

ARE WE BONDING BETTER IN A BETTER WORLD? PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGES IN CHANNEL RELATIONSHIPS

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As teachers and writers, marketing professors regularly discuss ways in which marketing practices are perceived to have changed over time. What distinguishes those of us who self-consciously identify ourselves with historical analysis is that we have a lessor sense of certainty.

The present discussion of relationship marketing as it pertains to the business channel suggests an increased appreciation among academics for the benefits of trusting, close relationships. We believe the importance of closer relationships in the business channel has not increased to as great a degree as reflected by some marketing academics. Even in this limited area, academic attention has shifted several times in recent decades. After the publication of Alderson's 1957 seminal work much attention focused upon channel analysis as a subset of systems theory. Then, following the developments by Stern and El-Ansary and others, attention focused on power relationships within the channel. More recently, the discussion has taken on an upbeat tone, with emphasis upon the cultivation and nurturing of supplier-end user/reseller dyads.

Marketing channels have existed for a very long time. In some cases those relationships have been very short-lived and provided opportunities for particular types of exploitation. In other cases, the connections were continuing ones, involving much greater obligation on both sides. Our historical perspective warns that contemporary and retrospective accounts of change in channel relationships are influenced by a variety of personal, subjective considerations and expectations.

In pursuing the subject, the authors would have preferred to compare relationships among key components of the business channel at some period in the past with similar key components today. As a first approximation, the authors conducted a survey of marketing academics who received their Phds over two substantially different time periods. If the closeness of channel relationships had either not increased or had increased less than the current literature suggests, one would expect that academics with more recent degrees, and also younger, would 1) feel that close relationships among channel members would have been less important in a former time period than their older colleagues; and 2) perceive larger differences in relationship closeness between the former and the present times than their older colleagues. We also felt the two groups would differ on perceived changes in social values, some of which may relate to business activities.

We selected the time of the receipt of Phds in a manner so to obtain appropriate quantities for statistical analysis. One group held their Phds for 25 years or more and the other 9 years or less. After substantial thought, we selected the early 1960s and the early 1990s for time periods to compare business channel relationships. The pretest indicated the respondents' task could be simplified by focusing on a single channel relationship. We chose the relationship between industrial buyers and sellers. Analysis of the data showed a perception of closer channel relationships in the early 1990s between industrial buyers and sellers among all respondents. In general, differences between groups were observed in the direction hypothesized but were not statistically significant. Significant differences among social values were observed, however, that raise important questions regarding inconsistencies between views of the world in which we live and the one within which business operates.