Editorial

The Language of Marketplace Rituals: Implications for Customer Experience Management

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Abstract

The domain of customer experience management (hereafter, CEM) includes every point of customer contact with products, services or businesses (Grewal, Levy, and Kumar 2009). In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Retailing*, Puccinelli et al. (2009) assert that a key atmospheric element of CEM that can shape customer satisfaction within the retail setting is the "interaction between the customer and employee" (p. 24). In this paper, we delve further into the social-interaction aspects of retail atmospherics, by focusing on how retailers and service providers use language to facilitate a specific type of provider/customer experience that we label the "marketplace ritual." We use depth interviews and participant observation to: (1) analyze the structure and function of the specific utterances providers identify as salient when creating and executing marketplace rituals; (2) discuss the ways language contributes to perceived strategic CEM-related outcomes; and (3) examine providers' perceptions of the potentially negative consequences of ritual language for CEM.
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Introduction

The domain of customer experience management (hereafter, CEM) includes every point of customer contact with products, services or businesses (Grewal, Levy, and Kumar 2009). In articulating the conceptual terrain of CEM, Puccinelli et al. (2009, p. 15) describe several topics they believe "offer the greatest breadth of insights into customer behavior in retail environments." Among these is atmospherics, or cues relating to the design, ambient and social aspects of the retail experience. They state that of all atmospheric elements, "the interpersonal nature of the interaction between the customer and employee. . .may be key to customer satisfaction in the retail environment" (p. 24).

In this paper, we explore how retailers and service providers (hereafter, providers) perceive that a specific type of activity that we label the *marketplace ritual* contributes to CEM. Within marketing, discussion of rituals typically focuses on consumer-centered behavior. Rook (1985) defines consumption rituals as dramatically scripted, symbolic and expressive behaviors "that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence [,] tend to be repeated over time. . . [and are] performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity" (1985, p. 252). Building upon his seminal work, and reflecting recent scholarship, we define the marketplace ritual as a *planned, symbolic, performative and often repeated activity that providers execute for and with customers, to enhance customer experiences and achieve marketing goals*.

Ritual scholarship in marketing centers on consumers' experiences with holidays (e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), life passages (Bonsu and Belk 2003), gift giving (e.g., Fischer and Arnold 1990), and extraordinary consumption (e.g., Kozinets 2002). Ritual research that does incorporate marketplace activities (e.g., Mick, DeMoss, and Faber 1992; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993; Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1992) also emphasizes customers' perspectives, with only a few scholars exploring rituals from providers' viewpoints (Arnould and Price 1993; Sandikci and Ilhan 2006; Sherry and McGrath 1989). We believe a focus on providers' use of

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rituals is justified because customers often expect, demand, and even mourn the loss of these experiences. For example, when Marshall Field's was rebranded as Macy's in 2006, customers lamented the disappearance of cherished rituals such as holiday-window pilgrimages and tea in the Walnut Room at the iconic Chicago State Street location (Otnes et al. 2009). In short, because rituals are pervasive in consumers' lives, they can serve as "cultural resources" (Arnould 2005, p. 90) for providers when creating desired and effective customer experiences.

In this paper, we specifically explore providers' use of language as a key strategic element of marketplace rituals. Our focus is warranted for several reasons. First, over twenty years ago, Sherry (1988) observed that engaging in ethnographic study of communication could reveal how language can contribute to fulfilling commercial goals for retailers and providers, such as converting an individual from "spectator to participant to consumer" in marketplace settings (p. 543). In addition, Palmatier et al. (2006, p. 136) observe that customer communication is "one of the most effective relationship-building strategies" and contributes to key outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and loyalty). Third, to date marketing scholars have limited their conceptualization of the role of language in rituals to that of a vehicle that communicates norms to participants (Rook 1985). Yet as we will demonstrate, ritual language serves a variety of functions beyond communicating norms.

Finally and perhaps most compellingly, our focus on ritual language is emergent; that is, our informants consistently and thoroughly discuss the ways they evaluate and use language within marketplace rituals. Thus, strong evidence reflecting the strategic importance of ritual language emerged in our text that demanded our analytical attention. We specifically address the following questions: (1) What structural and functional dimensions of language are salient when providers conceptualize and execute marketplace rituals? (2) What positive customer-experience outcomes do providers associate with ritual language? (3) What potential consequences on customer experience do providers associate with ritual language? Below, we situate our research within the emerging area of CEM.

Marketplace rituals and customer experience management

Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 3) note that customer experience includes all "cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer." To date, most CEM studies hone in on the social aspects of marketplace experiences that they deem most worthy of attention (e.g., Grewal, Levy, and Kumar 2009; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009). In fact, Puccinelli et al. (2009) mention both rituals and language elements as key CEM components that can enhance retailers' social relations with customers.

The CEM literature also acknowledges the importance of tailoring marketing strategies to each retail experience. Yet these studies do not compare the range of interactions customers experience in the marketplace; nor do they describe how key elements differ across these contexts. To encourage comparisons across the spectrum of customer/provider social interactions, we offer a conceptual framework that encompasses the retail or service "encounters" (Goffman 1961) detailed in the literature. We argue that four salient dimensions of these encounters pertain to language and vary across them. These are: providers' goals for
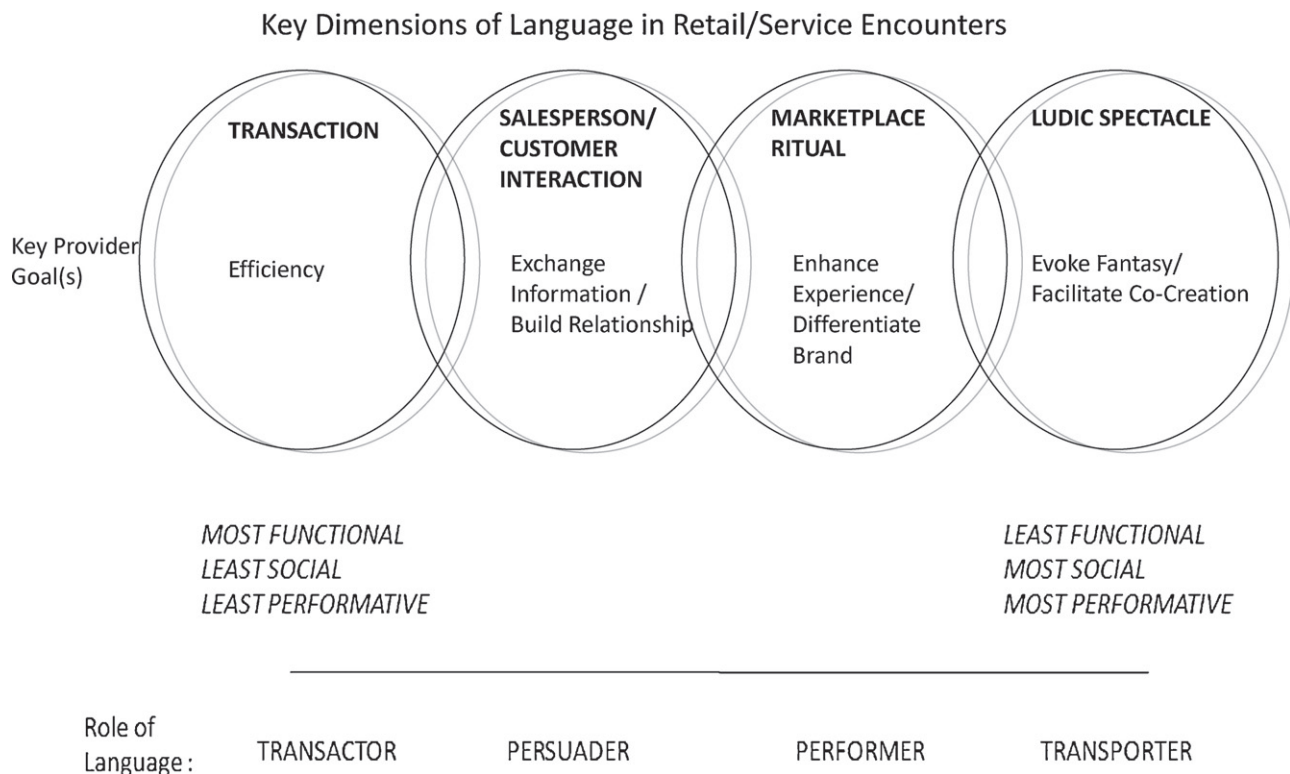

Fig. 1. Key dimensions of language in retail/service encounters.