

Orchestrating rituals through retailers: An examination of gift registry

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Abstract

We explore the phenomenon of gift registry as a specific ritual within a larger set of wedding rituals to understand interactions between consumers and retailers. We find that roles for retailers in family based rituals are expanding, given how consumers employ brands to negotiate meaning, experiences of identity, and the dispersion of social systems. These changes allow retailers, as ritual orchestrators, an opportunity to participate more fully in the gift registry ritual by shaping the experience for each type of ritual participant—bride, groom, and gift-giver. Our research contributes an interpretation of how consumers negotiate brand meaning within a temporary gift system, as they perform gift giving rituals situated squarely within the marketplace. We explore the implications these rituals have for the construction of identity, consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand relationships. We provide suggestions for managers and directions for future research.

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Introduction

Marriage, once a contractual union of families to manage asset transmission, has become the pursuit of perfect love ever after, or at least through the wedding celebration (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Penner 2004). Weddings are simultaneously the union of brides and grooms in matrimony, the creation of new family units, and a significant industry. In 2010, weddings in the United States were expected to account for over \$47.2 billion in revenue (van Beeck and van Horn 2010). In addition, an estimated \$19 billion in gifts were purchased from registries by invited guests (SoundVision 2008). This makes the wedding industry revenues second only to those of Christmas in America. Further, the industry size must be an understatement, as it only encompasses purchases and does not comprise monetary gifts, guest travel, intergenerational transmissions, or gifts provided outside traditional market avenues. Weddings comprise rituals celebrating these contractual unions to create new family units, and often encompass gift giving as one of the rituals.

In creating a new family unit through marriage, boundaries and identities are negotiated within both the bride's and

groom's family of origin (Epp and Price 2008), between families of origin, and between the bride and groom. The bride and groom explicitly invite family members and friends to participate in these identity negotiations through gift registry, a process whereby retailers guide families in navigating complex social exchange relationships (Marcoux 2009) to outfit the newlyweds' home. Retailers embrace their role as orchestrators in gift registry as evident in this everyday telephonic greeting, a scripted ritual salutation (Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2012) to an unknown caller with unknown needs: "Thank you for calling Bed, Bath and Beyond. We specialize in gift and bridal registry...how may I help you? (Operator; 10/25/09)." It is evident that wedding registries are central to gift giving and therefore family creation rituals (Cheal 1988; Otnes and Pleck 2003). Where retailers created gift registry as a mechanism to increase sales (Howard 2006; Penner 2004), gift registry is now an integral ritual within wedding celebrations. What deserves particular attention are the roles for retailers, service providers and their brands as consumers create new families through rituals.

In our ethnographic study of gift registry, we find the ritual reflects market-created and -sanctioned practices beyond the scope of traditional gift giving, inclusive of ritual participant roles. Further, we find that brands serve as signals between ritual participants as couples and gift-givers co-create a 'we' identity. This description of the retailer's orchestration of gift ritual to facilitate stakeholders' communal creation of a new and

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fundamental social unit advances theorizing in both the retail theatre and gift giving literatures. It has practical managerial implications as well. We begin with a discussion of the historical underpinnings of the registry ritual, followed by a brief summary of relevant ritual and brand literatures. Next, we outline our methodology, and then, our findings. We then discuss our findings relative to extant literature. We conclude with a number of suggestions for managerial practice.

Literature review

Gift registry: as institution and ritual

At the macro level, the wedding has customarily represented a gift of kinship, with families each exchanging a member to create a new household, and, thereby, increasing the size, intensity and reach of their social affiliation. Being the public performance of the creation of a new social unit, in effect the quintessential ceremonial celebration of social reproduction, the wedding is steeped in the ethos of the gift. While traditional practices (e.g., bridewealth or dowry) may vary by ethnicity, and emerging practices (e.g., prenuptial agreements) may vary by class, the entire wedding process is suffused with gift giving. At the micro level, the wedding embodies the giving of one's self to another individual, and, in turn, the receiving of that individual's self, the commingling creating a union (whether of an extended or incorporated self) recognized as a new social unit. Again, in turn, this unit becomes a gift offered by the couple, in the service of reproducing the social order, to society as a whole.

Rituals are enacted within communities, reflect social norms, and may be performed to dramatize status transitions (Rook 1985; Turner 1969). Wedding rituals introduce new family units to communities where the community encompasses consumers and marketers alike, each influencing the other through interactions (Otnes and Scott 1996; Varman and Costa 2008). Weddings comprise several rituals, beginning with engagement and culminating in the exchange of vows, and interim celebrations acknowledging the various transitions. As is common with other rituals, gift giving rituals are embedded within wedding rituals (Sherry 1983), and most evident in the gift registry ritual.

The tradition of obligatory giving at weddings originated among the social elite in the mid-19th century, and focused specifically on the bride (Otnes and Pleck 2003). Gift registries arose at the turn of the 19th century, initiated by jewelers striving to compete with department store discounting by offering a convenient service. By the mid-20th century, department store gift registries had routinized customs, essentially providing a “blue print for wedding consumption. . . that employed the rhetoric of tradition in the service of modernity.” By the end of the 20th century, the registry had become a ‘traditional’ wedding fixture, extending across channels and into cyberspace (Howard 2006, pp. 16, 38, 114; Penner 2004, pp. 6–7). Though retailers have played a significant role in shaping the desires and tastes for outfitting the home (Penner 2004), the suggested registry items list provided by most do not stray far beyond traditional homemaking categories, although nontraditional registry items do exist (e.g., birth control, honeymoons, home down payment).

As such, the categories across gift registries may look similar, yet it is in the constellation of offerings selected where distinction is evident.

The registry ritual provides an opportunity for the betrothed to practice their impending roles as husband, wife and family unit, as they co-construct and present a family identity to their collective family and friends. Individuals know of and trust branded offerings (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Coupland 2005; Fournier 1998; Keller 1993; Olsen 1995), and retail outlets (Fournier 1998). People negotiate what it means to be family, including the brands that will enable them to do so for ordinary (e.g., mealtime and bedtime) and extraordinary (e.g., hosting and holiday) family rituals (Coupland 2005; Epp and Price 2008; Otnes and Pleck 2003). Through these negotiations, they learn about brand, as well as contemplate adopting and switching to different brands (Chin-Parker and Ross 2004; Cunha and Laran 2009; Huffman and Houston 1993; Lam et al. 2010).

The sociological critique of gift registries is succinct. In the rationalizing, centralizing and personalizing of the wedding registry process, department store registries eventually determined the norms for giving, gradually reducing both recipients' and donors' choice options and gift giving skill sets (Howard 2006). The registry is in effect a commercial version of a total institution which modifies the spirit of the gift via market based ritual. The ‘competitive spirit’ of giving (Penner 2004) and the acquisitive fervor of brides fanned by the original registries have persisted over time, as retailers have found additional ways to involve stakeholders in the phenomenon. These market-focused accounts of gift registry as market ritual comprise a collective counterpoint to those which depict prospective brides as homemakers-in-training whose interest lies in creating a home by feathering the nest and fashioning the hearth.

Advancing theories of roles for brands in the creation of a joint (family) identity, our study of gift registry examines the willful and intentional interaction between the gift economy and the market and its influence on co-created identity performed through brands. Where previous research at this intersection finds a role for intracommunity gift giving as a means of maintaining social hierarchy and order (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012), we examine roles for retailers in the registry ritual. More specifically, we identify considerations for retailers, consumers and brands in the registry ritual, and interpret conditions allowing for retailer orchestration of gift registry rituals. This analysis may be viewed not only as the interaction between gift economy and marketplace participants, but rather as the negotiation between retailers, brands, kin, and kith in the creation of a new family unit. The registry ritual affords us the opportunity to explore some unresolved issues identified by Varman and Costa (2008, p. 154), such as the influence of community and extra-economic norms on marketing systems, the interplay of social and economic forces in the marketplace, and the roles of formal and informal institutions in this interplay.

Bridal (and, recently, groomal) showers, rehearsal dinners and wedding banquets, bachelor and bachelorette parties, attendant gifts, toasts and testimonials, and wedding presents do not begin to exhaust the inventory of opportunities for matrimonial giving. In some regards, this connubial complex resembles a

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