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Respect in the Marketplace

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ABSTRACT

Respect is important, ignored, and poorly defined in marketing circles. One would expect respect to play a significant role in relationship marketing because we know that it is important in interpersonal relationships; especially close ones (Frei and Shaver 2002). Even though marketers express concern about relationships, we have virtually ignored respect in the academic marketing literature (e.g., Winsted 2000). When it is mentioned, authors use the term colloquially, as if everyone shares their understanding. It is without conceptual development. We suggest that marketing and consumer scholars need to work on conceptualising respect in the marketing context. In this essay, we build a case for caring about respect in the marketplace. We explore what respect is, why it is important and what we need to do to build a new marketplace based on respect.

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I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me...All I ask is that you respect me as a human being. Jackie Robinson.

Respect is important, ignored, and poorly defined in marketing circles. Even though marketers express concern about relationships, they have virtually ignored respect. In this essay, we build a case for caring about respect in the marketplace. We explore what respect is, why it is important and what marketers and consumers need to do to build a new marketplace based on respect.

Why we should care about respect

We should care about respect because it is fundamental to our experience of both social relations and self (Sennett 2003; Harré 1980). People in most cultures desire and demand respect as it enhances their personal well-being (Middleton 2004). Everyone wants to be taken seriously. Considering the prevalence of consumption and marketplace interactions in today's society, we need to learn more about respect.

What is respect?

Respect is complex. There seem to be two aspects to respect: connection and consideration. First, respect requires a connection (Dillon 2003). The Oxford English Dictionary calls respect "a relation of one person or thing to another; to have relation to, to refer" (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). Consideration is the second aspect of respect. Respect involves "a responsive relation ... in which the subject responds to the object from a certain perspective in some appropriate way," (Dillon 2003 p. 3). Showing respect is part of this consideration element. It could manifest as discrimination, partiality, deference, or displayed esteem (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). To respect someone implies that one considers them and feels, thinks, or acts in certain appropriate ways.

There seem to be at least two different kinds of respect: recognition and appraisal respect (Darwall, 1977; Dillon, 2003). Recognition respect is a "disposition to weigh appropriately some feature or fact in one's deliberations" solely because it is a fact (Darwall 1977 p. 39). For instance, one could take into account the value of human dignity and act appropriately towards people simply because they are people. This includes expressing unconditional acceptance and acknowledgement. Thus, consequences are part of the deliberation regarding how one should act. Appraisal respect is a positive evaluation of an object's merits (Darwall 1977). In this sense, it is as if the object earns or deserves the respect. It implies no other response than the evaluation, which could be felt as admiration or esteem. For instance, one could respect a musician's or an athlete's talents. One can also admire one object more than another object (e.g., one musician more than another). But, this does not imply appropriate ways of acting.

Why respect is important to marketing

Kevin Roberts, CEO of Worldwide, Saatchi & Saatchi, believes that, "Respect is the foundation of successful business" (2004 p. 60). He reasons that customers base respect on the company's performance, reputation, and trust. Respect grows out of performance as consumers judge every interaction and touch point. Similarly, Tom Reilly, a sales training consultant, places respect at the "heart of all business transactions" (Reilly 2002). Disrespect alienates people, but they feel good when treated with respect. Respect brings customers back and leads to positive word-of-mouth (Blodgett et al. 1995). Customers who feel disrespected stop doing business with the company (Dobson 2003).

Consumers value respect. Stories of consumers' bad experiences illustrate how much respect matters to consumers. In one story (Friend 1997), a woman carefully chose a jeweller to set a special stone. She phoned for an appointment and was told she did not need one. When she arrived at the shop, the jeweller was busy. She went away and came back later as requested. The jeweller was busy again and still did not acknowledge her presence. The gist of the story was that the woman admired this person's work, but he ignored her; he did not reciprocate the respect. Naturally, she never went back. This story illustrates a lack of recognition respect from the jeweller. He did not value her as a customer or as a person.

Another story shows appraisals based on behaviour that led to disrespect. A woman and her colleagues had just finished a special and demanding project for the Ministry of Education and went shopping to reward themselves. They expected to be treated according to their status as educators, but in their giddiness and celebration, they could not believe the shop attendant's accusation. "I don't believe it ... NO... we're being picked up for shoplifting!!!" (Friend and Thompson 2003). The attendant evaluated them based on their behaviour and deemed them respect-unworthy.

Stories also reveal the reciprocal nature of respect. In a study of trust experiences in health-care relationships, respect emerged as an element of reciprocity (FitzPatrick 2004). When health-care providers respected their patients, patients returned the respect. Moreover, when respect was mutual, it built trust.

What do we need to do?

We need to care about respect. Informing both consumers and marketers about why respect is important and how it benefits them, how to show respect, and how to elicit respect from others, can build a better society. Respect, however, needs to be reciprocal. Not only do businesses need to give respect, but so do consumers. Consumers need to respect the service provider and other customers to gain respect in return. The more we learn to respect, the more value we create for self, marketplace and society. We can build a new marketplace – one in which we respect the eternal dignity of consumers and service providers.

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