RITUAL MARKETING MODE: RITUAL BEHAVIOR APPLICATION IN PRODUCTS SELLING

Ziyan Chen
Lecturer,
Gengdan College of Beijing Technology University, PRC
Shunyi District, Beijing, China. 101301

ABSTRACT

Ritual marketing mode is a new concept raised up for the first time in this paper, meaning that achieving good sales results through the shaping of the sense of ritual in every step of products selling. The research approaches of Field Study, Cases Research, Direct Observing and Questionnaire Survey are applied to analyze the social effect, regional culture characteristic, cultural symbolizing meaning, mutual promotion relevance between ritual marketing mode and new social media forms and ethical considerations of ritual marketing mode in reality practices. Empirical studies conclude that ritual marketing mode has a positive relevance with the products selling effect. Meanwhile, the paper testifies a mutual promotion correlation between ritual marketing mode and the new social media forms. Through empirical studies I conclude that, contrary to traditional marketing belief, consumers tend to consume and spend more if they have the chance to experience the meaningful and valuable ritual behavior practices.

Keywords: ritual; ritual marketing mode; social identity theory; new social media forms

Introduction

Ritual is stylized activity form through major events and important moments defined by social groups. The first conceptualizations of ritual were forged in the sacred domain (Durkheim, 1968), where rituals often took the form of very solemn and rigidly prescribed behaviors. However, several sociologists (Goffman, 1973) noted that ritual experiences also abounded in daily-life events, sometimes mimicking solemnity of sacred rituals (e.g., ceremonial rituals). Rituals are pervasive in people's everyday lives, yet there has been some difficulty in finding out a universal definition of the term “ritual”, especially from the perspective of marketing mode research. People have often restricted the meaning of “ritual” to religious
mystical contexts, viewed it as primitive and regressive behavior, or depicted rituals as things that take place in large public settings (Rook, 1985). For the purpose of this paper, the author adopts the definition of ritual as symbolic behaviors that are actively or passively performed by participants in public or private settings, either with or without audience (Rook, 1985; Rothen Buhler, 1998). Social identity theory (SIT) is a useful framework within which to explore why people participate in ritualized behavior. Social identity, as defined by Tajfel and Turner (1986:16), incorporates “those aspects of an individual's self-image that derives from the social categories to which he perceives himself belonging”. In order to facilitate the development of rich interpersonal connections within business markets, some scholars have highlighted the importance of rituals (Borghini, Golhetto, & Rinallo, 2006; Cova & Salle, 2000).

Generally speaking, ritual has three characteristics. Firstly, it owns the quality of groupment. Secondly, it must reflect the culture features of the community. Thirdly, it is a sign of specifying the differences among various social groups. Ritual has special social psychological effects on a lot of receivers, for example, from the government to the company, from families to individuals. Ritual, representing a kind of tradition, a kind of custom passed down from ancient times, such as the Ceremony of Sacrifice, New Year's Day, Marriage Ceremony, Funeral, Graduation Anniversaries, etc. For vast majority of ordinary people, ritual is a kind of happiness, a kind of relaxation and a kind of joy shared with others.

As far as the effect of marketing communication is concerned, ritual goods signifies better memorial effects than the general goods. People obtain cozy and more impressive feeling associated with the products due to the subtle advertisements of ritualized marketing goods. Consumers can practice these rituals before, during and after the main consumption ritual(Christian Gilde a, Stefano Pace b, Simon J. Pervan c* and Carolyn Strong, 2011). Consumers will get used to the harmonious combination between the products and attached special rituals. As far as the application practice is concerned, ritual plays an essential role in marketing communications and creative advertising aspects.

Literature review and research methods

I explain ritual as programmed sets of highly emotionalized and formalized activities carried out through social interaction. Ritual can manage relationships even in the absence of face-to-face communication because common participation still can be shared through consumption ritual(Gainer, 1995: 253). Anthropology creates a variety of recognition signs for the difference between various social groups, and ritual is one of important signs. My conceptualization of ritual in this paper originates in the large stream of social sciences research on the topic (Durkheim, 1915/1961; Goffman, 1967; Turner, 1969). Rook’s (1985) seminal paper is about the importance of rituals in consumers’ lives, at the same time, ritual has become a prevalent theme for the study of a wide range of consumption phenomena, such as Thanksgiving reunion, Halloween celebration, high school proms and other shared ritual occasions.

Analyzing from the aspect of social psychology, what is the important social significance of ritual ? Firstly, the existence of ritual helps strengthen social identity of each individual. According to Maslow's hierarchy theory of human needs, the person's demand is divided into many layers. When people's basic needs of commodities are satisfied, people will seek a higher level of "emotional closeness" and "group identity". Such as social individuals participate in the orientation meetings, admission ceremonies and graduation ceremonies. This kind of behavior is not only the qualification access to some kind of identity, but also the formalization of a certain social status and social role. Ritual serves to include or exclude individuals from community membership and groups (Bocock, 1974; Rook, 1985).

Secondly, the existence of ritual can be passed on to the social group. In sacrifice, funeral, gods worshiping, weddings and other ceremonies, new specifications of prayer ceremonies have been
constantly improved to strengthen the importance of this kind of behavior. The consumption of very specific goods and services is inherent to ritual events in every culture—for example, wedding wines, wedding cakes, wedding dresses and wedding rings are basic elements of almost any marriage. Rituals and symbolic consumption can be critical to sustain cultural transitions and can be catalysts of symbolic change in the life of individuals (Schouten, 1991b).

Thirdly, the existence of ritual cultivates traditional culture and values. For example, dinner is just a normal eating behavior, but a series of western dining rituals are cultivating and inheriting the national culture and historic values. French Dining ritual culture and western-style food are perfect fusion. French Feast is made up of 9 meals, namely, from the aperitif wine, bread, vegetables, salad, soup, drinks before meal, the main meal, dessert and drinks after dinner. According to the French traditional feasts custom, the meal products follow the specified ritual, finishing the former disk and then the next disk. The whole process of dining is a presentation of ritual consuming process.

So-called ritual marketing mode tends to achieve good sales results through the shaping of rituals in every step of products selling. The research approaches of depth interviewing, cases research, field study, direct observing and questionnaire survey are applied in this paper to analyze the social effects, regional culture characteristics, mutual promotion relevance between ritual marketing mode and new social media forms and ethical restriction of ritual marketing mode in reality practices.

Ritual marketing mode as catalyst of commodity selling

Brand culture and brand image promotion have become the main forms of modern marketing strategy. Ritual marketing mode is one of the important sections of integrated marketing communications. Cultural heritage is dependent on the rituals, in turn, the existence of the rituals is based on the cultural values. Customers' consuming behavior is not just a simple marketing relationship, but also a kind of cultural behavior; Ritual is playing an increasingly important role in the process of commodity marketing, and I name ritual marketing mode as catalyst of commodity selling.

Firstly, rituals marketing model gives birth to the new purchase requirements. Consumption ritual do not occur just at the moment of consumption, for example, the traditional rituals of China's Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, the Spring Festival are having dinner, visiting relatives and delivering gifts. And the ritual consumption goods at least include fireworks and snacks of the Spring Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival dumplings, Mid-Autumn festival moon cakes, chocolates and roses on valentine's day, Christmas trees and Christmas stockings as well as new clothes and expensive jewelries. Businessmen always spare no effort to promote a variety of national and foreign festival etiquette to artificially stimulate new purchasing demands. At the same time, various memorial rituals, such as the wedding ceremony, birthday ceremony and the anniversary celebration of enterprise are the key focus of the marketing strategy of related enterprises.

Secondly, the ritual marketing mode can deeply excavate the spiritual core of consuming culture. Researchers studied consumption behaviors during ritual occasions such as Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Amould 1991), Christmas (cf. Belk 1989, 1993; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Waits, William B., Jr. 1993), weddings (Lowrey and Otnes 1994; Otnes and Lowrey 1993), Mother's Day (Schmidt 1991), birthday parties (Otnes and McGrath 1994), and Valentine's Day (Creighton 1993; Otnes, Ruth, and Miiboume 1993). Consuming culture is the combination of consumption concept, consumption patterns, consumer behavior and consuming environment in the process of material production, spiritual production, social life and consumption activities in a certain historical stage. In simple terms, what to consume and how to consume are the focus. In modern society, people not only
consume products, service quality or brand reputation, also include the sense of ritual. Thirdly, the ritual marketing mode is able to help enterprises create positive brand image. In the course of production, sales and consumption, rituals are implanted to add culture value of the brands, and to meet some kind of emotional needs of consumers. We already know the power of rituals within organizations: that Christmas parties and other types of official rituals can foster a sense of organizational community (Monjaret, 2001; Trice & Beyer, 1984). For example, the purchase of a house is just an ordinary consuming behavior, while the real estate sellers deliberately holds "a home-possessing show" ritual ceremony, the brand image is promoted. According to the traditional ritual of China since ancient times, buying a house means possessing a home in a place and a house is a root for a family. Living in a family’s own house peacefully and contentedly, then you are able to work happily and sustain a family harmoniously. Buying a house contains substantial ritual meaning and the real estate sellers deliberately dilutes the commercial factors in the buying process. This commodity selling behavior evolves into "a dream coming true of possessing a home", which turns into an emotional exhibition of cultural behavior, in this way, cultural charm is added into the commodity brand. It is evident that the spiritual essence of rituals involves in both psychological and cultural identity, as well as the consumers’ sense of emotional belonging. Ritual strengthens people's feeling of solemnity. The harder process we achieve the target, the more solemn is the ritual. Serious rituals symbolize the beginning of a crucial event or the ending of an important dispute.” Therefore, ceremony can enhance the confidence of consumers for their own consumption decision, thus they are able to further recognize the value of the brand.

Regional characteristics of rituals marketing mode

Ritual is related to the matters that people raise and rich the daily life, observing and understanding the world, as well as guiding behaviors and following a variety of social norms, and how to establish their places in the society. Rituals are a set of stylized symbol system created by the unique human thinking logic. In marketing activities, we need to make use of certain ritual symbols with specific cultural significance, bringing consumers to the relationship between social other and self, achieving the marketing effect of moving people by feeling and emotion. Owing to the diversified cultural background among various regions and nations, we can also take the advantage of common sense originated from human emotions and rituals to create consuming potential. However, cultural differences in a variety of regions are still important factors which must be taken into consideration in the selling of goods. In advertising and marketing, we often encounter such a problem: a piece of successful product advertisement obtains amazing effect in a region, then flops in another region, even worse sometimes this piece of advertisement is criticized as "offending local manners".

For example, in the TV advertisements of Nike sports goods brand, after experiencing various barriers and athletic contests, basketball star Lebron James Brown succeeds in conquering the dragon at the last minute. This creative advertising wins superb market transformation effect in America. But in China audience oppose and criticize this advertisement because many temples worship the dragon kings with noble rituals one generation after another since ancient times. In this case, the difference of totem rituals is the key reason. In China, the dragon is the totem of Chinese nation, and the symbol of booming and noble spirit.

In marketing activities, in order to achieve the accuracy of ritual marketing, we have to find out consistent meaning space connecting marketing products and marketing targeted audience. In daily life, ritual is a form of cultural precipitation and inheritance, so ritual propagation must pay attention to the accumulation of cultural connotation and the smooth transmission of ritual culture, providing consumers
with the integrating point of ritual identification. The effective combination of ritual marketing activities with local ritual culture help achieve the goal of brand culture promotion as well as brand image cultivation, at the same time, it can also further extend the connotation of consumer culture.

**Cultural symbolizing meaning of ritual marketing mode**

Applying ritual concept to marketing activity, its most important significance is that humans not only obtain reference for life because of the objective and concrete "records" of the spiritual information, but also because of the instinct simulation and abstract thinking. Objective things and their spiritual symbols gain cognitive symbols. McCracken's essential premise is that "advertising is a conduit through which meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods" (p. 76). The symbols initially own the natural characteristics, and then obtains the extended artificial qualities. Natural symbols and artificial symbols make human surviving activities embody historical heritage and the spatial structure of culture on the mental representation, and making the survival peculiarity of the human beings get the brightest show. Semiology philosopher Ernst Cassirer says in a book "theory of man", when this time, "people are no longer live in a simple physical universe, but live in a symbolic universe. Language, mythology, art, and religion are belonging to various part of the universe. They are different threads composing the symbols net as well as the inter-texture net of human experiences".

Individuals’ survival is branded with the stamp of symbols when they are weaving web of symbols. Man is the animal of symbol, and citizens extend the cultural space of survival through the construction and use of symbols. Therefore, people are able to exploit the consumers market in a wider space. Although people of varied regions follow dissimilar ritual customs, there are still some similarities, for example, the protection and concern for the kinsfolk and the respect for value of life. McCracken's description of the transferring process (pp. 78-79) implies a more direct and one-way phenomenon concerning about the cultural symbolizing meaning of ritual marketing mode.

*Photographic and visual conventions will be exploited to give the viewer/reader the opportunity to glimpse an essential equivalence between the two elements of world and object....World and good must seem to enjoy a special harmony—must be seen to go together. When the viewer/reader glimpses this sameness (after one or many exposures to stimuli), the process of transfer has taken place. Meaning has shifted from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good....*

In the marketing activities, if culture symbolizing meaning of the ritual marketing mode can be excavated, the products sellers are laying stable foundation for the admirable sale results. For example, "Contest TV programs" also make full use of ritual marketing mode. "the Voice of America", "Talent Show" and so on promoted and eliminated competitors through the rounds of confrontation, and exhibiting authority through the official ritual behavior of title coronation ceremony. With the application of ritual marketing mode, these programs create high TV audience ratings. Meanwhile, program sponsors and related advertisements dealers earn a rich return of high profits and rewarding reputation for their products.

In today's marketing environment, consumers pursuit increasingly rich spiritual consumption, and the most obvious performance is that individuals attach great importance to the festivals, wedding, birthday and other activities. Under the massive rendering of the merchants, any domestic or foreign festival is able to trigger a consumption binge, and the root cause of this phenomenon is that people have shared values and beliefs all around a district or a country, even across the nations. The special significance which is endowed on a series of festivals are seeing eye to eye with the traditional cultural beliefs, and quickly becomes popular holiday template followed by the individuals of various cultural backgrounds, making
the consumption of special goods becomes a ritual. People’s intentions are not only to meet the material requirement, but more importantly to express the personal mood in the consuming market.

**Mutual promotion relevance between ritual marketing mode and new social media forms**

In the process of researching on the ritual marketing mode, the ritual is not only to convey information, but also to pass on a certain emotion, which is a building of 'imagined community'. Consumer researchers have exhorted that the ritual construct has great potential for interpreting many aspects of consumption phenomena (Ottes et al., 1993; Rook, 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). In the marketing activity, the creations of ritual mainly has the effect of condensing emotion. With the intervention of the new media power, the targeted consumers of ritual marketing mode are no longer confined to the narrow space range, but experience geometric ratio growth, and break the limit of time.

On June 27, 2013, the film *Tiny Times 1.0* publicizing plan were designed as a graduation ritual ceremony combined with other types of marketing patterns, especially the new media forms such as massive publicizing through Microblog, QQ space, Renren web community and Wechat friend circle (all above names are popular social media forms in China). 12 main actors of the film were scattered to 12 of the most important constituency cities, and also 1000 interns were scattered in each cinema hall. Interns put on the same costumes of the movie *Tiny Times 1.0* cosplaying the film roles. Each audience was initially asked to attend the film premiere dressing like the characters in the movie. Interns and film main actors led all the audience in the cinema halls to sing the classic song "Auld Lang Syne" appearing in the beginning part of movie. There were special graduation photo-shooting areas decorated with a variety of graduation souvenirs in the cinemas, where all the audiences can take a lot of memorial photos with the movie scenes.

This way of "moving people by ritual experience" through the new social media forms tends to be more effective than "persuading people by products" through the traditional media forms such as TV and newspaper. "*Tiny Times 1.0*" created stunning success of box office through the application of ritual marketing mode combined with the new social media forms. 95 million dollars of box office return is created by the minor investment of 5 million dollars investment in 2013.

100 questionnaires to the audiences of the movie *tiny times 1.0* in three cities of China including Shanghai (40 questionnaires), Wuhan (30 questionnaires) and Wuxi (30 questionnaires) during 27th-30th June, 2013. The related informants said that they just wanted to experience and observe the graduation ceremony of their own. The audiences were memorizing and celebrating their own tiny times in fantastic carnival parties all over the country through the specified ritual marketing process. The movie watching process became the memorizing process for each audience recalling their teenager times as well as cherishing precious friendship. 100 effective questionnaires papers are collected and analyzed. 37% of the informants admitted that the promoted information about the graduation ritual ceremony in the cinema halls of the movie were the most important factor of attracting them to watch the film”* tiny times 1.0*”; 88% of the informants marked the answer in the questionnaires that they were informed of the funny and memorial graduation ritual activities in the cinema halls through a variety of social media forms mentioned above such as Microblog, QQ message, Renren web community and Wechat friend circle in China.

An important feature of ritual marketing mode is the emphasis on the "participatory" by both sides. In the network environment dominated by new communication platform such as BBS, twitter, facebook and other social networking media forms, the initiator and the receiver no longer follow a one-way information transferring mode, but the new ritual of common participation, common experience and common construction, highlighting the subjectivity of the consumption receiver. However, it is this virtual
equal subjectivity that brings the receiver to the atmosphere of ritual marketing, leading to the loss of subjectivity for the consumers, achieving the spiritual control of the consumers. In this way, the marketing initiator construct the desired order status. For this reason, critical consumer culture researchers consider this pattern of marketing strategy as a kind of exploitation of consumers.

Ethical restriction of ritual marketing mode

Under the view of integrated marketing, ritual is the course of transmitting reality to the symbolization process of production, maintaining, modification and transformation. Therefore, its value is not a simple information transferring course, meanwhile, it lies in creating the common faith and preserving social stability.

At the same time, when ritual marketing mode yields unusually brilliant results in the process of product sales, it also being taken advantage of by some criminals, and "pyramid sale" is one of the most typical one. Pyramid selling activity organizers trap some innocent people first, and then "brainwash" these people. Through a series of divine ritualized behaviors, those new members are proud of themselves for joining in so-called great organizations, making them feel all activities in the "pyramid sale" are lawful and reasonable, which enabled the new members become self-identified and loyal to the illegal organizations. The application of some business rituals seemingly shows respect to the traditional culture, but in fact is a pattern of hype. In the development of tourism industry, the protection of intangible cultural heritage exhibits respect for the traditional beliefs. At the same time, these cultural factors also serve as a kind of social capital and structural resources, promoting the ornamental value of tourist attractions as well as meeting the cultural needs of consumers. However, in recent years, in order to accelerate the development of local tourism, some tourism areas do not hesitate to make use of a large number of manpower and material resources to organize "ceremonies", "pilgrimage" and other ritual activities, even fight and quarrel for historical celebrities sites and tombs because of the inconsistent record of the celebrities site in long history. This type of sole commercial hype not only fail to obtain good marketing effects, but also damage the social reputation of the product brand and the trust of consumers.

Conclusion

Based on my empirical studies, I conclude that ritual marketing mode has a positive relevance with the products selling effect. Meanwhile, there is a mutual promotion correlation between ritual marketing mode and the new social media forms. In the consumers-oriented market environment, the traditional marketing modes are unable to adapt to the increasingly fierce marketing competition. Ritual marketing mode is in fact a kind of creative strategy pattern of deepening the communication between the producers and consumers. Through above studies I conclude that, contrary to traditional marketing belief, consumers tend to consume and spend more if they have the chance to experience the meaningful and valuable ritual behaviors practices. The current research provides an important contribution to the academic research on ritual consuming behavior, and retailing promotion approaches of ritual marketing. My findings recommend that products marketing staff may make full use the consumers’ rituals practicing activities to promote the product/service selling.

The current research provides an important contribution to the academic research on ritual consuming behavior and retailing promotion approaches of ritual marketing. My findings recommend that products marketing staff may make full use the consumers’ ritual practicing activities to promote the product/service selling.
Future Research Focus

With the advancement and popularization of information technology, all kinds of electronic media become the most important ways for consumers to be informed of marketing information and be exposed to products culture. How to combine the ritual culture with new media effectively and economically to reach the expected sales effect will be the focus of future studies in the marketing research field. The varied attitudes of different sex groups toward ritual marketing behaviors and the ratio of different sex groups who makes purchasing decision when they are impressed by the ritual marketing behaviors are also research focus in the future.

References

12. McCracken, Grant (1986) ‘Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and


