowd. Differentiation helps form a person’s individual identity just as assimilation helps form their social identity.
The need for assimilation and for differentiation can both be utilized to build a strong buyer-seller relationship. Most individuals can identify these needs based on interactions and social cues and can adjust their behavior accordingly.

The optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) conceptualizes how much one’s need to be distinct influences behavior; however, it is important to expand on this theory to blend both similarity and distinctiveness traits to meet the buyer’s needs. An effective way to accomplish this is to find out personal traits with which buyers identify and call on similar traits to create a network of individuals called an “in-group.” This network would also fail to identify with individuals that do not share these personal traits, hence forming an “out-group.” The existence of this “out-group” tends to strengthen the bond within the network.

**Compatibility-Based Assimilation Strategy**

Every relationship contains a social, personal, and professional component, and even a business relationship can be influenced by a personal bond. Every interaction after the first meeting between buyer and seller acts to strengthen or weaken this bond. Therefore, it is crucial that the seller meets both the assimilation and differentiation needs of the buyer.

The need for assimilation can be met by simple informal personal conversation or “small talk.” Certain small, seemingly irrelevant details could emerge that may go a long way in causing the parties to identify with each other, building an initial bond. These facts may range from a similar movie or travel interest to similar dates or places of birth. These similarities form the foundation on which a strong relationship could be built.

Within a business, similarities are often key to successful relationships. Shared business goals or personal values strengthen the bond between partners and, in turn, lead to higher efficiency in the relationship. Adopting values and company morals that speak to customers also forms the initial subconscious link that will draw customers to the seller. Keeping these similarities in mind will help sellers manage seller-buyer relationships by influencing attitudes of the buyer through each stage of the relationship.

**Value-Based Differentiation Strategy**

As a real estate agent, your buyer’s need for differentiation can be met by demonstrating the uniqueness of your offering. This may not be purely transactional in nature, as buyers want to be identified as unique or special and may be searching for a new home that will set him or her apart from peers. As their agent, you could show them a house or listing which is outside of conventional purchases. You could also differentiate yourself by offering services they could not get anywhere else, such as access to your personal network of lenders, real estate attorneys, contractors, etc. This would prove your uniqueness to the buyer and prove valuable in strengthening buyers’ relationships with you. It is important to understand that the process of
identifying with a buyer through assimilation and differentiation can be done by adapting one’s own behavior to a specific buyer’s behavior and personal needs.

**Managing Relationship Stages and Goals**

Throughout various stages of a relationship, assimilation and differentiation strategies play different roles in the relationship. During the first stage in any relationship, the exploration phase, individuals aim to see whether the other person is similar to them or would fit into their social circle or group. In this phase, it is extremely important to emphasize similarities between the individuals. This can be achieved through personal anecdotes and “small talk.” In this phase, the customer looks for identifying factors that could show that individuals are in sync. In this phase, the only distinctiveness a customer may look for is the uniqueness for the product offering. It is imperative to highlight how building a bond with you would ensure that the services they receive are unlike and better than anything their peers and colleagues experience.

The second stage, the expansion phase, is where the relationship has been solidified, and a high level of assimilation, such as shared long-term goals for a successful transaction, promotes trust and confidence. Moderate differentiation is appropriate. Therefore, it is important to prove distinctiveness through considering new alternatives to meet buyers’ needs. This can be done by drawing from a range of experiences that show buyers the diversity in the relationship. Agents should emphasize the unique value they bring to the table, creating a dependence on the resources they provide.

The final, or maturity stage, highlights the optimal balance between compatibility-based assimilation and value-based differentiation in both the personal and business domains. In this phase, there is a high level of trust that both parties are invested in mutual success. Also, there is a constant fluctuation between assimilation needs and differentiation needs due to the dyadic nature of the bond. In the maturity phase, it is important to recognize the value a customer relates to the most and meet that value by offering a unique proposition. For example, a customer who identifies with eco-preservation can be offered an apartment that invests in harvesting rainwater or consumes only eco-safe energy.
Conclusion

Due to the large transactions that occur between a buyer and seller in real estate, a well-developed, stable relationship is of utmost importance. It may no longer be sufficient to build a network; rather, strengthening the bond within it, takes priority. Understanding the needs of individuals to both associate with others and maintain their individuality can help guide agents to broker more powerful bonds. While it is evident that opposites do attract, there must also be similarities in interactions to begin a relationship and to foster longer-term compatibility. The correct balance between maintaining the need for assimilation and ensuring there is adequate differentiation between individuals is key to success.

Recommended Reading


About the Authors

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Dr. Stephanie Mangus’ (PhD – Louisiana State University) research focuses on buyer-seller dyads in sales and relationship marketing. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, and *Psychology & Marketing*. Her work has been presented at conferences by the American Marketing Association, the Academy of Marketing Science, the Association for Consumer Research, the National Conference for Sales Management, and the Thought Leadership in the Sales Profession Conference. Mangus was recently named the American Marketing Association Sales Special Interest Group’s 2019 Excellence in Teaching Award winner. She also received the 2013 William O. Bearden Research Award from the Southeast Marketing Symposium for her dissertation proposal and the Best in Track Award from the American Marketing Association for her work examining customer retail experiences. She teaches personal selling and sales management courses at the undergraduate level and was previously recognized with the Excellence in Teaching Award by the E.J. Ourso College of Business at Louisiana State University.

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Dr. Ayalla Ruvio (PhD – University of Haifa) is an applied consumer behavior researcher who focuses on issues such as identity and consumption, material vs. experiential consumption, consumer arrogance, and cross-cultural consumer behavior. Her research has been published in refereed journals including the *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, Psychology &*
Marketing, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Journal of Business Research, and Leadership Quarterly. She is the co-editor of the volume on "Consumer Behavior" in the International Encyclopedia of Marketing and the book Identity and Consumption. Prior to joining the Broad College of Business faculty, she was an assistant professor at the University of Haifa and Temple University and a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. Her research has featured in numerous media outlets all over the world, including the CNN, TODAY, Good Morning America, TIME, The New York Times, Forbes, Consumer Reports, The Daily Telegraph, The Atlantic, The Telegraph, and the Toronto STAR.