A poststructuralist approach to the meaning of artefacts

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Two major trends have been noticeable in marketing practice and literature during the last decades. First of all, a focus on the customer such as customer retention, customer satisfaction and loyalty measurement, customer profitability assessments, and customer relationship management. Second, an increased interest in brands and branding, for example, brand loyalty, brand equity etc. Also, the rhetoric of managing the customer or the brand is noticeable. A traditional definition of management would imply to plan, organize, and control. In other words, viewing the customer or brand as passive or obedient rather than having powerful influence on development and interpretation of marketing activities. At the same time, we are also witnessing approaches to studying the relations between consumers and brands, often in the context of consumer culture (e.g. McCracken 1986). For example, consumer culture and branding (Holt 2002) and the impact of brand community (e.g. Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), the latter illustrating the social relations between admirers of a brand in a non-geographic setting. The consumer and the brand are then viewed as participants involved in defining meaning. This is the view advocated in this paper. Consumers as well as artefacts inscribe meaning. Hård af Segerstad (1957, p.15) writes: "People without things are helpless, but things without people are meaningless".

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the meaning of artefacts by using a poststructuralist approach (e.g. Holt 1997). It is argued that in order to understand the meaning of artefacts, it is necessary to understand the complex relations between individuals and artefacts in a cultural context. The paper is part of a larger multi-sited ethnographic study involving different actors with relations to collections such as collectors, designers, producers, retailers, and museums. Collectors are embedded in consumer culture. Collections are viewed and evaluated by people, collectors or non-collectors, and also related and compared to other collections or things. Collecting represents a highly individualistic activity, but it is also a collectivist activity in that the collectors often associate themselves to other collectors. The individuality is substantiated by the exposure received in relation to other collectors as well as in relation to the absence of such collections. Collecting represents consumption in that collectible items are acquired, displayed, and disposed of. Collecting represents also production. A collector produces and redefines his/her collection over time by adding, displaying, and divesting items. The collector also produces him/herself as a collector and relates him/herself to other collectors and collections.

In marketing, artefacts are often discussed in a general manner such as durability, tangibility, or use resulting in classifications such as non-durable goods, durable goods,

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services, convenience goods, shopping goods, specialty goods, and unsought goods (e.g. Kotler 2000). Focus appear to be on product attributes (e.g. style) and products benefits (e.g. functional), i.e. the ways in which products give certain meaning. There is a need for a stronger focus on the consumer and consumers’ interpretation of meaning. Lai (1995) emphasised the importance of understanding the benefits consumers seek in products and proposed a typology of benefits that a consumer may derive from possession or consumption such as functional, social, affective, epistemic, aesthetic, hedonic, situational, and holistic benefits. From an emphasis on mainly utilitarian aspects of consumption, research has over time recognised hedonic aspects. For example, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) discussed that experiential aspects of consumption such as feelings, fantasies, and fun should be considered. It appears, however as if marketing strategies often continue to be product- as opposed to consumer driven (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). Also, customer oriented product development sometimes appears to be a talk of the tongue rather than a true way of working (Ekström and Karlsson 2001). Previous research in marketing has mainly focused on how consumers derive meaning rather than studying why something is meaningful (Hirschman 1979, Moorman 1987). Traditional perspectives, theories, and methods in marketing are not sufficient for an in-depth understanding of the meaning of artefacts. A poststructuralist approach and ethnographic research are expected to improve this understanding.

References


Hård af Segerstad, Ulf (1957), Tingen och vi [The things and us], Stockholm: Nordisk Rotogravyr.


