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COMMENTARY

From Repeat Patronage to Value Co-creation in Service Ecosystems: A Transcending Conceptualization of Relationship

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Abstract: This article anchors a special issue on a service-dominant logic perspective on relationship, stemming from a special session at the 9th International Conference on Relationship Marketing in Berlin in 2009. It also proposes and elaborates a service-dominant-logic-based, transcending conceptualization of relationship that was the basis for that special session and links it to a model of service ecosystems through which value creation can be better understood and, thus, businesses can be better informed.

Keywords: Service-dominant logic · Relationship marketing · Customer relationship management · Business ecosystems · Service ecosystems · Value co-creation · Networks

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The foundations of the concept of "relationship" in academic marketing thought are generally acknowledged to be found in both service marketing and business-to-business (B2B) marketing (Ballantyne et al. 2003; Gronroos 2000; Mattsson 1997). Since its introduction, it has transitioned to a central concept in mainstream marketing as well, in which it is most often conceptualized in terms of maximizing customer lifetime value (CLV) through repeat patronage—ongoing exchange through multiple economic transactions involving units of output (see Christopher et al. 2004). As such, the concept can be seen as at least partially goods-dominant (G-D) logic oriented. If, however, as we (e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2004a, 2008a) have suggested, marketing is evolving to a new, transcending dominant logic—what we and others have called service-dominant (S-D) logic—that reframes the conceptualizations of service(s), goods, and transactions, it suggests that a transcending, S-D-logic-compatible conceptualization of relationship is also appropriate.

This article is intended to explore the implications of an S-D-logic-compatible conceptualization of relationship and also to anchor this special issue of the *Journal of Business Market Management* on the same topic[1]. The articles of this special issue are based on S-D logic perspectives on relationship marketing that were presented at a special session[2] we organized for the 9th International Conference on Relationship Marketing held in Berlin, Germany in September 2009. They share a common thesis, though varying perspectives, that S-D logic implies a somewhat different understanding of the role and meaning of relationship than that implied by traditional, G-D logic.

To do this, we first briefly review the development of relationship and relationship marketing. We then look at relationship in terms of the broader, contextual, networked and co-creative nature of value creation, as captured in S-D logic and supported by other research streams, such as new institutional economics and the sociology of the market. We then link this conceptualization to the business- and service- ecosystems nature of service exchange and with the market and value creation. In the process, we highlight how the articles that are part of this special issue reinforce, to varying extents, an S-D logic view of relationship.

Historical Perspective

As suggested, as an academic construct, "relationship"—and relationship marketing (RM)—has roots in both service marketing and B2B marketing (Ballantyne et al. 2003; Gronroos 2000; Mattsson 1997). At least initially, the two approaches to relationship had related but somewhat different notions behind them. Service marketing has largely focused on interactivity, based partly on the "inseperability" characteristic that has been used to differentiate service(s) from goods (e.g., Zeithaml et al. 1985; see also Gronroos 2004; Gummeson 1995). In the current issue, Gummesson and Mele, in "Marketing as Co-creation of Value through Interaction and Resource Integration," provide additional insights into the central role of *interaction* as a key construct in conventional services marketing, as well with the S-D logic perspective. As a normative concept, interactivity has implied the need to foster firm/customer relationships (e.g., Berry 1983). The B2B marketing orientation has been somewhat more focused on the *embeddedness* of value creation in networks, stemming at least in part from the work by the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group (e.g., Hakansson and Snehota 1995). It has also been related to the idea that in B2B markets, exchange takes place in associations or "domesticated markets" (e.g., Arndt 1979). These overlapping, but somewhat different, orientations are reflected in definitions of relationship ranging from (1) "Relationship marketing is a strategy to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships" (Berry 1983, p. 25); to (2) "Relationship marketing is marketing based on interaction within networks of relationships" (Gummesson 2004, p. 3); to (3) "Relationship marketing is the process of identifying, developing, maintaining, and terminating relational exchanges with the purpose of enhancing performance" (Palmatier 2008, p. 5).

Over time, relationship marketing has also become used to denote the opposite of a "transaction" orientation, in part based on Jackson's (1985) contrasting the terms. Dwyer et al. (1987), relying on Macneil (1980) and Arndt (1979), further developed this discrete (transactional) versus relational theme (see also Pels 1999; Webster 1992), though arguably with more richness than the relational-versus-transactional dichotomy is normally considered to imply (see Vargo 2009). Over time, the concept of relationship marketing has also transitioned from the sub-disciplines to "mainstream" academic marketing (see Vargo and Lusch 2008c), in which the normative, repeat-patronage orientation is particularly pronounced. However, Lusch and Brown (1996) both theoretically argue and empirically demonstrate in a B2B setting that (1) the length of doing business with a customer, (2) long-term orientation toward the customer and (3) relational behavior between the business and customer are distinct but related phenomena.

As a mainstream marketing concept, the G-D logic connotations of relationship are, arguably, punctuated, and RM has become something of a long-term extension of the customer orientation, with an emphasis on developing and maintaining firm-customer bonds in order to profit from customer lifetime value (CLV) through repeat patronage. (i.e., through multiple transactions) (see Christopher et al. 2004). As indicated by Palmatier (2008, pp. 4–5), this conceptualization of RM is largely a unidirectional, firm-centric prescription for increasing profits. In practice, RM is often manifested through customer relationship management (CRM), the often information-technology-driven, active management of relationships through the maintenance and use of customer information. In the current issue Gruen and Hofstetter, in "The Relationship Marketing View of the Customer and the Service-Dominant Logic Perspective," show that in some situations the relationship marketing perspective has already transcended the G-D logic view. However, in most situations we continue to observe that scholarship and research on relationship marketing and industry practices do not reflect the transcending S-D-logic view of relationship. It is a positive step for Gruen and Hofstetter to show how the tools of CRM and CLV can be used to help develop effective relationship marketing from an S-D logic perspective. This is important because S-D logic recognizes the importance of cash flows—what we call the flow of service rights—to the firm.

We (Vargo and Lusch 2008b) have suggested that sub-disciplinary initiatives, such as service marketing and B2B marketing have not been so much a response to differences (from mainstream marketing) in the phenomena with which they deal, but are, rather, motivated by the inadequacies of the underlying G-D logic, on which mainstream marketing is based, to deal with the full range of marketing-related phenomena. We have also argued that the new logic (S-D logic) to which marketing is evolving is service based, necessarily interactional and co-creative of value, network centered, and, thus, inherently relational.

Service-Dominant Logic

S-D logic has been elaborated in depth elsewhere (e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2004a, 2008a; Vargo et al. 2010) and will only be highlighted here. The central tenet is that, fundamentally, economic (and social) exchange can best be characterized as *service-for-service* exchange—that is, service is the basis of exchange. Thus, the essential elements begin with the definition of service: *the process of using one's competences (knowledge and skills) for the benefit of another party*. This meaning of "service" (singular) can be contrasted not so much with goods as it can with "services" (plural), which normally denotes a type of (intangible) output, a meaning that we (Vargo and Lusch 2004b) have associated with G-D logic. Goods remain important in S-D logic but are seen as vehicles for service provision, rather than primary to exchange and value creation.

The second most important principle of S-D logic is the recognition that value is (co)created collaboratively, rather than a property of goods that is created by the firm and distributed to "consumers," (value destroyers), as in G-D logic. Thus, the service provided (directly or through a good) by the firm is only input into the value (co)creating activities of the customer. Before value can be realized, that input must be integrated with other resources, some of which are also obtained through the market and some of which are privately (e.g., personal, friends, family) or publically (e.g., government) provided. Thus, value creation is always an interactive process that takes place in the context of a unique set of multiple exchange relationships. Hence, value creation is mutual and reciprocal (i.e., service is exchanged for service), almost by definition. That is, not only does the firm provide inputs for the customer's value-creating activities but the customer does the same for the firm, though usually at least partly indirectly, through money. But customers co-create value with firms in additional ways, such as by enhancing brand and relationship equity for the firm, either directly through their purchasing or indirectly, through influencing the attitudes, the making of meanings, and the behavior of others toward the firm (see McAlaxander et al.; Ogawa and Piller 2006 for examples).

S-D Logic and Relationship

When viewed from an S-D logic, value co-creating orientation, instead of a G-D logic, output-producing orientation (G-D logic), value can be seen as emerging and unfolding over time, rather than as a discrete, production-consumption event. Consider a company sending its employees to a conference or buying a new piece of manufacturing equipment. In both examples, exchanges and transactions might take place in relatively discrete instances (e.g., sitting in sessions of a conference or taking delivery from an equipment dealer, respectively) but the value unfolds over extended periods of time as the new knowledge (or contacts) is combined with other knowledge in the context of the employee's work (and life in general) or the equipment is combined with energy, employee skills and other explicit and tacit knowledge; product design; customer knowledge, input, and feedback; work-place culture and regulations; and other materials. This allows the creation of new value propositions with service potential for both employees and customers. This unfolding, co-creational (direct or through goods) nature of value is *relational* in the sense that the (extended) activities of both parties (as well as those of other parties) *interactively and interdependently combine, over time, to create value*.

It is in terms of these joint, interactive, collaborative, unfolding and reciprocal roles in value co-creation that S-D logic conceptualizes *relationship*. Co-creation and service exchange *imply a value-creating relationship* or, more precisely, *a complex web of value-creating relationships*, rather than making relationship an option. In S-D logic, this meaning of relationship is punctuated in foundational premise (FP) 8: “A service-centered view is inherently customer oriented and relational.” In some situations, it might be optimal for the firm (and the customer) to develop relationships that include repeat patronage (i.e., multiple, relatively discrete transactions), but it is not essential to the existence of value-creating relationships (economic or otherwise). Chandler and Wieland, in their contribution to this special issue, “Embedded Relationships: Implications for Networks, Innovation, and Ecosystems,” further elaborate this notion of relationship as being embedded within a complex network of other value co-creation relationships.

This S-D-logic-compatible concept of relationship requires zooming out to get a broader, value-creation perspective, as seen in Fig. 1 (see Vargo 2008). From this view, it should be clear that the primarily transactional focus of G-D logic, and its concern with the transaction (single or repeat), is not so much wrong as it is restricted. Value creation takes place in and must be understood from this broader, contextual perspective, as summarized in Table 1.

Additional insight into a transcending conceptualization of relationship can be found in the (new) institutional economics and the sociology of markets, as well as in research by marketing scholars influenced by these research streams. Chandler and Wieland (this issue) and Loebler (this issue) begin to introduce the readers to some of this literature. In this literature, value creation is understood in terms of the actor embeddedness in and

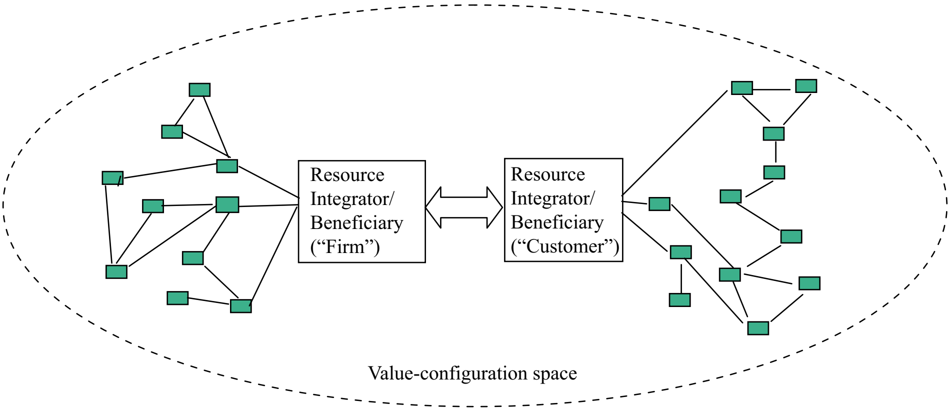

Fig. 1: The contextual nature of value creation (Source: Adapted from Vargo 2008)

Table 1: The meanings and implications of relationship (Source: Adapted from Vargo 2009)

	G-D logic	S-D logic
Meaning(s) of relationship	• Dyadic bonds represented by trust and commitment • Long-term patronage—repetitive transactions	• Reciprocal, service-for-service nature of exchange • Co-creation of value • Complex, networked structure of the market • Temporal, emergent nature of value creation • Contextual nature of value determination
Normative implications	• Manage customers (through communications, satisfaction, etc.) to maximize CLV	• Collaborate with customers to develop mutually beneficial value propositions • Co-create value through service-for-service exchange

creation of networks. For example—ignoring the somewhat G-D logical stance—Araujo and Spring (2006) draw on Baldwin and Clark (2003) and suggest that transactional units can be characterized in terms of objectified, bounded, tradable entities ("goods" and "services"), which represent parts of a larger network of relationships. That is, market offerings represent only a small part of the relationships that are involved in value creation. Baldwin (2007) similarly characterizes transactions as "mutually agreed-upon transfers with compensation located *within* the task network, [which] serve to divide one set of tasks from another" (p. 159, emphasis in the original). Likewise, Araujo and Spring (p. 801, 803), based on their paraphrase of Callon et al. (2002) and of Callon (1991) that "products constitute programs of action inscribed in tangible, materials," suggest that a good corresponds to "a state at a point in time," in a larger value-creation network.

In this issue, Loebler views signs in terms of service, similar to how S-D logic views goods as distribution mechanisms for service provision (FP2) – in brief, signs provide service through assisting in the service-delivery process by coordinating interactivities and relationships. Importantly, this occurs not only prior to and during a transaction but far into the future, as an actor integrates a market offering to co-create value. In practice, actors assign meanings to signs and thus meanings to relationships. This would suggest that, even after disposal of (service-providing) products, such as favorite automobiles, customers can continue to draw on meanings and signs to coordinate interactivity and relationships. Venkatesh et al. (2006) go as far as to view the market as a sign economy where markets allow for the exchange of meanings and values for money. Meanings however are not simply transactional but rather are embedded in networks of relationships through which actors coordinate their behavior with signs and practices, as noted by Loebler.

In S-D logic, these network links are *mutual service-provision relationships* and all of this begins to point toward a notion of *transactions as bounded relationships* within larger institutional structures established for mutual value creation. In some instances, these transactions are defined in terms of *products*, which can be seen as *tangibleized bounded* *relationships*. That is, products (goods) represent modular (discrete, standardized pieces of complex systems) structures, characterized by relatively "thin crossing points" in more complex networks of mutual value creation (Baldwin 2007; Langlois 2002)—that is, service-based, value-creation networks in S-D logic.

It is in this sense that transactions and products (goods) *perceptually and temporally trap relationships*, among actors involved in service-for-service exchange, at points in value-creation time and space, that the S-D logic concept of relationship transcends more limited conceptualizations. *Service relationships characterize the market* (and other social exchange systems); transactions and products are *structural and temporal isolates* in the value creation process. Thus, it is about relationship understood from the perspective of the *co-creation of value over time*, rather than from the perspective of *opportunities to extract additional resources* from customers over time.

This perspective on relationship should not be seen just as a restatement of the customer-centric view; it works the other way also. That is, whereas firms *might* develop more value through additional economic exchanges with a given customer, in some cases, they alternatively gain more long-term benefits from making additional transactions unnecessary, such as building brand equity and thus acquiring additional customers by providing easy to maintain, high-quality, durable goods or useful educational service. In short, in S-D logic, value creation in markets (and other exchange systems) is always relational but only in some instances is repeat patronage essential to the value-creation process from the perspective of both parties.

Transactions as Platforms in Ecosystem Relationships

This S-D-logic-compatible, extended-interactional, value-creation-based conceptualization of relationship also fits well with an emerging thinking about firms in terms of their relatively limited and specific role in business ecosystems (e.g., Iansiti and Levien 2004; Prahalad and Krishnan 2008). The ecosystems view is, in turn, compatible with the resource-integration, service-provision conceptualizations suggested by one of the foundational premises of S-D logic—all economic and social actors are resource integrators (Vargo and Lusch 2008a, FP9). In the ecosystems framework, engaging in a transaction in the market means buying in to a complex series of mutual, resource-integrating, service-providing, value-creating relationships. As suggested, this understanding of value creation requires the zooming out implied by Fig. 1. *Business ecosystems* must be seen in terms of service-based, network-with-network relationships, *including the network of the "customer."* In this view, all actors are both *providers and beneficiaries* and the "producers" and "consumers" distinction vanishes.

We have recently (Vargo and Lusch 2011, in press; see also Vargo 2009) suggested that "it is all B2B," which intended to punctuate this idea that the producer-consumer distinction is flawed and that all actors (economic and social) should be understood in terms of a common set of generic functions—resource integration and mutual service provision—that create value-creation networks. Thus, more appropriately, it *is all A2A* (actor-to-actor). But these networks are more than just linked actors; they are dynamic systems that must be understood in terms of the full meaning of system.

Dynamic-system thinking is not new to marketing thought (see e.g., Alderson 1957; Cox 1965; Dixon and Wilkinson 1982; Jaworski et al. 2000; Layton 1985). However, S-D logic, with its focus on relational, collaborative, systemic value creation, driven by resource integration and mutual service provision, points toward the need to think in terms of dynamic service ecosystems (Lusch et al. 2010; see also Vargo 2009). A *service ecosystem* is a spontaneously sensing and responding spatial and temporal structure of largely loosely coupled, value-proposing social and economic actors interacting through institutions, technology, and language to (1) co-produce service offerings, (2) engage in mutual service provision, and (3) co-create value. This definition requires some de-compacting and this can be done by recognizing eight key components of the definition.

1. *Spontaneously sensing and responding*. Actors interface with other actors and use their senses to determine how and when to respond or act. With the ascendance of information technology the sensing and responding is more and more spontaneous.
2. *Spatial and temporal structure*. Actors and resources are arrayed over geographic space and temporal dimensions.
3. *Largely loosely coupled*. Actors connect to others both within and outside organizations mostly via primarily soft contracts vs. hard contracts.
4. *Value proposing actors*. Actors cannot create value for other actors but can make offers that have potential value and this occurs via value propositions.
5. *Use of language, institutions and technology*. To interface successfully, actors need a common language. They rely upon these and other social institutions (e.g., monetary systems, laws, etc.) to regulate interfacing and exchange. Finally, technology, and especially innovation, drives system evolution and performance.
6. *Co-produce service offerings*. Actors invite other actors to assist in the production of service offerings.
7. *Engaging in mutual service provision*. Actors do not get a free ride but must help other actors, via service exchange, either directly or indirectly (e.g., monetarily or generalized reciprocity).
8. *Co-creating value*. Actors, in the integration of service offerings with other resources (including other service offerings), create value which is unique to their situation and context.

Once the shift toward service ecosystems of relatively generic actors is made, it opens up the possibility to draw on the vast knowledge developed in the compartmentalized sub-disciplines of marketing and elsewhere. This, in turn, allows a fuller understanding of how humans collectively create value for themselves through co-creating value with and for others and thus, provides insight into how actors (e.g., businesses) can better participate in these service ecosystems to benefit themselves. However, we submit that the turn to this service ecosystems perspective requires understanding that we collectively *create service ecosystems through relationship*, understood from a *transcending, service-for-service* perspective. Stated alternatively, service ecosystems emerge and evolve through relationships among service-for-service providing, resource-integrating actors.

Concluding Comment

For at least the last 40 years, the subject matter of marketing has generally been recognized as exchange. As Kotler (1972, p. 13) noted around the beginning of that time, a marketing situation requires "(1) two or more parities who are potentially interested in exchange, (2) each possessing things-of-value to the others, and (3) each capable of communication and delivery." In a traditional, G-D logic based perspective this exchange is measured in terms of transactions involving units of output. By the early 1980s this focus on exchange was broadened to embrace a relational orientation, especially in the B2B literature, but expanded in the 1990s to the B2C literature. But from a transaction-based, G-D logic perspective, this relational orientation became to be understood in terms of multiple transactions and thus manifested in data base driven, CRM programs and CLV metrics. We believe that this orientation is overly narrow and thus constraining.

We argue, here and elsewhere, that marketing needs to "break free" from G-D logic and its lexicon, especially the associated meanings of terms such as "value," "goods," "services," and "relationship." In the S-D-logic-implied, ecosystem view, various actors are connected, directly or indirectly, and become dependent and interdependent through a web of relationships that extend beyond traditional notions of the transaction and economic exchange. Although disquieting to some, firm activity and value (co)creation must be understood in the context of relationships among a complex web of actors (customers, employees, suppliers and other stakeholders) that transcend transactions (single or repeated). Understanding the service ecosystems nature of relationship should be a managerial, and thus a research, priority.

Endnotes

1 The content of this article draws heavily on one by Vargo (2009) on the same topic in the Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing and less so on a forthcoming article (Vargo and Lusch 2011) in *Industrial Marketing management.*

2 The article by Mele and Gummesson was from a presentation that was part of the special session but rather from one on a related topic presented by Mele.

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