

THE PROCESS OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Traditional measures of customer satisfaction have been criticized for failing to capture the depth of customer responses to service performance. This study seeks to redirect satisfaction research toward an approach that encompasses an understanding of the role of commitment, involvement, and trust in the creation of engaged and loyal customers. A conceptual framework for segmenting customer-brand relationships based on the extent to which customers are either new or repeat purchase customers of a specific service brand is proposed. The approach provides a deeper and more complete understanding of the nature of customer-brand relationships and the processes by which engagement may be developed and fostered among differing customer segments.

Customer satisfaction and service quality have been conceptualized as two of the most fundamental constructs at the “crux of marketing theory and practice” today (Sureschandar, Rajendran, and Anantharaman 2002, p. 363). At the corporate level, this is evidenced by the continued reliance of companies on satisfaction metrics to assess customer responses to their products and services in the belief that high levels of satisfaction may lead to increased customer loyalty, intention to purchase, word-of-mouth recommendation, profit, market share, and return on investment (Allen and Willburn 2002; Anderson and Mittal 2000; Heskett et al. 1994; Keiningham and Vavra 2001; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Oyewole 2002; Reichheld 2003). Satisfaction has, for some, become the ubiquitous mantra for corporate success (Chu 2002).

Voluminous literature continues to be published on customer satisfaction proposing various theoretical constructs that purport to examine the determinants of satisfaction. The most commonly used measurement approach to assessing customer satisfaction has been the confirmation-disconfirmation of expectations approach, which conceptualizes satisfaction as a postconsumption, cognitive process (Bartikowski and Llosa 2004; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988; Wirtz, Mattila, and Tan 2000). However, research into customer satisfaction has been plagued by imprecision and inconsistency leading many researchers to conclude that satisfaction measurement should be regarded as a “trap” to be avoided (Ander-

son and Mittal 2000; Giese and Cote 2000). Satisfaction measurement has been criticized as failing to measure the depth of customers’ responses to consumption situations (Giese and Cote 2000; Oliver 1997); failing to discriminate between true brand loyalty and inertia repeat purchasing (Amine 1998); setting a grossly substandard benchmark for excellence (Reichheld 2001); and providing an inherently unreliable predictor of attitudinal loyalty, making it “prudent for managers not to rely exclusively on satisfaction scores” as a proxy for loyalty (Bennett and Rundle-Thiele 2004, p. 520).

Factor- or attribute-based approaches to measuring customer satisfaction have supplemented the confirmation-disconfirmation approach by suggesting that there exists a nonlinear and asymmetric relationship between service attribute importance and attribute-level performance (satisfaction) evaluations (Busacca and Padula 2005; Kano et al. 1984; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Walden 1993). Although these models of satisfaction have offered a framework with which to analyze and understand customer behavior, they encourage the adoption of a “zero defects” service paradigm. This approach fails to account for the depth of customers’ responses and the “talismatic relationships consumers form with that which is consumed” (Fournier 1998, p. 343). The corollary of this approach is that all customers within the customer base are to be treated alike in the pursuit of high levels of satisfaction. However, as Mittal and Kamakura point out, “newly acquired and loyal customers of a firm

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place different importance on the same attribute [implying] that firms cannot treat newly acquired and loyal customers the same way" (2001, p. 352). Notwithstanding these far-reaching criticisms, it seems that measures of satisfaction continue to be used as key indicators of brand health. This is despite recent literature that points out that even satisfied customers will defect (Jones and Sasser 1995).

Research on affect has attempted to overcome some of the limitations of the purely cognitive approaches to evaluating customers' consumption responses by drawing a distinction between mere satisfaction, and stronger and more positive emotional responses toward consumption (Oliver, Rust, and Varki 1997; Santos and Boote 2003; Watson and Tellegen 1985). In particular, research investigating the notion of delight suggests that the nonlinearity in attribute-based judgments may be due to the role that affect plays in customers' satisfaction judgments, as opposed to solely the weighting or importance that a customer places on a particular attribute. However, affective approaches such as delight have been criticized for increasing customers' expectations (Santos and Boote 2003, p. 152), leading to habituation with regard to delighting service delivery (Rust and Oliver 2000), and for failing to examine the extent to which delight may be a segment-specific phenomenon. Research is also yet to determine whether delight is more effective in the initial attraction of new customers than in the retention and maintenance of existing customers, due to its short-term and transient nature.

In summary, there is a need for the development of measurement models that more effectively account for the depth of customers' emotional responses to consumption situations and that recognize that as customer-brand relationships evolve through increased experience, so too does their weighting and assessment of the importance of various attributes in determining their overall service evaluations. This paper proposes a framework for the process of customer engagement that attempts to address this gap in the literature. It incorporates the notion of mere satisfaction into a much richer process model of loyalty, one that examines the pathways and processes that different experience-based segments follow on their journey toward loyalty through satisfaction, delight, trust, involvement, and commitment toward a specific service brand.

TOWARD THE CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

The concept of engagement has been explored in the organizational behavior literature as a means to explain

organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior and has been subsequently utilized as one means by which to predict financial performance (Saks 2006). Interest in the concept has increased recently with reports that a significant proportion of the workforce remain disengaged, or at least partially disengaged from their workplace leading to what some have termed an *engagement gap* that is costing U.S. businesses \$300 billion per year in lost productivity (Saks 2006).

Within the organizational behavior literature, engagement has been defined as "task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others," which are expressed physically, cognitively, and emotionally and which stimulate personal development and increase employee motivation (Kahn 1990, p. 700).

Other related definitions also emphasize the dual roles of cognition and emotion in the creation of a state of engagement. For example, Schaufeli et al. define engagement as a "pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behavior" that acts to enhance organizational productivity (2002, p. 74). Hardaker and Fill (2005, p. 368) point out that employees need to be intellectually engaged with their jobs. Salanova, Agut, and Peiró (2005) also note that emotional engagement may act to further increase group morale, cohesion, and rapport via positive psychological "contagion processes."

However, the driving force behind the recent interest in the concept of engagement is that it has been linked to a number of positive consequences at both individual and organizational levels. Employee engagement is argued to be positively related to individuals' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Saks 2006). Subsequently, it has been positively linked to business results such as job satisfaction, low absenteeism, and high organizational commitment and performance (Salanova, Agut, and Peiró 2005). When employees are highly engaged, it is expected that they will perform well with customers, therefore leading to favorable customer evaluations (Salanova, Agut, and Peiró 2005). This is supported by Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002), who point to the positive relationship between high levels of employee engagement and increased customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Engagement has also been discussed in the advertising literature where it is suggested that it may be used as a proxy measure of the strength of a company's customer relationships based on the extent to which customers have formed both emotional and rational bonds with a brand (McEwen 2004). Engagement is therefore argued to include feelings of confidence, integrity, pride, and passion in a

brand (McEwen 2004). Clearly, then, engagement has an important place in contributing to an understanding of service performance and customer outcomes.

Currently, no theoretical basis for the measurement of the process of engagement exists within the customer behavior literature and most of what has been written about engagement has its basis in practice rather than in theory or empirical research, giving engagement the appearance of being simply another management fad (Saks 2006). However, if a strong theoretical base can be developed for the concept, it may offer a possible framework with which to more closely examine the formation and development of customer-brand relationships and the circumstances under which enduring states of brand loyalty may be developed and maintained. Moreover, there is a need to investigate the extent to which the cognitive and affective components of the process of customer engagement operate for different customer segments.

This paper attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by inferring a theoretical basis for the psychological process of customer engagement from the literature on relationship marketing, organizational behavior, and cognitive psychology. This literature suggests that although "satisfaction is a necessary step in loyalty formation," satisfaction "becomes less significant as loyalty begins to set through other mechanisms" (Oliver 1999, p. 33). It is the examination of these "other mechanisms" that are of interest in this paper. With this in mind, this paper considers the role of affective commitment, calculative commitment, trust, and involvement in the process of customer engagement for new versus repeat purchase customers of a specific service brand.

Recent research on the constructs of commitment, involvement, trust, and loyalty have contributed substantially to conceptual and methodological advancement in the discipline of consumer behavior and have provided coherent, but largely disparate, sets of knowledge (Iwasaki and Havitz 1998). A logical step is to examine the dynamic relationship between these constructs in order to further our understanding of when, how, and why different segments of customers—in this case, new and repeat purchase customers—develop loyalty toward a specific service brand. This paper attempts such an examination.

In this paper, the process of customer engagement is conceptualized as being related to, but distinct from, an end state of customer loyalty. The process of engagement traces the temporal development of loyalty by mapping the relationships between the constructs of calculative commitment, affective commitment, involvement, and trust as customers progress from being new to a service brand

to becoming repeat purchasers of a specific service brand. This approach therefore emphasizes the role of specific psychological mediating variables in the development of a more enduring state of brand loyalty, and in so doing, differentiates truly loyal customers from those who have limited brand sensitivity and repeat purchase due to a state of inertia or spurious loyalty (Odin, Odin, and Valette-Florence 2001).

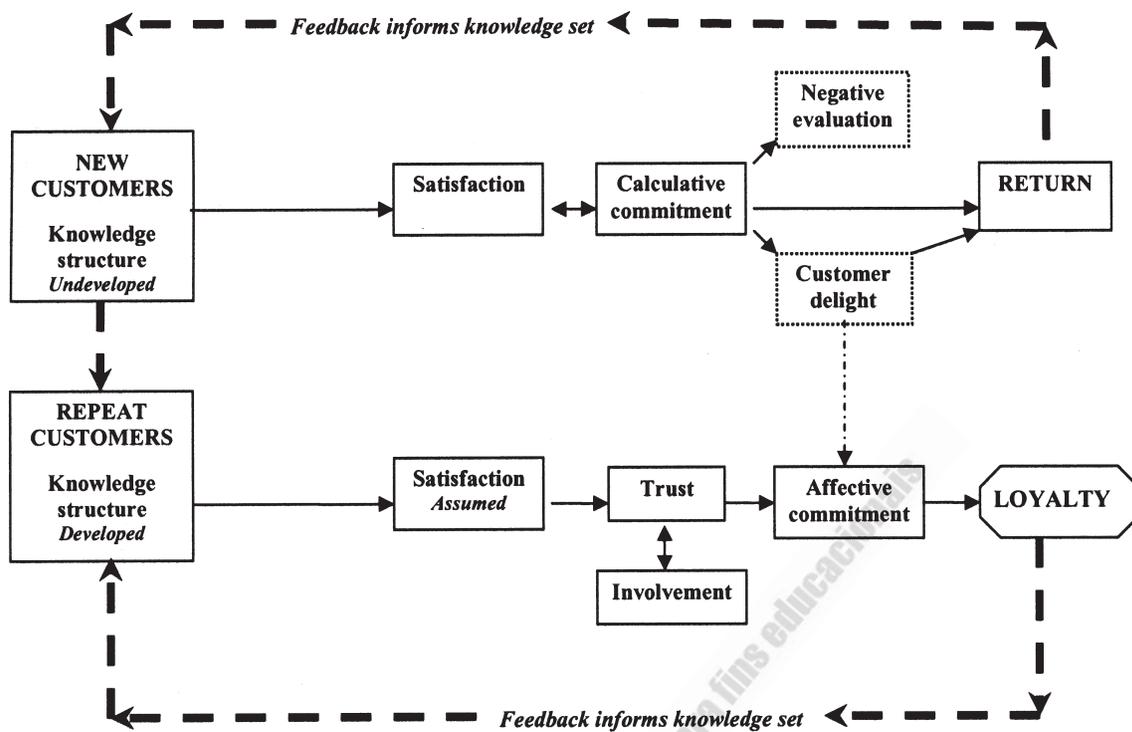
This paper expands on McEwen's (2004) definition of engagement as relating to a combination of rational and emotional bonds, by investigating the mechanisms by which these bonds might potentially form for new versus repeat purchase customers of a specific service brand. The process of customer engagement, outlined in Figure 1, proposes that individuals move through a sequential psychological process to become loyal to a service brand. It is argued that there are separate temporal pathways for first-time users of a service brand, compared to repeat users of a service brand. The model proposes that customer engagement as a process includes:

1. The formation of a state of calculative commitment for new customers which is considered to be a largely cognitive basis for purchase
2. Increased levels of involvement concomitantly supported by increased levels of trust for repeat purchase customers, and
3. The development of affective commitment toward the service brand which is considered to be a more emotive basis for purchase and which may ultimately eventuate in a state of enduring brand loyalty.

Thus, the model aims to elucidate the mechanisms by which an enduring state of loyalty may develop among new versus repeat purchase customers of a service brand. The term *engagement* is conceptualized in this paper as a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand.

This model of engagement has been developed in the context of the hospitality industry and, particularly, with reference to specific brands within the restaurant dining sector; however, the model proposes a generalized process of engagement and, therefore, is argued to have potential application to a range of other service categories and the specific service brands within those categories. Thus, although customers may have significant experience within a service

Figure 1
A Conceptual Framework for the Process of Engagement



category (i.e., the restaurant category), nonetheless, many customers will be experiencing a specific restaurant for the first time and these customers are therefore new customers to the brand. Similarly, many customers will also be returning to a specific restaurant as a repeat purchaser of that restaurant brand. The intent of the model of engagement, therefore, is to provide management with a service paradigm that demonstrates the necessity of moving beyond merely satisfying customers to engaging customer segments at a deeper, relationally based level.

SEGMENT-SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES IN THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: A THEORETICAL MODEL

New Customers and the Development of Rational Bonds

A number of disparate empirical studies and theoretical arguments from domains such as marketing and cognitive psychology suggest that significant differences exist in terms of information-processing patterns between customer segments that have either greater or lesser levels of experience with a product, service, or brand. This literature has typically discussed these issues under the context of

customer experience (Johnson and Mathews 1997; Patterson 2000), customer familiarity (Soderlund 2002), customer expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Matilla and Wirtz 2002), and cognitive knowledge structures (Matilla and Wirtz 2002; Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001). To date, however, research on the level of experience that a customer has with a brand has tended not to address the question of how that experience affects that customer's evaluative processes (Soderlund 2002). This is despite the important finding that as a customer's familiarity with a specific brand increases over time, the customer develops (1) a more elaborated knowledge structure associated with the brand and (2) a different psychological frame of reference when evaluating the brand when compared to those customers who may possess a lower level of experience with the same brand (Soderlund 2002). There is a need, therefore, for research to investigate how and why different levels of experience with a brand shape customer's evaluations of that brand.

Mittal, Katrichis, and Kumar's (2001) study in particular has provided perhaps the strongest level of support for the specific information-processing differences between newly acquired customers versus repeat purchase, loyal customers. Their investigation, which examined the extent to which attribute evaluations of a credit card service differed for these

two segments of customers, found that attribute importance varied over time based on a customer's length of tenure with a particular brand. This variation was subsequently attributed to the differences in customer's consumption goals. The managerial implication of this study was, therefore, that newly acquired and loyal customers cannot be treated in the same way due to the differing needs of the two segments. The authors subsequently argued that organizations that ignore this important segmentation base are (1) less likely to convert newly acquired customers into loyal customers and (2) less likely to retain loyal customers (Mittal, Katrichis, and Kumar 2001).

In particular, a number of other studies have suggested that new customers display a number of unique characteristics that separate them from more experienced repeat purchase customers (Soderlund 2002). Research, with regard to information-processing patterns, has suggested that new customers have imprecise expectations of service provision, and therefore have difficulty in assessing new service experiences. In order to overcome this difficulty and form initial overall judgments of service performance, new customers demonstrate a greater reliance on attribute-level information (Patterson 2000). McGill and Iacobucci (1992) also note that inexperienced customers tend to rely more heavily on tangible and often extrinsic cues when attempting to evaluate a new service brand experience. They are also argued to actively generate comparison standards during the consumption experience in an effort to compensate for their imprecise expectations.

The construct of calculative commitment may subsequently have a significant role to play in the service evaluation process for new customers. Calculative commitment is concerned with the extent to which customers instrumentally weigh the probability of making a poor decision along with the importance associated with the potentially negative consequences of that decision (Amine 1998). In other words, the construct infers a reliance on an attribute-based analysis by the customer. Calculative commitment has additionally been linked to the development of a psychological defense motivation whereby negative brand information is limited to the target attribute in question and positive brand information on other related attributes is enhanced, thereby reducing a customer's propensity to switch brands (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 1999). Strong calculative commitment is therefore frequently associated with a strong attitudinally congruent information-processing bias.

It may, as a result, be the case that calculative commitment has greater relevance for new, inexperienced custom-

ers of a service provider given their tendency to initially evaluate consumption experiences at an attribute-based level according to the extent to which they view the brand as meeting their needs in terms of utility. It is proposed, therefore, that calculative commitment may operate to initiate the engagement process for new customers given its role in the creation of what McEwen (2004) terms "rational bonds" between the service provider, brand, and customer. Based on the above discussion, it is proposed therefore that

Proposition 1: Calculative commitment will have a greater impact than affective commitment in explaining new customers' intention to return and to make positive recommendations to others.

The construct of calculative commitment, as an explanatory variable for loyalty, has, however, been criticized as inadequate for failing to take into consideration the role of emotion and affect in the consumption choice (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999). Calculative commitment has also been criticized as an embryonic form of true commitment due to its reliance on risk reduction and behavioral inertia as opposed to the more affective, relational dimensions of affiliation, association, and shared values (Hess and Story 2005; Liljander and Roos 2002; Wetzels, De Ruyter, and Van Birgelen 1998).

Importantly, these studies highlight for marketers that loyalty per se does not always suppose true commitment (Warrington and Shim 2000). That is, customers are argued to commence their brand relationship from a cognitive, shallow, and attribute-based evaluation of information during which the "depth of loyalty is no deeper than mere performance" (Oliver 1999, p. 35). Based on this argument, calculative commitment would subsequently have a much more limited role to play in the consumption evaluation process of repeat purchase, experienced users who have established expectations and who seek to establish a deeper and more enduring customer-brand relationship.

Research is still required, however, to examine "whether the building of . . . commitment for customers with weak bonds can transform them into relational consumers, and, if it can, which marketing tools build . . . commitment" (Garbarino and Johnson 1999, p. 82). The constructs of involvement, trust, and delight may assist in the achievement of this objective. The notion of customer delight may potentially provide a mechanism with which to accelerate the development of commitment—particularly affective commitment—for new customers. A small body of literature exists on the notion of customer delight within the

field of customer behavior. Oliver, Rust, and Varki (1997), in an attempt to address the limitations of previous mere satisfaction models, have posited the concept of customer delight, which they define as a combination of high pleasure via joy and elation, combined with unexpected levels of arousal or surprise (see also Rust and Oliver 2000). The authors argue that due to the unexpected nature of delight, customers engage in backward information processing in order to, first, reflect on the delighting events likely probability, and, second, to evaluate how the event departs from their experience-based norms.

Price, Arnould, and Tierney (1995) argue that although many firms recognize the importance of appealing to customers on an affective level, it is not always clear how to develop and maintain strong customer-brand relationships. They propose that one way to achieve this is to provide the customer with unexpected “extras” that may assist in the creation of delight. The key to the success of this approach is to provide customers with nonstandardized service experiences that convey a sense of relationship-based reciprocity. Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi in addition note that it is necessary to solicit active interaction and dialogue between the service provider and its customers: “the greater the attention paid to and participation invited from the target customers at every step of the value chain, the greater will be the customer delight” (2004, p. 486).

Delight may, therefore, first assist in attracting new customers to experience a new service brand (i.e., based on other customers’ word-of-mouth recommendation), and in addition, may offer a mechanism by which to encourage repeat purchase and retention among new users who were delighted by the experience. However, based on the foregoing arguments, the existence of cognitive complexity for repeat purchasers may limit the role of delight due to the highly developed expectations of repeat customers. This may subsequently lead to habituation toward delighting service elements. Therefore,

Proposition 2: For new customers, the experience of delight accelerates the development of commitment and loyalty.

The preceding analysis therefore suggests that management should be cautious of customer relationships that are solely based on calculative commitment. They should, however, be aware that the initial development of calculative commitment is merely the beginning of a transitioning sequence that if further developed and fostered, may lead to more affective and hence more enduring states of commitment (see Figure 1).

Repeat Purchase Customers and the Development of Emotional Bonds

Conversely, the literature on information-processing patterns for more experienced customers, or in this case, repeat purchase customers, postulates that increased experience with a service brand leads repeat purchase customers to develop a broad set of stable, evaluative criteria concerning consumption situations (Huber, Beckmann, and Hermann 2004; Patterson 2000; Zinkhan and Braunsberger 2004) and engage in cognitive complacency with regard to service evaluations (Soderlund 2002). This has led some researchers to term such users *cognitive misers* in that if previous encounters have been positive, then additional encounters appear to produce increasingly positive evaluations (Iglesias 2004; Mattila 2003). Complex and well-formed knowledge structures, such as those possessed by repeat purchase customers of a brand, are therefore argued to be conducive to the formation of commitment: “for the highly committed, [dissonance] costs are more pronounced than those incurred when change is contemplated in the simple structure of the less committed” (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999, p. 335). A question that remains therefore concerns the mechanisms by which a state of commitment may be achieved, and it seems that the constructs of involvement and trust may provide a useful contribution in this respect.

Involvement has been defined broadly as a goal-directed motivation that is indicative of the extent to which the decision is viewed as personally relevant to the customer (Mittal and Lee 1989). It is viewed as being important in the customer engagement process for a variety of reasons. Gordon, McKeage, and Fox (1998) and Swinyard (1993) note, perhaps most importantly, that a state of involvement with a brand engenders a sense of ongoing psychological commitment to that brand with regard to the customers thoughts, feelings, and subsequent behaviors and that where the customer is involved, he or she may be more likely to respond positively to marketing efforts that attempt to personalize the experience. This is supported by the research of Oliva, Oliver, and Bearden (1995), who point to the “stickiness” that involvement creates within the customer-brand relationship. It is argued that the more highly involved customers are with their brands, the more loyal they are over the long term (Oliva, Oliver, and Bearden 1995). Roser (1990) also points out that involved customers are more likely to discount negatively conflicting informational messages in order to preserve their existing schemas. They are also less likely to possess large brand repertoires (hence, leading to a greater level of brand rejection) (Belonax and Javalgi 1989).

In addition, Mano and Oliver (1993) emphasize the point that when customers respond to satisfaction queries, limited attention is given over to product or brand involvement. Thus, customers need not be involved with the product category or with brand choice to be merely satisfied. However, it is argued that involvement is “concomitantly required in the generation of high levels of either positive or negative affect” (Mano and Oliver 1993, p. 455). Therefore, the argument has been put forward that if customers are uninvolved with the choice of brand or service provider, then it is virtually impossible to have committed customers (Hofmeyr and Rice 2000). Uninvolved and, hence, uncommitted customers while being satisfied may switch brands on a regular basis because the brand or service provider is viewed as being unimportant in the customer’s decision-making process (Warrington and Shim 2000).

Even though new customers may experience some level of initial involvement with a service brand, the arguments put forward above suggest that involvement may have a more significant role to play in the purchase decision and evaluation process for repeat purchase customers. This is because they have a higher level of familiarity with the brand and subsequently have more complex cognitive structures in terms of the evaluative categories that they possess. Soderlund notes that it is this familiarity with a brand that leads to repeat purchase customers’ polarized evaluative opinions: “If I repeatedly come back to this object, it matters to me, and if it matters to me, I should have an opinion about it that signals that it matters, and a neutral or near neutral opinion does not do that” (2002, p. 866). It is argued, therefore, that involvement is likely to be a necessary component of the broader conceptualization of the process of engagement in that it mediates the relationship between satisfaction and commitment most significantly for repeat purchase customers.

The development of trust in the customer–service provider relationship is also proposed to assist in the development of customer commitment. Hess and Story (2005) note, for example, that trust may transform customer–brand connections from being largely cognitive in nature and based on risk minimization and the maximization of utility, to more emotionally oriented and affective connections associated with affiliation, identification, and attachment. In other words, trust is argued to be a necessary condition of true commitment (Hess and Story 2005). This is supported by Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2001), who note that trust within the brand domain consists of two primary components: first, the assumption that the brand is able to

respond to the customer’s needs with a consistent level of quality and, second, an affective belief that the brand has the customer’s best interests at heart. Moreover, the process by which a customer assigns a degree of trust toward a brand is argued to be based on the customer’s experience with that brand. That is, the level of trust in the customer–brand relationship is influenced by the customer’s direct and indirect exposure to the brand (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2001).

Trust has also been found to be strongly linked to involvement. The two constructs of trust and involvement have been found to work concomitantly with one another in the development of high levels of commitment toward a brand, particularly where the purchase is moderately to highly involving. This is because trust acts to moderate risk perception in the consumption process and subsequently guides customers’ intentions (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2001). Therefore, based on the foregoing discussion, it is proposed that

Proposition 3: The higher the level of involvement with the service brand, the greater the degree of brand trust leading to increased levels of customer commitment.

It is also postulated that as a consequence of their entrenched knowledge structures, experienced users are better able than inexperienced customers to construct relationship-based evaluations (Bowden and Corkindale 2005; Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos 2005; Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001). Such evaluations are argued to be advantageous to the service firm: “the best relationships with customers are affective or emotional in nature . . . tangible attributes of a product or service have far less influence on consumer preference than the . . . sensory and emotional elements derived from total experience” (Pullman and Gross 2003, p. 217).

The construct of affective commitment subsequently appears to have a significant role to play in the service evaluation process for repeat purchase customers. Affective commitment refers to an emotional feeling that expresses a customer’s psychological closeness to a brand and that “consists of a holistic or aggregate judgment of the brand independently from its functional or instrumental attributes” (Amine 1998, p. 313). Research investigating the moderating role of affective commitment on loyalty has found that affective commitment may lead to a greater desire to remain with that brand, a willingness to invest in the brand, and a propensity to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (Harrison-Walker 2001; Wetzels, De Ruyter, and Van Birgelen 1998).

In addition, affective commitment produces a “stickiness” that moderates attitudinal and behavioral responses under service failure conditions (Mattila 2004). For highly committed, experienced customers, the negative effects of a service failure may be mitigated by a reliance on past affective experiences (as opposed to purely cognitive beliefs) in the determination of future loyalty behaviors (Mattila 2004). Furthermore, affective evaluations may be a better predictor of behavior than cognitive evaluations (Dick and Basu 1994). Recent research supports this contention noting that affective commitment may have a stronger impact on loyalty above and beyond other constructs such as satisfaction, price, corporate image, and calculative commitment (Johnson et al. 2001). Yet, given the importance of affective commitment in the development of loyalty, it is noted that empirical work on the construct is sparse (Mattila 2004).

Based on the foregoing arguments, it is likely to be the case that affective commitment may assume greater relevance in the consumption evaluation process for experienced, repeat purchase customers of a service brand who are seeking to develop a relationship with that service brand, when compared to new users of a service brand. Repeat purchase customers are viewed as having moved beyond cost-benefit, rational evaluations, and may be seeking to establish a deeper, ongoing, personal connection with the brand or the experience. It is proposed, therefore, that affective commitment may play a key role in the creation of what McEwen (2004) terms “emotional bonds” between the brand and customer and that subsequently,

Proposition 4: Affective commitment will have a greater impact than calculative commitment in explaining repeat purchase customers' intention to return and recommend.

The Distinction Between Involvement, Commitment, Loyalty, and the Process of Customer Engagement

Exploring the notion of customer engagement may raise the issue of customer engagement being “old wine in a new bottle”; however, this paper argues that this is not the case and that there is a clear distinction between involvement, commitment, and loyalty when compared to the process of customer engagement.

To further strengthen this distinction, for example, involvement has typically been defined in the literature as relating to an internal state of arousal (i.e., intensity,

direction, and persistence of that arousal) (Warrington and Shim 2000). More specifically, involvement has been used to describe either the ongoing concern that a customer may have for a product class based on the perceived importance of that product class in relation to his or her self-concept, ego, and value system and/or the general interest that a customer may have in the purchase process (Beatty, Kahle, and Homer 1988). Customers are therefore argued to be involved when their values and self-image are made salient by a specific decision situation (Crosby and Taylor 1983). Involvement is subsequently viewed as motivating the customer to seek information that may be used to manage and moderate any potential risk inherent in the decision-making process in order to facilitate a decision on a particular choice alternative (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2001).

Conversely, commitment is often couched in the context of entrenched psychological attachment whereby the object to which the customer is committed is considered as the only acceptable choice within a specific product class (Warrington and Shim 2000). A customer is therefore considered to be committed when his or her values, self-image, and attitudes are strongly linked to a specific choice alternative (Crosby and Taylor 1983). Commitment is therefore associated with a specific attitudinal position on an issue, and not just mere involvement and interest in that issue as is the case with involvement (Muncy and Hunt 2001). This particular point was empirically investigated by Warrington and Shim (2000), who differentiated four segments of customers according to (1) the extent of decision making (involvement) and (2) the strength of attitude toward a brand (commitment). The two constructs of involvement and commitment were found to be conceptually distinct. However, involvement has been found to precede the development of commitment (Beatty, Kahle, and Homer 1988). Customers with high levels of commitment were also found to be more highly involved.

Commitment and loyalty are considered to be closely related constructs; however, they are also considered to be distinct (Beatty, Kahle, and Homer 1988). Even though brand loyalty does have an attitudinal element (Dick and Basu 1994), loyalty is often evaluated in behavioral terms (i.e., intention to return). Following this line of argument, it has been noted that commitment implies brand loyalty but that loyalty does not imply brand commitment. That is, brand-loyal customers (if measured on a behavioral basis) may switch brands; however, brand-committed customers, due to their strong attitudinal beliefs, are much less likely to switch brands (Warrington and Shim 2000).

The theorized process of customer engagement is not concerned specifically *per se* with each of the individual constructs that are modeled within it (i.e., involvement, calculative commitment, affective commitment, trust, delight, and loyalty). Rather, the process of customer engagement is concerned with understanding the way in which each of these individual constructs might operate to drive customer loyalty within a broader psychological framework. That is, the paper develops a framework in which to articulate the mechanisms by which loyalty may be developed and maintained for two different segments of customers. To reiterate, the process of customer engagement, as distinct from each of the elements within it, is therefore primarily concerned with examining the formation and development of customer-brand relationships and the mechanisms that drive loyalty for new customers to a specific brand versus repeat customers to a specific brand.

Following the discussion above, a theoretical model of the relationships described in the earlier propositions within the paper are summarized. It is proposed that customers who are new to a specific service brand follow a very different pathway to loyalty than those customers who are repeat purchasers of a specific brand.

The model proposes that new customers to a specific brand have largely undeveloped knowledge structures and hence imprecise expectation sets due to their lack of experience with the specific service brand. In order to evaluate a new service brand, and given their poorly formed expectation sets for the specific brand, these customers are therefore proposed to rely on a piecemeal, attribute-based approach of evaluation as opposed to the more heuristic and relationship-oriented evaluation of repeat purchasers. The focus of this attribute-based evaluation is subsequently directed at establishing a sense of calculative commitment—that is, an evaluative approach that focuses on identifying the utility that the new service brand offers. Satisfaction, rather than being the primary driver of loyalty for this segment, is viewed as simply initiating a transitioning sequence initially toward a state of calculative commitment and ultimately toward a state of enduring brand commitment. Three potential evaluative outcomes may arise following the new customer's evaluation of the service experience, including (1) confirmation of a state of calculative commitment leading to an intention to return, (2) the experience of a delighting service element that greatly exceeds the customers' expectations initiating the development of more affective forms of commitment and resulting in intention to return, or (3) exit from the service brand altogether following a negative service evaluation.

Conversely, repeat purchase customers of a specific service brand have well-formed knowledge structures and clearer and more specified expectation sets due to their increased levels of experience with the specific service brand. Repeat purchase customers subsequently rely more so on a relationally oriented evaluation of the brand, often adopting a heuristic approach to evaluation given their tendency to evaluate recent service experiences in light of previous experiences and engage in cognitive complacency. These customers are argued to be more highly involved than new customers to a service brand in that as a repeat purchaser, they inherently have a greater level of interest in the brand itself. Trust, like involvement, operates concomitantly to moderate the repeat customer's risk perceptions; however, trust, more importantly, facilitates the progression of the customer's commitment to the brand from being primarily calculative and functionally oriented to more affectively and emotionally oriented. Trust and involvement are additionally supported in the literature as being antecedents to the formation of commitment. It is this entrenched psychological commitment and desire to remain with the brand in the form of affective commitment that the repeat customer has toward the service brand that ultimately acts to drive customer loyalty.

The conceptual model of the process of customer engagement therefore traces the temporal development of loyalty as customers progress from being new to a service brand to becoming repeat purchasers of a service brand, by highlighting the relationships between the constructs of calculative commitment, affective commitment, involvement, and trust. The model therefore emphasizes the point that as customer-brand relationships evolve, so too does the way in which service experiences are evaluated.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This conceptual paper should be seen as a preliminary attempt at addressing an issue that has significant implications for services marketing theory and practice. Empirical testing of the conceptual model and propositions that have been put forward should follow. However, based on this preliminary conceptualization of the process of customer engagement, a number of implications seem relevant.

First, this model of engagement contributes further to the debate concerning the continuing tendency of management to use rather simplistic and substantially flawed measures of customer consumption responses. These survey instruments place undue emphasis on customer satisfaction and expectation scores at the expense of a more detailed examination

of customers' consumption responses, which is inclusive of affective measures. Although recent studies of the role of affect have moved this debate forward, engagement may propose a more complete, conceptual process with which management may measure commitment and, hence, loyalty toward a brand or service.

Second, the model provides a means by which management can better understand the relationships between customers' goals and expectations, and the range and depth of customers' cognitive and affective responses toward a service or brand. It also provides an understanding of the specific process of engagement, for new and repeat purchase customers of a service brand, highlighting the possible transitory nature of new customers' commitment. It additionally focuses management's attention on the specific requirements of affectively committed customers and the need for a more relationship-based approach to the management of these customers. It suggests the need for a more proactive approach to managing a customer base, one in which customers are actively managed and progressed from their initial service encounter and a state of calculative commitment toward a state of affective commitment and full engagement, therefore emphasizing the development of ongoing management policies and programs that are aimed at fostering affective, relational ties between the customer and service brand. It would be conceivable, for example, to generate engagement assessments from the model that assess the extent to which a corporation's customer base, and each of its various segments, is engaged with its brands or services. These assessments could then be compared or benchmarked against the industry category and against service and product initiatives that are designed to improve engagement performance for each or all segments of the brand or service.

Third, the model draws attention to the quite different cognitive and affective preconsumption states of new versus repeat purchase customers. It points out that new customers are likely to be more attuned to service experiences that surpass baseline expectations and lead to a delighted state, through, for example, the provision of unanticipated service levels or unexpected extras. Delight, in this sense, is viewed as a conceptually useful construct in the proposed model as it suggests that a focus on service attributes that lead to highly positive and surprising levels of affect may offer service providers a mechanism with which to interest and involve customers. Moreover, delight may act to accelerate the development of affective commitment among new customers.

However, the model also suggests that merely delighting a customer on his or her first or even subsequent visit may

not be enough to generate long-term affective commitment and loyalty. That is, the loyalty of repeat purchase customers is more effectively maintained through relationship management approaches such as personalized service experiences, rapport with service staff, and recognition.

In summary, it is proposed that it is important for academics and practitioners to understand that engagement, as a process, arises out of a combination of calculative commitment, followed by the development of trust, involvement, and eventually affective commitment. Engagement conceptualized as a psychological process models for management the way in which customer loyalty forms for new customers to a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty is maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand. The task for management therefore is to be cognizant of the differences between these two customer segments so that they are able to more effectively manage their customer base by developing tailored marketing strategies to deal with those different segments of customers and continue to progress them up the "loyalty ladder." The issue of engagement and its measurement should therefore be considered as a fundamental concern for managers who wish to move beyond the notion of merely satisfying customers, to establishing more powerful emotional bonds between their service brands and their customers.

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