

# A citizen's critique of relationship marketing in risk society

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Relationship marketing (RM) has come to dominate the (r)evolutionary imagination of marketing thought. This paper discuss the limitations and impotencies of RM in terms of two key dimensions which are of fundamental importance to the development of marketing ideas – namely the legitimate representation and empowerment of consumers and citizens, and the consideration of environmental welfare in risk society. It is proposed that current theories of RM, while promising a more appropriate and credible set of marketing principles, do in fact undermine these two crucial considerations to such an extent that the robustness and social relevance of RM as a meaningful discursive resource is seriously called into question.

**KEYWORDS:** Relationship Marketing; subordination of citizenry; organization–consumer relationships; risk society

## **INTRODUCTION: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES**

The relationship marketing (RM) 'paradigm' has almost reached maturity in the sense that it is no longer plausible to discuss it in terms of novelty. RM has, especially over the last 10 years or so, become embedded in the rhetoric and lexicon of marketing discourses. It has its key texts and chief proponents; it is used to define sessions at conferences and seminars; it is widely taught on MBA programmes in business schools and has found its way into the patter of consultants, practitioners and other marketing professionals. Some of those initially responsible for defining and expanding the RM concept as an alternative to the 'exchange'-based paradigm of marketing (as RM converts choose to describe marketing thought before RM) will no doubt take a certain degree of comfort and pride in seeing their call for a paradigm shift being realized today. Such elation is, we propose, ill founded.

RM was intended to offer the discipline of marketing a new approach from which to understand and approach issues of marketing practice and marketing philosophy. Instead of

the narrow and limited focus of exchange based conceptualizations, RM promised to provide a framework from which to expand marketing into a wider, more relevant context (Gummesson, 1987, 1994a, 1994b). No longer was it satisfactory to consider the point of exchange between firm and consumer as the ultimate and primary focus, for RM asked us to consider other 'exchange relations' on which the survival of the organization depended (Christopher *et al.*, 1991). RM showed the future of the firm to depend on the successful nurturing of long-term commitments to consumers, employees and channel members, and to look beyond that simple focus of exchange (Berry and Gresham, 1986).

But the coming of age of marketing through RM has not been revolutionary. The fairly painless transition from exchange to relationship is testimony to the extent to which the two opposing paradigms are in fact compatible and, below the rhetoric, rather similar. As a radical paradigm RM has most certainly failed and furthermore, it is incapable of offering any such development. The problems and contradictions inherent to the 'Kotleresque' school of 'marketing-as-exchange' can be found just as clearly in a concept like RM if one scrapes the surface of its regular and common usage. The real tragedy, however, in the brief history of RM is that revolution and revision of basic principles was, and still is much needed. The challenges and constraints that have been drawing in on marketing thought since its contemporary conception some 35 years ago are still evident and are getting ever more immediate but the herald of change, which for many RM represented, has offered little to tackle them.

In this paper we set out to expose, or rather critique, RM from two standpoints which are of special importance for marketing and are likely to become more so in the not so distant future. Our first objection comes from an assessment of marketing (and RM in particular) in light of the ecological and environmental challenges of risk society (Beck, 1992). Marketing thought together with the majority of organizations and citizens have continued to ignore or respond inadequately to the worsening ecological crisis currently being witnessed around the globe. Ecologically speaking, we examine why the RM discourse has failed to deliver. Not only is the 'Green' issue a matter of general social and ecological importance (Prothero, 1998) but it is also of considerable economic and commercial importance. It is becoming increasingly apparent that long-term business interests can only be secured if environmental issues are addressed and resolved (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1996; The World Business Council For Sustainable Development, 1996). RM, we propose, offers nothing to those involved with marketing by way of concepts or methods that can be applied to this desperately important issue. The negation of 'the external natural environment' to the periphery of conventional (or exchange based) marketing management models has not been redressed by RM in any significant or satisfactory fashion. As a result RM provides an equally inadequate set of concepts from which to approach the Green challenge but remains managerialist in its treatment of green concerns. In evaluating green marketing thought development to date Kilbourne (1998) uses Dobson's (1990) convention of differentiating between green with a little 'g' signifying managerial approaches and truly Green with a large 'G' that considers the larger issue of sustainability. In this respect claims of recognizing holism in RM do not include ecological holism.

In our second objection we bring the weight of critical theory to bear upon RM, suggesting that this so called paradigm shift offers little by way of emancipation or greater representation to those whom marketing was supposedly founded to serve. Although the marketing concept was guilty of conceptually raising consumers to regal status while openly seeking to devise methods to instigate control and exercise power over them, RM has the

potential to further impede and disable the consumer. RM promises consumers the golden 'security' of 'organizational commitment' and 'responsibility' of long-term relations in place of the exploitative and short-sighted abuse of the single exchange. This promise does, however, have a darker side and the promise is bought for a hard price. RM does not rebalance the inequalities and underrepresentation of the consumer in market exchanges but rather seeks to socialize and naturalize the past failings of marketing to such an extent that it mortgages all further analysis.

## THE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING DISCOURSE

Whatever its strengths and criticisms, we must first accept the basic principle that RM exists primarily at the level of discourse. That is, RM provides a set of ideas and concepts which we can choose to apply when seeking to represent or discursively engage a particular issue or phenomena in marketing. Traditionally, concepts such as the 4 P's, Porter's 5 forces and the idea of mutually beneficial consumer-organization exchanges have framed the marketing discourse in the sense that these concepts form the basic language and terms of reference of our approach to marketing. It would be very difficult, for instance, to talk about marketing without discursive conventions such as the marketing mix or consumer satisfaction. The salient point here is that these discourses not only furnish us with a way of reporting and discussing any given issue but actually go some way to constructing that issue.

The emergence of RM as a new paradigm of marketing thought cannot be attributed to any significant change in the nature of marketing practice. It can be attributed to the inadequacies of existing discursive conventions within the field to represent marketing issues in a manner that is generally agreed to be legitimate and acceptable. Although RM proscribes some changes in the way that marketing is practised (such as investment in customer service) its main contribution is to ask us to look at marketing differently and to reappraise marketing priorities (Reichheld, 1994).

As evidenced in Table 1, rather than a series of discrete and perceptually singular exchanges, RM asks us to see a continuum of transactions and a series of repeat purchases. Rather than pinning organizational success to the sole principle of customer satisfaction, RM introduces a new discursive point by way of customer retention (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). In place of discursive practices such as need satisfaction to represent consumer motivation, RM introduces new terms such as promise fulfilment and constructing good relations with customers. For instance, the conventional marketing discourse has traditionally viewed consumer-complaining behaviour as a negative outcome of exchange (the very term '*complaining*' brings with it a host of negative associations). RM discourse, however, has relocated this issue into a positive context that, if managed correctly, can lead to greater customer loyalty and retention which in turn reduces overall marketing costs (DeSouza, 1992). Whereas prior conventions in marketing tended to represent the consumer as a passive and receptive unit that was acted upon (i.e. someone marketers sought to satisfy, who could be influenced attitudinally and behaviourally by communications) RM rephrased the consumer as an active agent. This seemingly liberal (and liberating) principle seeks to acknowledge consumers' own productive endeavours and personal motivations for engaging in relationships with organizations, and at the same time, brings notions of negotiation and partnership to the forefront of the marketing discourse (Goodwin, 1988). RM is thus posited not only as a progressive concept for marketing practice and thought but also as a progressive discourse for consumers. Indeed some RM writing has an almost evangelical tone, which

TABLE I. A brief selected chronology of the RM discourse

Industrial	Emphasis	Reference	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mutual interdependencies consensus and collaboration closeness trust and satisfaction</li> <li>Resource-advantage theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hakanson and Ostberg (1975) Ford (1980)</li> <li>Gumesson (1987)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business to business</li> <li>• Channel relations</li> <li>• Buyer-seller relationships</li> <li>• Relational resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource-advantage theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spekman et al. (1997)</li> <li>Nielson (1998)</li> <li>Selnes (1998)</li> <li>Hunt (1997)</li> </ul>	
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• services markets</li> <li>• small groups</li> <li>• selling services</li> <li>• forming relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coined term RM</li> <li>Respect</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>Situation characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Berry (1983)</li> <li>Gupta (1983)</li> <li>Crosby et al. (1990) Gronroos (1990)</li> <li>Barnes (1995)</li> </ul>
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• quality service</li> <li>• implementation</li> <li>• advanced technology</li> <li>• intrusion or intimacy</li> <li>• definition confusion</li> <li>• structure</li> <li>• 'co-opetition'</li> <li>• social networks</li> <li>• consumer behaviour</li> <li>• consumer marketing</li> <li>• consumer survey</li> <li>• rhetoric vs reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customer retention</li> <li>Database use</li> <li>Customer retention</li> <li>Privacy</li> <li>Value relations</li> <li>Content analysis &amp; concept categorization</li> <li>Inter-personal vs commercial</li> <li>Customer as 'collaborator'</li> <li>Guanxi vs RM</li> <li>Equity of relations</li> <li>Interaction and network approaches</li> <li>Inappropriate metaphoric transfer</li> <li>Review of business – customer relationship</li> <li>BCR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reicheld and Sasser (1990)</li> <li>Petrison and Wang (1993) Patterson et al. (1996)</li> <li>Pine et al. (1995)</li> <li>Cova (1993) O'Malley et al. (1997)</li> <li>Tzokas and Saren (1996)</li> <li>Harker (1999)</li> <li>Iacobucci and Ostrum (1996)</li> <li>Zineldin (1998)</li> <li>Arias (1998)</li> <li>Szmigin and Bourne (1998)</li> <li>Pels (1999)</li> <li>O'Malley (1999)</li> <li>O'Malley and Tynan (forthcoming)</li> </ul>

proscribes greater sensitivity on the part of the organization towards its many publics and interest groups.

Viewed as a discursive technique, RM seemingly offers a great deal to all. To the organization it offers a more legitimate expression of the market and market relations, as well as promising long-term growth through retention and the stability of customer loyalty. To customers it grants organizational acknowledgement of consumer intention and motivation by identifying the constructive and productive aspects of consumption. To employees, suppliers and stockholders it offers a voice and place in organizational strategic decision-making (Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991; Reingen and Kernan, 1986). By considering these potentials RM emerges as both a progressive and a radical discourse in that it sets out to overcome some of the criticisms of micro-focused, managerialist-orientated, exchange-based marketing models. The fact that a discourse such as RM has gained so much acceptance among a relatively diverse and fragmented audience does itself suggest that revision of marketing science is not only much needed but also generally desired. Yet while RM offers the potential of an evolutionary praxis, we believe that it has failed to achieve it. Furthermore, we propose that RM discourse is not only incapable of providing a context for revision of basic marketing principles but that in practice it will come to hinder the evolution of marketing thought and prevent the most important challenges from being tackled and overcome. In order for marketing science to make a valuable contribution to future success of business practice and social development it must revise its basic assumptions regarding the purpose of marketing as a socially cohesive and defining institution (i.e. macromarketing). This, we believe, can only be achieved if serious attention is given to broader ecological concerns of marketing as well as the representation of the individual citizen in marketing discourse.

## **THE FAILURE OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING'S ROLE IN RISK SOCIETY**

Risk society, claims Beck (1992), distributes not just wealth but also environmental degradation and destruction of unimaginable magnitudes. This failure, inherent in the term *progress*, is not mere past but acute present and threatening the future. It is the failure of scientific rationality in the face of growing risks and threats from civilization. To date there has been limited application of the RM discourse to the issues raised in risk society (Kilbourne, 1998). Indeed it is becoming evident that issues of risk society, the environment and sustainability, are not fully understood by many in society (see for example Macnaghten and Urry, 1995; Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1996). This is not altogether surprising given the anthropocentric motivations of RM aficionados in awe of the free market logic. Indeed when Porritt and Winner (1988), two respected contemporary commentators, consider the significance of the green revolution, they are quick to highlight the problems of the contemporary green line of socialism. But to take a resource perspective to nature, as in the RM discourse, does not pay adequate attention to the warnings of enlightened marketing scholars (Fisk, 1973 and 1974; Prothero, 1998) against the adoption of a marketing focus in any research project into the consequences of the market economy. How can something, which we call RM, contribute to and engage the wider discourse on risk society? Where is the widespread ownership of this term? More importantly it is devoid of ecological relevance. Further to this there is over attention to micromarketing concerns and thus when heralded as the new way forward severely underrepresents the concerns of macromarketers within our

academy. This failure to engage with wider societal concerns and motivations beyond the profit motive of the firm marginalizes the RM debate in risk society. This may be a deliberate desire for those who proffer the RM cause to ensure the green lunatics are not seen to interfere with their theory but such myopic action is really marginalizing the RM aficionados.

Despite this, it is claimed that there are benefits for both the environment and nature in considering the green project (Ottman, 1998) from a marketing perspective. Why then has RM missed the window of opportunity to prove its ecological worth? We argue, however, that RM's role in any eco-innovation is restricted because of its narrow interpretation of the eco-relationship. Following Murphy's (1994) logic we note that there are many natures and that RM can only be said to truly exist by acknowledging these foundational relationships more explicitly! In this respect we argue for a fundamental ecocentric re-think of relationship marketing theory. We need a basic acknowledgement of the polysemy of natures and give this a focus at the centre of decision-making. This has not occurred to date in the RM literature. If RM is to have any ecological relevance in risk society it must take this step in its discursive practices. In the past an economic resource based perspective on nature has dominated. For instance, Gummesson has only said of nature that it constitutes R27 namely, the green relationship with its focus on content (Gummesson, 1994a). Gummesson (1994a) argues that the vantagepoints of RM are kept in mind by posing the question: *If we view marketing as relationships, networks and interaction what do we see and how do we use what we see?* He also argues that the basic logic behind the 30Rs representation of the discourse is that each of the Rs is essential in building functioning customer relationships. While he claims they are not one-dimensional or sequential he accepts the anthropocentrism (human centredness) of the 30Rs as legitimate. The green relationship describes *'the environmental, ecological and health issues have slowly but gradually increased importance and are creating a new type of customer relationships through legislation and the voice of leading consumers'*. There is nothing Green about this strain of managerialism. Thus there is a strong case that marketers and those responsible for hyper consumption (Kilbourne *et al.*, 1997) be held accountable for this ignorance on behalf of consumers and asked to use their resources to redress this situation.

As such, if RM is not part of any solution in risk society, its 'complicitness' in the crisis of risk society remains unchallenged. As Brown (1998, p. 177) states *'Its time, I say, for the real RM – Rip-off Marketing to stand up and be counted (just don't expect it to add up)'*. Ironically Gummesson (1994a) notes that common sense easily gets lost in the complexity of the modern world of business. He claims successful business people have probably always understood the significance of relationships, networks and interaction. By inference this would mean that they have always known of risk production/consumption. The development of genetically modified foods, as typified by the Monsanto organization, highlights the potential dangers that such interaction can present society. If the RM discourse insists on using terms such as *holism* while ignoring any ecological ownership to the term then claims of rigour in RM theory construction are groundless. Thus we can clearly state that the construction of RM theory has to date occurred without adequate consideration of natures including risk distribution. This is not a singular oversight but a recurring omission. Despite scholarship and special issues of the *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science*, 23 (4), *Journal of Marketing Management* 12 (1–3), and repeated articles in the *European Journal of Marketing*, the ills of risk society go unchallenged and unrelated to RM. Marketing's role in risk production and distribution to the bearers of that risk (consumers) goes unproblematized. In some extreme

cases infant formula milk is represented as an improvement to breastfeeding and the risks to new Irish mothers are downplayed (White, 1999).

The focus of RM's role in risk society should be on the enhancement of environmental awareness and action in society where pursuit of sustainable consumption and production is deemed desirable (Kilbourne *et al.*, 1997). Such theory development thus allows consideration for the existence of multifarious natures during the symbolic manufacture of consumption and calls for an erosion of the dominant social paradigm (see also Geno, 1995). The ecocentric logic is represented in the denotation  $3OR/n \dots N$ , where nature is seen to be foundational to the RM discourse. This is denoted by the dividing line and nature's polysemy is represented by  $n \dots N$ . We of course argue that there are many more than just 3ORs. Without such acknowledgement one asks what worth is there for the citizen of risk society to apply an RM logic? While RM has recently been differentiated from *guanxi* (Arias, 1998), it remains debatable whether or not the rhetoric of 'relationship marketing' is an appropriate form of language to use when dealing with something as wide-ranging as risk society. Likewise what relevance has RM discourse for issues such as the rise of homelessness, third world debt, slavery or National Socialism? What does this say about our discipline? Relationship marketing scholarship at best remains ecologically stubborn by standing in contradistinction to those within its own academic interested in relating Green issues to the market logic (Peattie, 1995; Prothero, 1998) and to those in management and organization studies (Fineman, 1997; Shrivastava, 1994). We, for instance, are also concerned with how useful or problematic an existing RM approach might be for citizens when considering some of the contradictory relationships which face people in society. Citizens might encounter relationships which demonstrate manipulation, exploitation or derive from situations where one witnesses opulent neglect or is a situation arising from or contributing to conflict. Recent attempts at theorizing risk into the organization-consumer communicative act have been both managerial (see Powell and Leiss, 1997 on risk communication) and ecocentric (see McDonagh, 1998 on sustainable communication). These offer RM some yardsticks to consider when addressing risk production on a global scale.

## **THE GOLDEN PROMISE: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND THE SUBORDINATION OF THE CITIZEN**

Narratives regarding the relative status of the citizen to the organization are ingrained in the traditions of contemporary capitalism and have been distilled into the present-day perceptions of marketing management. Despite attempts to define marketing as an emancipatory concept for the consumer, via notions such as the Marketing Concept, which professes to orientate organizational activities to consumer satisfaction, there nevertheless remains an alternative discourse. The latter holds that organizations will always, purposefully or otherwise, seek to dominate and control consumers in an attempt to secure the firm's goals. The recent legislative moves against tobacco companies such as Marlboro highlight such scenarios. Marketing principles may proclaim the 'consumer is king' and that the organization will only prosper if the consumers' needs and wants are considered central to its activities, yet in practice, organization strategy and marketing activity inevitably look not towards consumer demands but to those of the organization. But while the marketing concept may fail to empower consumers it nevertheless remains a transparent concept in that mutual self-interest for both organization and consumer is apparent (the so called win-win scenario). As long as consumers are conscious of the fact that marketing activities are focused primarily towards

organization interests it remains possible for consumers to fulfil their own objectives in the market place while remaining sceptical towards benevolent marketing intentions. The RM discourse, however, transcends the factional boundary between consumer and organization, which has enabled individual citizens to establish autonomy and independence from marketing ideology. RM lays out an agenda of consumer commitment on the part of the organization which, at an explicit level, seeks to redress the inequalities that currently exists in this 'relationship' but implicitly serves to socialize and naturalize power differentials. The rhetoric of the social relationship to position organization–consumer interactions is in this regard hegemonic (Baudrillard, 1998). By assessing the implications of the relationship marketing discourse on the redefinition on the citizen as 'collaborator/partner' (Zineldin, 1998) rather than self-motivated need satisfier, we intend to demonstrate the failings of RM to achieve greater representation of the individual.

The first, and perhaps most important line of argument lies in the development of the RM discourse itself. It is worth bearing in mind that it is organizations and organizational interests more generally that have chosen to adopt this rhetorical shift towards the relationship. The organization chooses to describe interactions in the market as a relationship and not the consumer. With the exception of O'Malley (1999) there has been little effort to establish whether consumers actually want relationships with the organizations they have come to rely upon for their products and services. Furthermore, they have little opportunity to define the parameters or natures of the relationship once organizations decide that such an arrangement would be in their own interests. For instance the organization decides 'marketspace' and technology add more customer value and the individual's level of agency is thus subjugated by the organization. So it is the organization that decides whether the market interaction is a relationship to begin with and with which consumers it will engage in such relations. The British Broadcasting Corporation's recent Panorama documentary *Absolutely Fabulous Prices* (12 April 1999: 40 minutes) highlights the lengths to which top fashion brands will go to prevent the practice of 'parallel trading'. It is this practice of 'parallel trading', as evidenced by retailers such as Tesco, which provides consumers top brands at cut price prices that has been ruled unfair by manufacturers of the brands. Conversely, documentary evidence suggests that consumers are strongly in favour of parallel trading and the benefits it affords them.

Whereas the firm can choose to define their customers as mutual partners, select those groups of consumers with whom it is prepared to establish relationships, and prohibit relationships it considers undesirable or unprofitable, the consumer can make no such demands. Wherever the rhetoric may lead us, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the RM discourse tends to be justified in the literature by the extent to which organizational objectives can be enhanced. In effect the RM discourse has been sold to us on the basis that it will increase profits and market share, facilitate stability through establishing long-term 'switching costs' (DeSouza, 1992) for customers, make marketing expenditure more efficient and so on. The following quote from Buchanan and Gilles (1990) provides a good example:

By chasing new customers at the expense of retaining existing ones, companies are, quite literally, missing a golden opportunity. Our clients have found that if they increase the rate at which customers are retained by as little as five percent, profitability can move in some cases, by over 100% In other words: Customer Retention adds profit to the bottom line.

From a more pragmatic perspective the terms and conditions of any relationship between organization and consumer, while being predicated on the assumption that such relationships

are mutually beneficial, are not determined or negotiated mutually but rather imposed by the organization. As a consumer I am unable to demand that my bank or airline service provider negotiate the terms of our relationship to serve my own interests, whereas the organization can impose such terms without any recall to the consumer. These relations are established not just in the political and economic sphere but also in terms of consumer law (see Gabriel and Lang, 1995, Chapter 7). To illustrate this imbalance let us consider a 'relationship' between a credit card company and an individual customer. Such an interaction is a good example since it cannot be understood as a single transaction or exchange but rather relies upon a long-term relationship existing between the service provider and the user. When the customer first enters the contract it is important to note that the terms and conditions of this relationship are predetermined by the organization and are not open to negotiation. The user cannot demand that the credit card company lower its Annual Percentage Rate before he or she is willing to enter into the relationship, whereas the organization can modify this rate should it believe that organizational interests would be better served by doing so.

Once having agreed to the conditions of the relationship as imposed by the organization, the consumer is equally impotent in terms of his or her ability to modify the conditions of those relations. The organization could, for example, increase the APR rate or introduce an annual fee without having to negotiate these relational changes with the consumer. The consumer cannot make any such demands and must either accept the imposed modifications or break off relational links. There are of course many cases when consumers cannot withdraw from relations due to the initial conditions of the relationship, or because of the characteristics of the service itself. While it may be feasible for *some* consumers to switch credit card company or retail outlet, it is more difficult to withdraw from mortgage or pension arrangements without incurring additional costs and inconvenience (the terms of which were initially determined by the organization rather than the consumer).

The next problematic area arises when one considers the policing and management of consumer-organization relationships, or the business-customer relationship as noted (O'Malley and Tynan, forthcoming) in the RM discourse. Inevitably all relationships, whether they be between consumers and organizations, colleagues or spouses, have the potential to become conflictual. Both parties may become dissatisfied with the relations and behaviours of the other party and in such cases will endeavour to resolve them. But unlike most social relationships consumer-organization relationships attribute judicial responsibilities unequally. The organization typically has both the legislative authority and economic power to resolve disagreements in its own favour and consequently the consumer has very little power in such disputes. While the individual consumer must personally accept the consequences of such adjudication's, the organization does not (McMurty, 1998). Financial service organizations can impose penalties and additional tariffs on consumers if they fail to meet the terms of the relationship (for example, failure to make a mortgage payment or late payment of a bill). Consumers however must rely upon the organizations own internal procedures and adjudication if it is felt that the organization has broken these terms. For instance, if a customer feels that their communications provider has made an error in billing, or a bank customer believes their bank has recorded an unauthorized transaction it is left to the organization to resolve the dispute. Admittedly consumers can resort to legal action if relations break down to a significant extent but we must consider the level and type of access individual consumers have to legal representation compared to the estranged organization. It is not unusual to hear of recourse being made by citizens to consumers' associations in circumstances of some form of corporate abuse. Popular television shows such

as the BBC's *Watchdog* regularly tracks such events as does the Consumer Associations *Which* publication.

These provisional arguments indicate that the market relations between organizations and consumers form a very unusual type of relationship, and one that we as individuals would be unwilling to consider in any other relational context. The bias in such relations is such that one could legitimately argue that there is no mutual relationship, only imposed relations. In summary, we identify the following characteristics of organization–consumer relationships.

1. *Terms of reference* The organization defines the interaction it has with its consumers as a relationship only if it is considered to benefit organizational interests (e.g. secure growth, increase repeat consumption).
2. *Relational basis* The organization defines and regulates the terms and conditions of the relationship. Consumers have little opportunity to specify their own terms and/or can alter them only if sanctioned by the organization.
3. *Opportunity to vary relational terms* The organization, due to the relational basis, can adapt, modify and change the terms of a customer relationship without negotiation. Consumers are tied to relational terms.
4. *Relational conflict* When disagreement in the relationship emerges or either party fails to comply with the agreed relational basis, organizations have a greater opportunity to arbitrate on the resolution arrangements and have a greater capacity to impose penalties.

## ON MASTERS AND SLAVES: THE CHARACTER OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Few individuals would willingly engage in relationships that were structured in the terms summarized above. Such power differentials not only restrict and abuse the rights of the weaker party but also those of the stronger. Not far beneath the surface of RM discourse one can easily uncover a relationship that is almost tyrannical and oppressive in character and one that most would find abhorrent in any other social context. RM began as a neutral and ideologically legitimate concept in business-to-business exchanges, where organization and organization, firm and firm, found mutual benefits from securing long-term commitments to each other in terms of product delivery and service provision. But the RM discourse does not travel well into situations where the relative resources, power bases and interests of both parties vary considerably.

From a risk society, despite the relative maturing of the RM discourse (refer to Table 1 again), there is, we have noted, an ecological abyss still to be addressed by those heralding RM as a new managerialist practice of much significance. This may be a deliberate ploy by developers of the RM discourse but severely marginalizes its social relevance and ultimately its adoption. Those fearing RM's premature death (Fournier *et al.*, 1998) may indeed be called in the social ER room sooner than anticipated. Presently RM is ecocentrically redundant and its usefulness as a discursive resource is hindered by not explicitly acknowledging this. To make such articulation challenges its followers to truly take on board global concerns in RM's own local context (Burningham and O'Brien, 1994) before attempts at what is hailed as *meaningful* theory development is embarked upon (Hunt, 1997). One needs to problematize the RM discourse for risk society as well as for the cultural turn in social science (Alexander, 1996) and enquire if it is indeed possible to develop an ecocentric relationship marketing school of thought. McDonagh and Prothero (1997) encourage such action through the

consideration of multifarious theory, such as an ecofeminist perspective, on relationships. Continued avoidance of the latter leaves nature enslaved ad infinitum in anthropocentrism. We thus call for the challenge of risk society to be fully incorporated by those involved in the RM discourse and theory construction of this new paradigm in order to increase its robustness. This we believe will be enhanced *inter alia* through the adoption of a macromarketing perspective by RM aficionados.

Linked to the former, the RM logic negates the role of citizenry in its conceptualization thus reinforcing inherent power imbalances, and favours the corporation over customer in any relational episode. The rhetoric of the relationship can be applied in many contexts, some of which, however, seem to be more credible and authentic than others are. On the whole, relationships tend to fairly complex interactions, which can yield both positive and not-so-positive consequences for those involved. But we need to think very carefully about the relation between organization and consumer before bringing to it the complexity and contradiction of terms that are so culturally embedded. From a macromarketing perspective the purpose of the market, and marketing activities, must surely be to provide an equilibrium mechanism. Through this citizens within our societies can not only acquire the things they need and want but also can find equality, personal expression and – dare we say it – liberty. The marketing concept and other such conceptualizations failed in this task and for this reason new concepts and discourse were, and still are, much needed. We have severe doubts about the prospects a discourse such as RM offers by way of an acceptable alternative. Marketing has an important role in contemporary cultural life and it must begin to address the fundamentals in order for it to fulfil this role effectively. This cannot be achieved by minor revisions to terminology and rhetoric but must instead focus on balancing the increasing disparity between organization and consumer, and the power and authority they both command. Organizations that are prepared to meet the citizen on a more equal basis, in which the terms and conditions of the market exchange are negotiated rather than enforced, will no doubt find considerable support among current and potential consumer groups. Such a move would indeed offer meaningful and lasting progress, in terms of marketing theory and practice, and thus offer the citizen a voice in risk society.

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