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Making the Brand-to-Customer Relationship Work
Claudio Alvarez, PhD, Danielle J. Brick, PhD, and Susan Fournier, PhD

When it comes to buying products, we all tend to have favorite brands to which we are loyal. Is it because we prefer familiarity, receive a benefit, appreciate high quality or affordability, or because we developed a personal relationship and have a deeper meaning that goes beyond typical consumer-brand behaviors? Studies show that brands and customers have relationships that are very similar to human relationships. Brand relationships can now be identified through templates that organize thought and action, such as brand love, commercial friendships, and exchange or communal relationships.1,2,3

Our Study

Our research looks at how consumers’ relationships with brands change over time. The purpose of this study was to take a deeper look at how consumers' actions create, maintain, transform, and terminate with brands throughout these relationships. Three questions were asked to address brand relationships. First, what are the main tensions that consumers face in the dynamic nature of consumer-brand relationships?4 Second, what actions do consumers take to navigate these tensions? Finally, how do consumer actions preserve or disable brand relationships?

Brand Relationships and Tensions

Brand relationships can be broken down into four relational tensions: connection-separation, affect-instrumentality, ideal-real, and new-known oppositions. These relational tensions are analogous to those that have been found in interpersonal relationships5,6 and organizational relations7,8.

The connection-separation tension involves the opposing tendencies to make a brand part of daily life yet assert the freedom to break away and choose other brands. The affect-instrumentality tension is the interplay between emotions that brands elicit and the utilitarian nature of brands as commercial objects. Ideal-real is the tension between expectations ascribed to consumers and brands—expectations that come from previous experiences, word-of-mouth, social norms, or industry standards—and the actual behaviors they perform in any given interaction. The new-known tension contrasts the excitement and risks that consumers experience in new or changing relationships with the orderly comfort of well-established routines with a brand.
Consumer Actions

It takes work for consumers to deal with the tensions that emerge as they interact with a brand. We define "relationship work" as consumers' use of actions that build, shape, and/or terminate brand relationships as they address relational tensions. We’ve included examples to illustrate each of the seven consumer actions that we identified as variations of relationship work:

1. Balancing: searching for compromise or a middle ground between the two ends of a relationship tension.
   Example: *I like my agent; she’s showed us some good properties. I’m not convinced she’s found the best options for us, but she is really nice and seems to be working hard for us.*

2. Segmenting: prioritizing one option of the relationship tension in certain periods or domains and the opposite end at other times or domains.
   Example: *Our agent was super sociable and told us everything about the neighborhood when we took the day off from work to tour houses with her. The next day we were back at work and had no more time to socialize. We really appreciated that our agent kept texting to a minimum and helped us through the buying process quickly and efficiently.*

3. Bridging: activities that change the pattern of future interactions between consumers and brands.
   Example: *Our agent was late for our first two appointments. We liked the properties we saw and really wanted to keep working with her, so we voiced our concerns. She took our feedback to heart and started showing up on time.*

4. Reframing: changing the perspective to resolve contradictions between opposing tensions, oftentimes using terms from interpersonal relationships to describe the brand.
   Example: *We were super disappointed that we didn’t close on a house we loved, but our agent helped us see that losing out on some deals was part of the process in a seller’s market. Our agent was like a coach to us, guiding and motivating us along the way.*

5. Disorienting: interacting with the brand in a way that makes opposing demands irreconcilable.
   Example: *I love that our agent seems so on-the-ball with our house hunting. She is pulling great houses for us to look at and has ideas to help us expand our search criteria. But, she is constantly contacting me throughout the day with questions and updates, and I can’t focus on my other tasks. There is no way around it – to find a good house with her, we need to sacrifice our lives.*

6. Denying: completely rejecting or eliminating one pole of a tension.
   Example: *We want to get the list price when selling our home. If our agent cannot get an offer for that amount, we will find another agent who can.*

7. Polarizing: increasing the contrast between opposing poles, such that resolution of relational tensions is not possible.
Example: Our agent found us a property in our preferred school district, but it is priced way too high. We would love to move to a better neighborhood, but reality is that we cannot afford to move.

Relational Outcomes

A key learning from our research is that the actions taken by consumers to deal with relational tensions have profound impact on the trajectory of the brand relationship.

Balancing and segmenting actions foster equilibrium in the brand relationship. Any shocks to the relationship, such as a failure to deliver on expectations or substantial changes in market conditions, are absorbed without the brand losing its original appeal and identity for the consumer.

When consumers use bridging and reframing actions, they fundamentally transform the brand relationship in a positive way. For instance, a purely transactional, business-oriented relationship with an agent may be reinvented as a commercial friendship. Rather than remaining largely the same, as with balancing and segmenting actions, bridging and reframing produce substantial change over time.

The other three consumer actions are associated with less positive brand relationship trajectories. Disorienting actions produce vicious cycles that trap consumers in unsatisfying relationships. Consumers stay with the brand for a while because they don’t see a way out, but they may talk negatively about the brand and may not even be profitable for the brand to serve. Denying and polarizing actions generate conflict in the brand relationship, resulting in rough breakups or relationships that never fully develop. Friendly termination is also a possibility, most notably when consumers reframe conflicts or vicious cycles as signs that the brand relationship did not work for them but could potentially work for other consumers.

Real Estate Implications

In real estate, agents and brokers represent their firm and brand, which leads to consumer-brand relationship implications. Real estate professionals should establish a good relationship with clients—not for selfish reasons—but to benefit the client, the agent, and their relationship. This includes understanding tensions that emerge in each client relationship—tensions between connecting with and separating from the agent, between emotional and utilitarian needs, between ideals and what is possible to accomplish, and between embracing the new and keeping things as they have always been. Most importantly, real estate professionals should pay attention to how consumers are dealing with these tensions. Do consumers experience opposing tendencies as irreconcilable and painful? Or do they find ways to compromise and build bridges? Rather than striving to be perfect, our research encourages agents and brokers to embrace the challenges of relating with their clients, so that both sides can work together to make the relationship work.
With customer relationship management and time, you and your firm will win over new relationships that will be mutually beneficial and successful.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

**Claudio Alvarez, PhD**  
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Dr. Claudio Alvarez’s (PhD – Boston University) research investigates brands, brand meaning, and consumer-brand relationships, with a particular focus on questions that have strategic implications to marketing practice. He uses qualitative analysis as well as experimental techniques in his work. His research has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and *European Journal of Marketing*, among others. Before joining academia, Dr. Alvarez worked for the strategic management consulting firm Monitor Group (now Monitor Deloitte).
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Dr. Danielle Brick’s (PhD – Duke University) research investigates how close relationships and consumer behavior jointly influence consumer well-being. Within this broader topic, her research can be organized into three themes: the interplay of brands and people, brand relationships, and shared consumer decisions and experiences. Dr. Brick has published in *Journal of Consumer Research, Health Communication, Journal of Consumer Psychology, The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior, Journal of the Association for Consumer Research, Journal of Product Innovation Management,* and others. Dr. Brick also served on the review boards of several scholarly publications and done countless reviews for others on an ad hoc basis. Before academia, she worked on biomedical research in the Neuroendocrine Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. She also has served on many committees and boards for her university and department. In recognition of her contributions, Dr. Brick has been the recipient of several awards and honors from multiple universities.

Susan Fournier, PhD  
Allen Questrom Professor and Dean of Marketing, Boston University  
Dr. Susan Fournier (PhD – University of Florida) is a leading researcher and international voice in the field of branding and consumer behavior. Her work spans the disciplines and methods of marketing, psychology, anthropology, and finance with a signature research style that delivers profound theoretical insights and applications for business practice. Dr. Fournier has published in *Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Marketing Research, Harvard Business Review, GfK Marketing Intelligence Review, The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior, Forbes, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, NIM Marketing Intelligence Review, Journal of Marketing Communications, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Advertising, Business Horizons,* and others. Dr. Fournier is also a long-standing member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Relationship Marketing, Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing,* and *Marketing Theory.* She also serves as Senior Consulting Editor for the *Journal of Brand Management* and sits on the Senior Advisory Board of the *Journal of Product and Brand Management* and *GfK Marketing Intelligence Review.* Before academia, she served in a variety of critical management positions including Marketing Research Manager at Polaroid Corporation, Account Manager at Yankelovich, Clancy Shulman, a leading marketing research firm, and Vice President and Associate Research Director at Young & Rubicam Advertising in New York—at the time, the largest private advertising agency in the world. She also has served on many committees and boards for her university and department. In recognition of her contributions, Dr. Fournier has been the recipient of several awards and honors from major journals throughout her career.