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# Partial employees and consumers

## A postmodern, meta-theoretical perspective for services marketing

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***Abstract.** This analysis aims to highlight the impact of both ‘partial employees’ and ‘partial consumers’ on the service delivery process. Effective service delivery often requires the participation of the customer. Accordingly, the customer may be conceptualized as a partial employee. Further, service employees may ‘consume’ their roles and duties as providers of service. Although the services literature has developed the notion of the partial employee to some extent, the concept is not developed within a comprehensive, theoretical framework. And, the portrayal of service employees as consumers (i.e. partial consumers) is largely undeveloped. As an emergent cultural philosophy, postmodernism offers a basis for developing a framework incorporating the notion of the partial employee, as well as an understanding of the effects and contributions of other service participants (i.e. service providers) as partial consumers. The implications of treating the consumer as partial employee and the employee as partial consumer in the delivery of the service experience are many. For instance, this notion inspires an expanded view of service exchange as a productive (consumptive) moment, which, in turn, requires a shift in orientation from an emphasis that con-*

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*siders only managing the functional benefits that the service provides to managing both employees and consumer alike.* **Key Words** ● Partial Employee ● Postmodernism ● Services Management ● Services Marketing

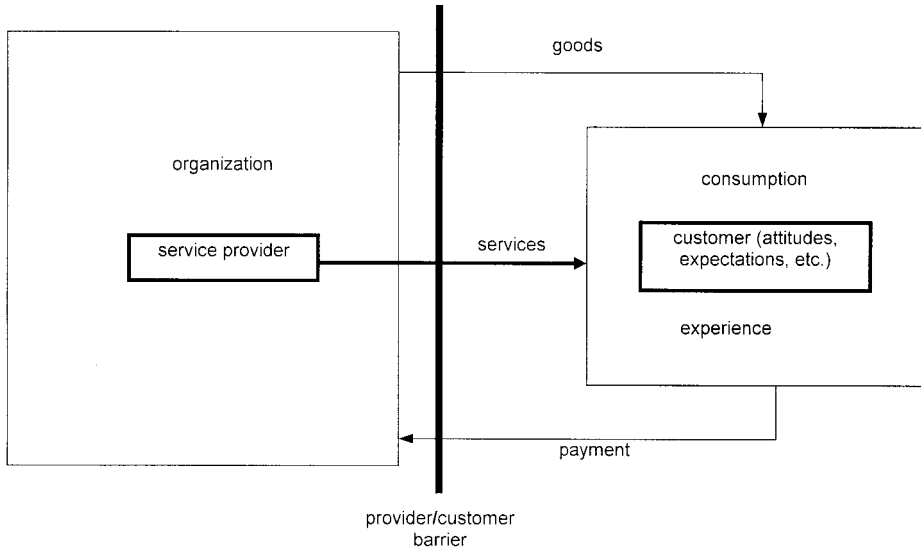
When compared with the delivery process of goods, the service delivery process is often considered distinct in that it frequently requires the participation of customers. Service customers, for instance, pump their own gas, fill out loan or credit applications, bus their own tables, and provide tax information to their accountants. As a vital element of the service offering, the notion of the 'partial employee' is well recognized (Grönroos, 1987; Lovelock and Young, 1979; Mills and Morris, 1986). A partial employee is defined as a customer who temporarily participates in the service delivery process, contributing resources to the service organization in the form of either information or effort (Bowers et al., 1990; Mills and Moberg, 1982). Although service customers do not generally think of themselves as partial employees, service managers may benefit from incorporating the contributions of customers (whether information, effort, or both) into their management plans and strategy (Grönroos, 1990; Kelley et al., 1990).

Unfortunately, few theoretical models of service management incorporate the partial employee concept.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the corresponding notion of the service employee as 'partial consumer' has only recently received some attention from marketing scholars (e.g. Bowers et al., 1990; Küpers, 2000). We believe a more fully developed notion of both partial employee and partial consumer can add to our understanding of the service delivery process. We argue that a more complete understanding of these concepts can be obtained using postmodern conceptualizations of the producer–consumer and production–consumption dialect.

The purpose of this research is to further develop the concepts of partial employee and partial consumer within a services marketing context by suggesting an alternative paradigm or meta-theoretical perspective of the service delivery process. This alternative perspective is based on postmodernist approaches to marketing and management philosophy (e.g. Clegg, 1990; Drucker, 1992; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In the paper, we argue that the service delivery process represents, to some extent, a discernible 'postmodern moment' wherein consumers and employees engage in the production and consumption of the service as a symbolic act that includes the production of themselves. After expanding the ideas of partial employee and partial consumer to include the symbolic aspects of participation in the production of the service experience, we outline specific areas wherein marketing practitioners can improve or enhance this participation.

Figure 1

**A modern model of the service delivery process**



**Modern conceptualization of the service delivery process**

In the process of constructing its culture of production, modernism disassociates the functions of production and consumption. In so doing, modernism generates the perspective that production creates value and consumption destroys it. For example, conventional models of the service delivery process view service providers (i.e. the service organization and employees) as the primary actors in the production of the service (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1985). And, although consumers are participants in this production process, the overall service experience is conceived of mainly as an outcome of productive inputs and efforts (see Figure 1).

In a service delivery context, the modern framework separates the provider from the consumer (customer). The service employee is embedded within the organization and provides the service (along with goods if appropriate) to the customers, who, in turn, are embedded in the consumption experience and return payment for the goods/services rendered. The limitations of this perspective include the lack of attention to the interactive relationship between service employees and consumers in the production–consumption experience as a whole, and ignoring the service delivery process as a place for symbolic and experiential encounters.

Working from a ‘modernist’ perspective, researchers’ understanding of the participation of actors in the service delivery process has been limited. Marketing



literature and research is, for the most part, dominated by the positivist/empiricist paradigm (Arndt, 1985; Peter and Olsen, 1983). This paradigm privileges the study of formal and orderly systems, such as the formal elements of service delivery and the objective and discrete roles of employees and consumers. As such, a positivist/empiricist approach to model and theory construction (i.e. meta-theory) in the services marketing literature is arguably inappropriate for subsuming and realizing fully the notions of partial employees and partial consumers.

### Postmodernism in marketing and management

Postmodernism is an emergent philosophical perspective. As a cultural critique it has gained legitimacy not only in the humanities disciplines, but also in the social sciences, and, more recently, in marketing and management (Boje and Dennehy, 1994; Brown, 1995, 1998; Clegg, 1990; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Postmodernists challenge, question, and critique the conditions and beliefs associated with modernity (the most recent period in human history corresponding with the rise of Enlightenment thought) and known as modernism. Some of the more central tenets of modernism under question include the primacy of rational thought, the rise of science, and the dichotomization of the world into binary opposites – such as the separation of production from consumption as a conceptual and material fact of economic life.

From a postmodern perspective, production became privileged over consumption through the organization of formal bureaucracy and the corresponding separation of work from the home during modernity. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) discuss briefly, the development of the economy during the Industrial Revolution was predicated on distinctions between public versus private, and work versus home, with the former term in each pair valued more highly than the latter. The public institution of work provided not only the means for the family to live, but also for the economy as a whole to survive and prosper. Thus, work was valued more than activities associated with the home, such as consumption (cf. McKendrick et al., 1982; Marchand, 1985; Polanyi, 1977; Saffioti, 1978). Even after World War II, when the economy shifted from a production to a consumption focus, a reversal of the ordering of the terms production and consumption did not occur in the collective minds of modern culture. Consumption did, however, become more important as an extension of production. Thus, the prevailing belief at the time was that production needed to survive in order for the economy to remain healthy. And, in order for production to survive, consumption had to be encouraged.

Thus, modern methods of managing production embrace Fordist and Taylorist techniques, as well as Weberist forms of bureaucratic/hierarchical organization, in a quest for ultimate productive efficiency. These methods are characterized by elements such as the division of tasks and the specialization of labor, the standardization of productive output (as goods or services), inducement of workers through monetary and disciplinary means, and tall/formal organizational structures. Modern forms of management and management philosophy are an



outgrowth of modernism and its corresponding positivistic-type perspective or approach (e.g. logical positivism, logical empiricism, and/or modern empiricism). Modern philosophy represents a preference for formal or orderly systems (Sheth et al., 1988), continuities, stability, and harmony (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

Recently, however, alternative philosophies of science (sometimes coined 'post-positivist philosophies'), such as hermeneutics and phenomenology, have been reincorporated into scientific disciplines. And, at the same time, modernist thought has come under attack from scholars interested in exposing the limitations of its ontological and epistemological premises. Termed postmodernism, this collection of critiques challenges previously held views on such issues as the notions of production, consumption, and producers and consumers.

### Production and consumption: a postmodernistic viewpoint

Postmodern thought brings to light the equality of production and consumption by exposing the distinction between the two as a myth. Not only is production unnecessary without the consumption of what is produced, but there are productive moments occurring during consumption processes. As people consume, for instance, they produce a notion of self, and thus are producers and consumers simultaneously. Postmodernism critiques the mythology of the interpretation of production as meaningful and valuable, and consumption, on the other hand, as destructive and only a consequence of production (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). It also points out the contradictory nature of the opposition between the view of consumption as a profane, devouring act and the modern rhetoric of 'consumer sovereignty.'

In addition, postmodern perspectives problematize the modern institutions of the market and capitalist bureaucracy. For many postmodern thinkers, it is not important that the market system be overturned (postmodernism, in general, advocates no such revolutionary strategy), but that the market and its corresponding institutions be held up to critical scrutiny with the idea of dismantling problematic aspects of its ideology and practice.

Although some postmodern scholars (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) question the idea that the liberatory potential of postmodernism can be realized fully until the dissolution of the market as the principle world-ordering system occurs, and suggest that partial liberation can be achieved in cultural and economic spaces outside of the market (such as in social or economic exchange situations independent of the market), our position is that much can be accomplished towards liberation while inside the logic of the market-order. The existence of the market is a central condition of our lives, and, as an artifact of contemporary life, work organizations (e.g. service firms) can become more responsive and emancipatory in serving the *interests* of both the market and individuals internal and external to the organization.

It is important to note that 'interest' is not to be equated with the concept of satisfaction, and, instead, suggests several major breaks with traditional or modern forms of business, including the enrichment of jobs through the re-



integration of tasks and the concomitant despecialization of labor, the increased differentiation of output via 'flexible production,' the motivation of workers by improving the work culture and by personal 'empowerment,' and flatter, more informal organizational structures (Boje and Dennehy, 1994; Clegg, 1990; Drucker, 1992). In short, postmodernism represents, among other things, a strategy or critique of modern, service-based business. And, although postmodernism is ultimately anti-foundational, alternatives based on this critique can be formulated for managing a less hierarchically structured organization wherein people are more highly skilled, more empowered and less exploitable, and work in independent teams amidst a flat and global network of relations (Boje and Dennehy, 1994).

## **The consumer and employee in the postmodern service delivery process**

Literature in both the services marketing and consumer behavior areas has touched upon ideas related to the postmodern service process. Table 1 presents selective, yet representative examples of research on topics associated with the production and consumption of services in postmodernity and the roles of service employees and consumers. (For a more complete discussion of postmodern conceptualizations of production, consumption, producers, and consumers see Firat and Venkatesh, 1995.)

Arnould and Price (1993) and Arnould et al. (1998) focus on the interaction of employees, consumers, and the servicescape in the extended service experience of river rafting. During this particular service experience, consumers and employees interact for an extended period that serves to foster the formation of temporary bonds between the two parties. The service providers are essential to the service experience for consumers as river guides 'may orchestrate affective, narrative, and ritual content through the skills, engagement, emotions, and dramatic sense' (Arnould and Price, 1993: 28). The servicescape facilitates this production of meaning allowing for the enactment of cultural constructions of wilderness by and for consumers. However, the negative side of the service employee's responsibility for fostering the service experience for and with the consumer is the impact of sustained emotional labor, including boredom, stress, and burnout. The issue for service providers is that the enactment of the extraordinary from the perspective of the consumer can be routine or stressful for the employee. Küpers' (2000) work on embodied emotional and symbolic 'prosumption' (synchronous production-consumption) of the service encounter argues that emotion, intention, and perception of both the service employee and the service consumer are interrelated, and that shared emotional expressions between co-workers and consumers can facilitate a sense of connectedness and identity. In sum, this research stream provides evidence for the dialectic relationship between the service employee and consumer, and suggests that it is through interaction that the



Table 1

**Literature on services, service employees, and service consumers in postmodernity**

Author(s)	Subject matter
Arnould and Price (1993)	Extended service encounters: provider–customer relationship
Arnould, Price and Tierney (1998)	Servicescapes: sites for production of meaning, intention and purpose
Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999)	Servicescapes: facilitator role in nurturing social interaction among consumers
Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1988)	Buyer and seller behavior: role fluidity at a swap meet
Berry (1995)	Service framework: employee empowerment and teamwork
Bettencourt (1997)	Customer voluntary performance: customers as partners
Bowers, Martin and Luker (1990)	Interchangeable marketing efforts and consequences: employees as customers, customers as employees
Cova (1996)	Postmodern implications for marketing: postmodern consumers
Cova and Cova (2000)	Postmodern consumer behavior
Deighton (1992)	Marketing performances: consumer participation
Fornell (1976)	Marketing decisions: consumer input
Holbrook (1998)	Artistic performance of services: consumers as co-producers
Iacobucci (1998)	Service encounters: interaction, interdependence, self-maximization, cooperation/competition, and joint outcomes
Küpers (2000)	Embodied symbolic consumption: postmodern consumer
McAlexander and Schouten (1998)	Brandfests: extraordinary experience and relationship building
Price, Arnould and Tierney (1995)	Service encounter: temporal duration, Affective/emotional content, and spatial proximity
Schneider and Bowen (1993)	Human resource practices: service quality perceptions
Schneider and Bowen (1999)	Reciprocal relationships: service providers and employees
Sherry (1990)	Community generated experience: flea markets

service experience becomes meaningful to the consumer. However, addressing the needs of the service employee, along with those of the consumer, seems critical to the continued success of the service encounter.

Berry's (1995) work, along with research not necessarily included in Table 1 (e.g. Zeithaml et al., 1990), argues for the empowerment of service employees and use of teamwork in the service delivery process. This theme is reinforced in Bowers et al.'s





(1990) article on employees as customers and customers as employees. By applying strategies traditionally reserved for consumers, management can offer its employees more than conventional supports (e.g. job definitions, training, rewards, recognition, etc.). In this way, management can ultimately bring about such positive outcomes as improved quality, value, satisfaction, loyalty, feedback, compatibility, and involvement for *both* employees and consumers alike. For example, the principles underlying market segmentation and the marketing of multiple products (i.e. bundling) can be translated to mean flexible working hours (segmentation) and cafeteria-style benefit packages (multiple products) for workers. Likewise, pricing principles can be applied in the use of incentive-based wages and non-monetary rewards. On the other hand, consumers can benefit from strategies once reserved for employees, including job definitions (i.e. designing one's own service experience and/or helping others to construct theirs), training (role performance), and rewards. Based on game theory, work by Iacobucci (1998) shows that cooperation between the service provider and consumer can be facilitated through the use of employee rewards and open communication.

Bettencourt (1997) developed the notion of 'consumer voluntary performance' to label consumer behavior that is discretionary but useful for consumers to perform in the service delivery process, such as promoting a service provider, acting as a human resource (i.e. helping other consumers, etc.), and/or offering complaints and suggestions (much like an organizational/management consultant). Back in the 1970s, Fornell (1976) wrote about the use of consumer input in making marketing decisions, and Schneider and Bowen (1993) found a relationship between consumers' ratings of service quality and an organization's human resource practices. In summary, this research illustrates that acknowledging a relationship between employee and consumer experiences in the provision of a service is important in understanding the service delivery process.

Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1998), Cova (1996), and Cova and Cova (2000) outline the implications of the current period (postmodernity and its associated cultural conditions) for services providers and other marketers. Cova (1996) writes about the postmodern consumer's interest in local experiences, participation in the experience process, and immersion in thematic settings with others. Consumers in postmodernity seek to construct experiences that carry symbolic meaning. The servicescape acts as a site for the creation of consumer- (and employee-) generated symbolic meaning. Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1998) call this the 'linking value' of the service environment, as it encourages and nurtures social interaction between and among employees and consumers and allows them to achieve meaning and self-expression. Cova and Cova (2000) discuss how consumers appropriate service/marketing environments in order to construct identities and make the outside world controllable. Today, individuals define identity with reference to themselves and their experiences (lifestyle), rather than by role or occupation. Thus, the work of Arnould and his colleagues shows how participants in river rafting service encounters constructed an extraordinary experience imbued with feelings of joy and freedom. Similarly, Aubert-Gamet investigated consumer behavior at a bank that found that consumers actively reappropriated



the service environment for their own use, including using the bank as a meeting place for friends (cited in Cova and Cova, 2000). Peñaloza's (1999) paper on the retail environment of Niketown also illustrates the point that service experiences can be sought out for reasons that bear little relationship with the service/product being sold. Services provide opportunities for consumers and employees to interact in meaningful ways – often beyond the function of the service exchange itself.

In a similar vein, Holbrook (1998) argues that services, as live performances, resist 'commodification' when consumers are allowed to realize their role as co-producers of the performance. Deighton's (1992) work also highlights the idea that consumers actively participate in marketing performances. In their discussion of 'brandfests' (brand-sponsored and brand-centered consumer events), McAlexander and Schouten (1998) illustrate participation on behalf of consumers and employees. At these events, relationships form between and among consumers, brands, and companies (e.g. Harley-Davidson motorcycle riders and employees at a Harley-Davidson-sponsored event). Brandfests, while not service encounters per se, nonetheless illustrate the sense of meaning, belonging, and identity construction inherent in service/marketing experiences. Schneider and Bowen (1999) discuss the reciprocal relations in service provision and outline various benefits of the service experience, including the affirmation of self-esteem.

While not focused exclusively on services per se, Belk et al.'s (1988) exploration of consumer–seller behavior at a swap meet reinforces the idea of role fluidity between consumers and service/product providers who may chat, exchange information, and bargain as part of the experience. Sherry's (1990) work on flea markets also stresses the sense of community generated at the experience itself as going beyond the confines of the exchange of products.

Although this research adds to our understanding of services generally, and consumers and service providers (employees) specifically, it fails to address the notions of the partial employee and the partial consumer from a philosophical or meta-theoretic perspective. Service experiences can provide many benefits beyond the exchange of labor, products/services, and money. Service encounters allow for the creation of symbolic and emotional meaning for all participants. Particularly important is the idea of both consumers' and employees' quest for experiential meaning and social interaction in the current period of postmodernity. Services provide outlets for these searches, and, thus, service delivery systems must be designed for this purpose.

## **A postmodern meta-theoretical model of the service delivery process**

As implied above, postmodern thought offers services marketers a necessary theoretical backdrop from which to study the entirety of the service delivery process. In short, this relatively recent perspective calls for a renewed look at each

of the service delivery participants, including their roles and outcomes. In this section of the paper, we present an overview of, as well as discussions on, more particular aspects of the postmodern perspective.

Postmodernism's culture of consumption represents the eradication of the production–consumption cleft and yields a perspective where consumers are both receivers and providers of value (Firat, 1990; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993, 1995). And, similarly, service providers can also be thought of as both receivers and providers of value (i.e. partial consumers). In other words, the postmodern perspective is one where service providers and consumers produce and consume – *both* are providers and receivers of symbolic meaning (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In terms of the service delivery system, the service provider (i.e. the employee as partial consumer and the organization) and the service customer (as partial employee) participate equally – in symbolic terms – to create the service experience as both a communicative and performative process (see Figure 2).

A postmodern model of the service delivery process connects the service provider, who is also partial consumer, and the customer (partial employee) within the porous boundaries of the production/consumption experience. Exchanged by both parties in the service encounter are labor, ideas and experiential consumption benefits that include the symbolic construction of the self (and of the meaning of the experience), and the formation of social connections with each other. In addition, goods/services flow from the partial consumer to the partial employee and payment flows in the opposite direction.

As representations of images, products and services act on consumers to produce certain types of human beings. Consumption is not an act of destruction (as the meaning of the Latin root 'consumere' indicates, cf. Williams, 1982), and, instead, is a social act wherein symbolic meanings, social relationships, and the identity of producer and consumer are (re-) produced (Baudrillard, 1981).

In addition, it is the (symbolic) image that has primacy in society generally, and in the service delivery process specifically, as objects and/or experiences have little value independent of their *symbolic value*. 'Instrumentalism' and 'functionality' themselves are symbols with specific meanings; therefore, even in the most mundane service encounters, symbols are circulated and exchanged. It is often suggested, for example, that consumer evaluations of service quality are associated with images (e.g. store image) and/or atmospherics (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). This may be explained by viewing the consumption environment as a 'signification system' (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) wherein consumers experience the world through symbols and meanings that are produced and exchanged through consumption. As with any type of market exchange, the service experience is replete with the production and consumption of images. The intangible and perishable nature of services, however, suggests that the meaning of symbolic consumption becomes less abstract, and, accordingly, more significant in services compared with other more tangible types of exchange.

Participation in the service delivery process is a productive act involving image, as well as the production of the service itself and the service provider and customer. Similarly, employees' perceptions of the organization also involve

Figure 2

**A postmodern model of the service delivery process**

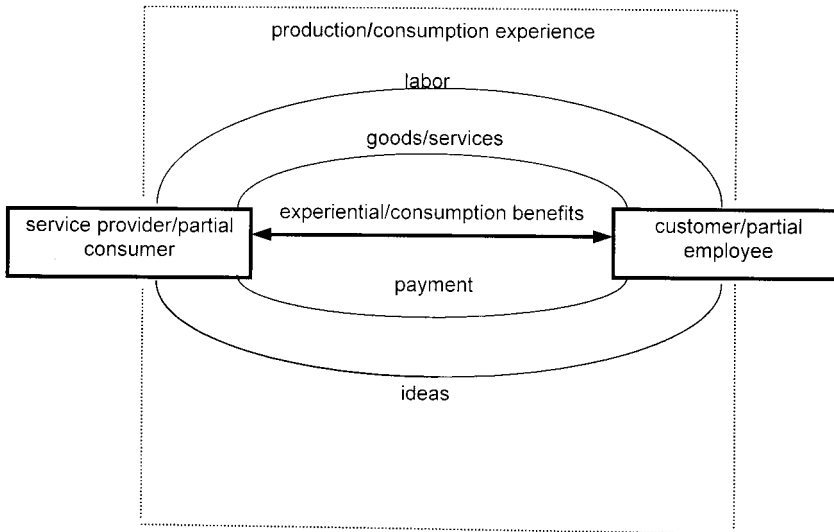


image. Take, for example, a computer consultancy organization as described by Alvesson (1990).

The technical and functional quality of what is accomplished is clearly subordinate to this (customer's experienced quality). The corporate image is of importance to produce the experience. The creation of favorable impressions is consequently of importance for this type of company. Internally, many organizational conditions are hard to evaluate from the employee's point of view. Material conditions (raw material, machinery, etc.) are non-significant in this type of business. Hundreds of diverse consultancy projects are taking place, many of these geographically dispersed and the individual employee has a limited overview. (p. 390)

Symbolic production and consumption experiences govern our way of operating in the world. The illusory separations between product, service, and image disappear with the acceptance that nothing has value independent of the symbolic order. The symbolic processes at work in the market allow consumers to seek out symbolic experiences wherein they can produce notions of themselves. By exposing the way in which consumption is productive, postmodern perspectives of management and marketing are particularly suitable for examining the customer's (as well as the employee's) participatory role in the service delivery process.

The postmodern perspective has particular relevance for services marketing as services in addition to being intangible and perishable, are quite literally produced and consumed simultaneously (Regan, 1963). Based upon this perspective,



service management necessitates a full reintegration of both the service customer and the service employee. The postmodern stance depicts a more complete level of involvement for the customer in the service production and delivery process, as well as a more comprehensive inclusion of the service provider in the consumption experience. Acknowledging individuals in the service encounter as both partial employees and partial customers may have tremendous implications for their self-images and for the image of the organization. In sum, postmodernism offers services marketing a unifying framework for understanding exchange processes – both economic and symbolic.

## Implications for marketers

### Customer integration

Postmodernism suggests that service organizations consider customer interests. On the surface this proposition may appear inherently obvious. Indeed, considering customer interests (e.g. needs, etc.) is the basis of the marketing concept. As noted previously, however, interests suggest more than responding to or anticipating consumer needs and include the notion of emancipation on the part of customer (e.g. helping the customer to create or expand beyond the present situation, etc.). And, in light of the present focus on the partial employee, this perspective assumes a unique and more comprehensive service customer role. Specifically, this focus requires that service practitioners consider the interests of service customers (in terms of motivation, knowledge, and/or technological support) as they pertain to the *customers' participation skills* (Grönroos, 1990). In other words, service managers must understand clearly what customers need to know in order to participate effectively in the service delivery process (from both the service provider's and consumer's perspectives).

By paying special attention to customer interests in this way, managers can facilitate customer participation in service delivery and thus enhance the service production process. For example, oftentimes self-service elements can be introduced to improve the production and quality of a service product. But, by either failing to consider or understand customer participatory interests, service providers may incorrectly implement this strategy, thereby causing it to backfire (Lovelock and Young, 1979). Customers often need to perceive and understand the benefits of participation in self-service processes, including the emancipatory benefits of being 'producers' (i.e. partial employees). If these benefits are not acknowledged, perceived quality and benefits of the experience may decline. Similarly, customer self-service should be encouraged and reinforced by programs designed to reward this behavior (Goodwin, 1988; Kelley et al., 1990).

Service managers also need to assess existing levels of customer knowledge. In this way, management can address those areas wherein customers need the most participatory training. In many service delivery situations, for instance, customers may not know exactly what they are supposed to do or say or when they are



supposed to do or say it (e.g. knowing how and when to fill out documents, etc.). Ultimately, this lack of knowledge may affect negatively customers' perceptions of service quality, as well as consume needlessly service employee time and energy (i.e. decreased productivity).

By ascertaining accurately customer needs in terms of service participation, managers can create better-informed customers who require less attention from service employees, make fewer mistakes, feel more secure, perceive more control (Hui and Bateson, 1991), are more satisfied, and, ultimately, feel some emancipation as producers. This is not to argue for less consumer–employee involvement. As the literature in Table 1 illustrates, part of the experiential and symbolic benefits of the service include such interaction. Küpers (2000), for instance, argues that an important aspect of service delivery design and management is the creation of conditions for emotionalizing and symbolizing. Allowing consumers to interact in (non-harmful) ways not anticipated by the service provider allows consumers to make the experience their own. Allowing for meaningful participation of employees and consumers can help each in the performance of the service experience. Kotler (1994) further suggests increased consumer participation in the provision of services as a method of overcoming supply/demand asymmetry created by the inability to stockpile services due to their perishability characteristics. Finally, productivity is increased as both service employees and customers (i.e. partial employees) are able to perform their respective roles more effectively in the process.

## Employee integration

As noted above, the postmodern perspective represents the reintegration of consumption and production. In postmodernity's culture of consumption, consumers not only become producers, but employees also 'consume' their roles and duties as providers of service. It is incumbent upon organizations to structure and construct tasks in ways that engage employees and draw them into the production/consumption of the service. As Firat (1992: 82) notes,

Work will be increasingly considered as a means and not the end. Since consumption is the goal and aspiration of the individual who increasingly perceives him/herself as a set of images to be marketable, organizations that can position the tasks to be performed as consumables which contribute to the consumers' sought images will be successful in motivating and 'consuming' the employees.

The viewing of service employee tasks as performances that affect consumers is not inherently new in the services marketing literature. Building on the notion that services require simultaneous production and consumption, for instance, Grove and Fisk (1983) utilized Goffman's (1959) conception of dramaturgy to describe services marketing. Grove and Fisk suggest, among other things, that service actors (providers) perform tasks in order to establish a favorable definition of their services, and, in so doing, impact the audience (i.e. service customers).

The postmodern integration of the consumption experience into the pro-



duction process is especially relevant in the realm of services. Due to the inseparability of services, each producer–customer interplay and relationship is unique. This leads to both variability and difficulty in establishing and monitoring service quality. As a result, organizations must carefully orchestrate this interplay by creating circumstances where service employees or providers are yielded benefits contemporaneously to those provided to consumers.

Since employees are more likely to prefer richer consumption experiences while performing their roles, a ‘service provider as consumer’ perspective is warranted. This perspective suggests, among other things, the possibility of enhancing the provider/consumer relationship during the service encounter through the de-division of service labor roles by reintegrating the mental and physical tasks of work (Leiss, 1988). This idea directly contrasts with the contemporary (and clearly *modernistic*) trend towards attempting to eliminate the inherent variability of the service experience (in order to increase predictability for the consumer) through ‘McDonaldization’ (Ritzer, 1993), or the extreme specialization of service employee tasks.

Of course, the despecialization of service employee tasks and activities is more appropriate in some service settings and less appropriate in others. That is, there may be ‘good’ variation and ‘bad’ variation. Lovelock (1991), for instance, suggests three criteria in determining whether variation, or customization, in service products is warranted: speed, consistency, and price savings. As the value of speed, consistency, and price savings increases across service products, customers are more likely to forgo a preference for customization (Lovelock, 1991; see also Levitt, 1972, 1976). However, even if services are specialized, this does not mean that employees cannot achieve emancipation in their roles, as long as the service provider perceives the productive benefits of his/her activities for him/herself and the organization.

## Conclusions

Not only does postmodern theory embrace the marketing position that the service customer is vitally important with respect to the service delivery process, but it also suggests a more complete understanding and recognition of service exchange and delivery. This comprehensive viewpoint is accomplished in two ways: (1) by more fully explicating the role of the customer as a *producer* in the service delivery process (e.g. considering particular service- and service participatory-related customer interests that allow customers to fashion images for their own production); and, (2) by offering a framework inclusive of the (primary) service employer’s/provider’s consumption desires and aspirations (e.g. taking into account how the needs, wants, and expectations of service providers affect the service exchange/delivery process). It is worth noting that, although the service employee’s standpoint has been considered in the services marketing literature (e.g. Bitner et al., 1994; Solomon et al., 1985), service employees have not been portrayed as ‘consumers’ (i.e. partial consumers) in the service process.



Not only does postmodern thought offer a perspective capable of fully developing this conceptualization, but it also provides a foundation such that both the service provider and consumer are grounded in a particular perspective of theory (i.e. meta-theory).

This analysis aims to highlight the impact of the partial employee on the service delivery process, as well as incorporate the significant contribution of the regular or 'full-fledged' service employee. Precisely, a postmodern viewpoint is proposed to integrate systematically and theoretically the partial and the full-fledged service employee and their respective influences on the service process.

Although the partial employee notion has been developed conceptually (Mills and Morris, 1986), few, if any, inquiries have considered the partial employee from a postmodern standpoint. The postmodern view is proposed as an important step toward a better understanding of how and when service practitioners might conceptualize and ultimately incorporate the rendering of customer as partial employee, and service employee as consumer (i.e. partial consumer) in the service delivery process.

## Notes

- 1 Three exceptions include: Bowers et al.'s (1990) model of interchangeable marketing efforts and consequences for service employees and consumers, Grönroos's (1990) dynamic model of the service offering, and Kelley et al.'s (1990) service classification scheme.

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