I'M Not Your Friend, Buddy: Friendliness Without Friendship Hinders Consumer-Firm Relationship Development

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To begin a relationship, brands often act like a friend at consumer touchpoints. While academics and managers generally support this practice, do consumers really want this kind of personal attention? Four studies demonstrate that being like a friend can hinder rather than help relationship development efforts between firms and consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although the literature on consumer-brand interactions has identified a variety of different ways in which firms can forge relationships with their customers, one of the central, practical suggestions is to treat consumers with friendship. Several consistent characteristics of friendship have been identified by previous research to help define the friendship role, including "opening up" and sharing personal information (Price & Arnould, 1999; Grayson, 2007). Friendship is one of the most common forms of relationship (Chan & Cheng 2004; Hartup 1975; Hays 1985, 1988) and seems highly relevant to the context of consumer-brand and consumer-firm relationships (e.g., Aggarwal 2004). Being friendly and engaging in friend-like behaviors is commonly prescribed in the practitioner literature (e.g., Cummings 2015; Martin 2010; Turnali 2014) and in textbooks (Baron 1997). Moreover, a number of studies support the idea that friendliness, at least in a service context, leads to higher levels of satisfaction (Brown & Sulzer-Azaroff 1994; Pugh 2001; Tsai 2001; Tsai & Huang 2002; Barger & Grandey 2006).

While friendly behaviors are clearly symptomatic of friendship, it is less clear that they are causally responsible for friendship or that they are even appropriate in the early stages of friendship (i.e., when there is no friendship). Studies of relationship development, for example, show that relationship "initiation" behaviors are very different than latter-stage behaviors (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller 2013; Knapp 1978). Other work has shown that behaviors that conflict with the expectations for the relationship, such as whether it is business or friendship (Grayson, 2007), can elicit discomfort or unease (Clark & Mills, 1993) or even undermine relationships entirely (Fletcher et al. 2000). Thus, to the extent that friendly behaviors are not characteristic of the behaviors people generally engage in at the beginning of a relationship, it seems possible, contrary to common wisdom, that friendly behaviors may cause discomfort and might even harm the firm's chances of establishing a friendship.

We conducted four studies to test various elements of our prediction. Study 1 tested the basic idea that consumers may react negatively to overtly friendly behavior by a firm representative. Friendly vs. neutral scenarios for each study were designed based on the conceptualization of friendly behaviours described by prior research (Price & Arnould, 1999; Grayson, 2007). We found initial evidence that friendly firm encounters were less favorable to consumers than neutral firm encounters. Studies 2 and 3 examined possible boundary conditions to the negative effect of friendliness documented in Study 1, and statistically ruled out perceived ulterior motives as a possible alternative explanation. Specifically, study 2 examined whether the negative effect might be mitigated or reversed when consumers could anticipate a future relationship with the firm. Not only did the negative effect found in study one replicate, we also found that the observed negative effect of friendliness was not simply an artifact of our manipulation – we saw a positive effect of friendliness in a context where friendliness should have been normative. Also, we found the same negative effect of friendliness in the context where consumers might anticipate a future relationship. Study 3 examined whether the effect was moderated by the desirability of the firm. We found that the negative effect found in the previous two studies replicated,

and a (marginally) significant interaction suggested that the negative effect of friendliness was greater in desirable stores than in undesirable stores. Although somewhat surprising at first glance, examination of the means indicated the desire to stay in the undesirable store was universally low and that the nature of the interaction did little to change that. In contrast, in a desirable store, friendliness reduced an otherwise strong desire to stay in the store. The final study examined whether friendliness was really most appropriate in the context of a pre-existing friendship, rather than at the beginning of a possible relationship. We found a negative effect of friendliness on desire to stay when participants had no prior relationship with the salesperson, and in contrast, a positive effect of friendliness when participants had a prior relationship with the salesperson. These results were consistent with the idea that friendly behaviours are a consequence of friendship, rather than a cause of it. Therefore, it seems that friendliness in the absence of friendship appears to backfire. The results of these four studies demonstrate a consistent pattern that when firms act like friends, consumers react less favorably compared to when the firm acts neutrally.

The current research contributes to the consumer-brand relationship literature by demonstrating that acting like a friend at firm touchpoints may not be the best way for firms to develop a relationship with consumers. While the literature seems to imply that consumers view firms and brands as meaningful relationship partners, our studies suggest that, in fact, consumers may not characterize their relationships with firms and brands in this way. In four studies, we demonstrate a robust, counter-intuitive effect: acting like a friend can hinder relationship development efforts between firms and consumers. Evidence from four studies demonstrates that friendly encounters reduce consumers' perceived comfort such that they would rather not stay or continue the interaction, thus impeding the relationship development process. So, acting like a friend reflects a customer service strategy that may unintentionally do more harm than good.

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