Abstract

After discussing the theoretical constructs of customer loyalty, corporate reputation, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and corporate citizenship, the paper develops and explores the new idea of 'customer-citizen loyalty relationships' within the context of each of the theoretical constructs, especially CSR. The investigation shared in this paper is conceptual, with research the next step.

Introduction

This paper agrees with Dick and Basu's suggestion (1994) that corporations can gain from reframing customer loyalty as a *loyalty relationship* to be nurtured and managed. It further proposes that corporations could reframe customers as global consumer-citizens (akin to corporate global citizens), thereby prompting corporations to manage customer loyalty relationships from a new perspective - that of long-term *consumer-citizen loyalty relationships* between corporate citizens and consumer-citizens. This moves the dialogue away from customers and firms to *global citizenry*. After discussing the theoretical constructs of customer loyalty, corporate reputation, corporate social responsibility (CRS), and corporate citizenship, the paper explores the idea of *consumer-citizen loyalty relationships* within the context of

each of these theoretical constructs, especially CSR. The investigation shared in this paper is conceptual, with research the next step.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is an important concept for corporations. It refers to the non-random tendency of customers to keep buying products and services from a firm and concurrently associate mostly positive images with that firm (Maignan, Ferrell & Hult 1999). In general terms, it refers to attitudes toward a company and resultant patronage behaviour (Pirsch, Gupta & Grau 2006). Customer loyalty can manifest itself through one or a combination of five dimensions (some also call these antecedents or consequences of loyalty): attitudinal, behavioural, situational, personality traits (propensity to be loyal) and resistance to competing offers (Rubdle-Thiele 2005). Pirsch et al.

25

found that institutionalized CSR programs (rather than point of sale programs) lead to greater customer loyalty because customers perceive the companies making a positive difference in communities due to the positive moral stance taken by the firms. Institutionalized CSR programs involve seven activities including support for human rights, employee diversity, charitable giving and community involvement. Where point of sale promotions strive to drive up sales by increasing customer purchase intention, institutional programs are intent on building *relationships* with stakeholders (Pirsch et al.).

Indeed, in their seminal work, Dick and Basu (1994) underscore the long-term importance of corporations' successful management of customer loyalty. They conceptualize customer loyalty or repeat patronage as a *loyalty relationship* informed by a concept they call relative attitude. Their notion of attitude assumes that repeat patronage is better predicted if one considers the customer's attitude about the corporation *relative to the competition* (rather than in isolation). A high relative attitude contributes significantly toward long-term maintenance of loyalty. High customer loyalty leads to lower propensities to consider alterative corporations (brands), higher resistance to counter persuasion from competitors and increased positive word of mouth (Dick & Basu 1994; Maignan, Ferrell & Hult 1999). Walsh, Mitchell, Jackson and

Beatty (2008) report, "increased customer loyalty benefits are hugely important in deepening relationships with customers" (p.12).

Customer Loyalty and Corporate Reputation

Reputation and identity are a firm's soft assets, representing a competitive advantage that is hard to imitate and even harder to maintain (Walsh et al. 2008; Money & Gardiner 2005). Walsh et al. report that corporate reputation explains three quarters of customer loyalty (see as well Andreassen & Lindestad 1998). Also, Thompson (2005) recognizes that transnational corporations (TNCs) are becoming increasingly interested in fostering and preserving their *reputation capital*, which is closely linked to corporate identity and image, which are not the same thing. Corporate *reputation* is the "observers' collective judgements of a corporation based on the assessments of financial, social and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time" (Barnett, Jermier & Lafferty 2006 p.34). Corporate *identity* is the "enduring, central features of organizations that makes them distinctive from other organizations" (p.33). Corporate *image* is the impressions people have of the firm. Barnett et al. explain that the identity of the firm can remain static while its image and reputation can change, meaning *reputation capital* ebbs and flows as judgements of the firm accumulate over time. Part of a

26

corporation's *reputation capital* is its performance vis-à-vis its obligations to society and the environment, called corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Corporate Social Responsibility and Customer Loyalty

"CSR has become... *the* major concern for the corporate business world" (Thompson 2005 p.132). Concomitantly, the criteria for keeping customers loyal to a company is broadening to include CSR, albeit only a micro fraction of large TNCs are reporting related CSR initiatives, estimated at 2.5% (Thompson). CSR refers to open and transparent business practices that are based on ethical values and respect for employees, communities and the environment. It encompasses a concern for: (a) human rights, labour and security; (b) enterprise and economic development; (c) business standards and corporate governance; (d) health promotion; (e) education and leadership development; (f) human disaster relief, and (g) environment (Corporate Social Responsibility Forum 2000). Corporations concerned with their CSR act on moral and ethical considerations as well as commercial ones (Thompson).

Conceptualizations of CSR have transformed over the years, moving from it being: (a) a social obligation to enhance the bottom line (legal, economic, ethical and philanthropic); (b) to a stakeholder obligation (beholden to those affected by the firm's direct actions rather than beholden to the whole of society); (c)

on to an ethics driven approach (a positive commitment to society in addition to the self-interest, bottom line); and, (d) also a component of the management process and strategic planning (Maignan & Ferrell 2004). All four notions of CSR persist today and inform this discussion, some developed in more details than others to make salient points.

As noted earlier, research has confirmed that there are links between CSR, corporate image and customer loyalty. Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) found that corporate image directly, positively, impacts customer loyalty. Maignan, Ferrell and Hult (1999) report that customer loyalty is a benefit of corporate citizenship (a concept to be discussed shortly). They found that the more proactive the corporation is relative to CSR, the greater the customer loyalty. The Environics International (1999) millennium poll found, in an open-ended question, that 56% of citizens identify social responsibilities as a major factor influencing their impression of firms. A 2001 GlobalScan monitor notes that 49% of citizens state that CSR related factors are most important when making patronage decisions (includes labour practices, business ethics, environmental impacts and responsibility to broader society). The Environics International poll reports that a corporation's reputation is at risk (leading to lower customer loyalty) when customers have negative

27

perceptions about the firm's CSR performance. Half of the global citizens in this poll talked with significant others (word of mouth) about corporations' social and environmental behaviour. Two thirds of *citizens* (66%) want companies to contribute to broader societal goals. Almost three quarters (71%) take corporate citizenship into consideration when making purchase decisions. de Man (2007) reports that 80% of citizens expect companies to be held at least partially responsible for all 14 of the social, environmental and economic actions tested for in the GlobalScan annual CSR monitor. She also notes that there is a widening gap between what the public expects from a company vis-à-vis CSR and their perceptions of how well companies are faring, with the perception becoming more and more negative as time goes by. All of these findings imply that a corporation's CSR image will directly impact customer loyalty.

Interestingly, Walsh et al. (2008) found that the social and environmental responsibility of a corporation is not significantly related to customer loyalty. They explain away this incongruent result by claiming that "social responsibility is not a company generated phenomenon, as companies simply try to do what society, i.e., consumers, think is good at a given point in time" (p.3). Their finding seems counter-intuitive given the compelling results from recent surveys about consumers' loyalty and

CSR. Consider that a recent GlobaScan/HP Canada survey (Hewlett-Packard 2006) found that 92% of Canadians said the more socially and environmentally responsible companies are, the more likely they are to do business with them (inferring loyalty to a company). Consider as well GlobalScan's (2005) discovery that 70% of consumers hold companies responsible for CSR related activities and that failure to fulfil them seriously damages a company's reputation. Also, half of consumers hold companies fully responsible for citizenship responsibilities, including solving social problems, reducing the divide between haves and have nots and tackling human rights abuses. Moreover, GlobalScan found that companies taking on citizenship responsibilities can differentiate themselves thereby boosting their reputation and contributing to loyalty (as suggested by Dick & Basu 1994).

Lichtenstein, Drumwright and Braig (2004) offer a plausible explanation for Walsh et al.'s (2008) unexpected negative correlation between CSR and customer loyalty, claiming that something else may be going on that the original operationalization of the variable did not capture. In this case, Walsh et al. operationalize the CSR variable as "supports good causes" and "is an environmentally responsible company." Maignan, Ferrell and Hult (1999) characterize this as a narrow focus of corporate citizenship, calling instead

for a more holistic conceptualization. Perhaps this narrow definition of CSR as social and environmental responsibility lead to the unexpected negative correlation with customer loyalty. This line of thinking, that the construct of corporate citizenship is complicated and intricate, is continued in the next section.

Corporate Citizenship

In more detail, Maignan, Ferrell and Hult (1999) contrast the concept of *corporate citizenship* with *corporate social performance*, which in itself is a construct amalgamating three related constructs: corporate social responsibility, corporate social responsiveness and corporate social responses. They then define corporate citizenship as "the extent to which businesses meet the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary [societal betterment] responsibilities placed on them by their various stakeholders" (p.457). This definition is holistic in that it integrates a particular response characterized by (a) four types of responsibilities and (b) the notion of proactive responsiveness (instead of reactive, defensive or accommodative). A proactive firm is aware of, anticipates and meets its stakeholders' demands, with primary stakeholders comprising customers, investors, suppliers, employees and government agencies and secondary stakeholders comprising the media and special interests groups (not directly engaged in transactions with the firm). Proactive firms anticipate future

responsibilities and act beyond minimal requirements. The Environics International (1999) poll found that the majority of citizens want companies to go beyond the minimum definition of their role in society and strive for building a better society at high ethical standards.

Locke (2002) explores the construct of corporate citizenship, concluding that there are four variations differing on the role of management, the focus on profit versus social betterment and the limits of corporations' responsibilities. He suggests that when corporate decisions are understood to affect those beyond the company (especially beyond shareholders and stakeholders like suppliers, customers, creditors and employees), the actual governance structure of the corporation has to change to better ensure *corporate democracy* (evident when stakeholders have explicit roles in corporate decision making, Thompson 2005). Locke refers to this change in corporate structure as *social activist citizenship* (relative to minimalist, philanthropic and encompassing modes of corporate citizenship). For the three latter forms of corporate citizenship, firms can maintain their existing structures and just do extra activities: agree to voluntary monitoring of sourcing policies, scrutiny and transparency to ensure a balance among the triple bottom-line issues of business/profit, environmental, and social

29

responsibility.

In the case of minimalist, philanthropic and encompassing corporate citizenship, it is the directors of the companies who continue to make the decisions. When social activist corporate citizenship comes into play, the actual corporate governance structure has to change so it directly includes overt and observable stakeholder involvement (Locke 2002). Engaging civil society actors in dialogue, deliberations or direct negotiations are examples of corporate democracy, of citizenly activity. These and other activities enhance the role of stakeholders by stimulating stakeholder activism, trimming the power of CEOs and raising the profile of non-executive directors (Thompson 2005). Making changes to the actual corporate structure to accommodate corporate democracy is not easy for firms. In fact, Thompson posits that firms are turning to CSR as a substitute process for corporate democracy because it is less threatening than reforming the entire governance structure.

This paper suggests that if firms want to avoid changing their entire governance structure, they could opt to reframe their customers' predispositions for loyalty, doing so within the context of global citizenry. After all, if corporations are reframing themselves as global citizens (Thompson 2005), it makes sense that they re-conceive one of their major stakeholders, customers,

as global citizens, especially since customer loyalty is becoming deeply associated with CSR. If we accept that customer loyalty is a relationship that needs to be monitored and nurtured (Dick & Basu 1994), it is reasonable to suggest both parties in this relationship be perceived as citizens - consumer citizens and corporate citizens.

From Customer Loyalty to Consumer-Citizen Loyalty

The label customer comes with certain connotations. The Greek root for customer is *custom* or habitual practice (one who patronizes an establishment regularly). The common business interpretation of the word customer is someone who purchases and uses a good or service (with custom first attributed to buyer in 1409). Other labels for customer are buyers, clients, patrons, users and consumers. The word custom also stems from the translation of the Greek word *sunetheia*, in the sense of common usage, common practice, being used to doing something. (Harper 2001). This paper suggests that corporate citizens consider *getting used* to viewing customers as consumer-citizens. While customers or consumers tend to be self-interested, isolated and inward-looking, citizens tend to be politically interested, informed and outward looking (Scammell 2000). Also, while the use of market metaphors (e.g., customers) weakens civic engagement obligations of citizens and officials,

30

accountability in a relationship is strengthened when people are defined in terms of citizenship instead of consumers (Brewer 2007).

If two in three *citizens* (66%) want companies to contribute to broader societal goals (Environics International 1999), it is time for companies to begin to see people as citizens instead of just customers, especially if this shift in perspective can benefit corporations' triple bottom line (profit, societal and environmental obligations). Instead of trying to *reduce* citizens to consumers or customers, firms could work instead to affirm that corporations' citizenship behaviour is a reason for them to be loyal patrons of their establishments. Scammell (2000) says quite plainly that, whether through enlightened self-interest, pure opportunism or fear of public shaming, commercial success is increasingly linked to the treatment of consumers as concerned citizens. Forward thinkers in the field of consumer behaviour actually define the citizen as "a *responsible consumer*, a socially-aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure to communal well-being" (Gabriel & Lang 1995 pp. 175-176).

To manage this new consumer-citizen loyalty relationship, corporations would not have to deal with all consumers, just the opinion leaders. GlobalScan (2001) reports that 13 to 15 percent of any population influences the opinions of their fellow citizens (meaning the remaining 85% are followers). These opinion leaders are far more prone to engage in issues related to CSR and to expect more from companies than minimal, fiscal performance (Environics International 1999). In particular, these social activists consumers expect companies to exercise citizenship by playing a socially minded leadership role to improve conditions for everyone (GlobalScan 2001) - to be good social activist corporate citizens (see Locke 2002). Corporations have to be ready for more moral and ethical consumption. People continue to be more inclined to use social, environmental, human and labour issues as key choice criteria, replacing the current strong focus on price, quality and durability. Consumers are poised to be supportive of a public-private partnership approach to solving global problems - as global citizens (GlobalScan 2002). "In coming years, companies will be under greater pressure to deliver on their broader social responsibilities" (GlobalScan 2001 p.2). This shift will entail new notions of citizenship.

New Notions of Citizenship and Consumer-Citizen Loyalty

Schattle (2005) reports that social activist citizens who self-identify as *global citizens* use "the

31

term to communicate a sense of loyalty to humanity at large" (p. 121). These same people explain that their sense of being globally connected originated in their local context and then expanded to cut across domestic/national politics into the international arena. He explains that global citizenship involves thriving within (and ensuring the continuance of) local public space while creating and building a global public space. He found that social activists equate the term global citizenship with civic republican notions embracing awareness, responsibility and participation in politics and society. This perspective is in opposition to libertarian discourse (free market ideology) that views global citizenship as code for competition and technological competence so as to compete in the global marketplace. At the global level, there is a softening of public support for the free market economy accompanied with a growing support for government regulation (although support for libertarianism is still high, with the majority of people thinking it is the best system on which to base the future of the world). At the same time, the majority of people do not believe the world is going in the right direction; do not like the way society is progressing (GlobalScan 2008). This growing pessimism explains the global citizenship movement from the bottom up (Schattle). The past few years have witnessed the simultaneous development of the anti-globalization movement, of shareholder activism, and of corporate governance reform (Maignan & Ferrell 2004), mainly because of new notions of global citizenship.

Indeed, Frey (2003) maintains that the concepts of citizen and citizenship have to become more flexible for a global society. In the traditional sense, citizens, whether consumers or corporations, hold rights in speech, participation and decision making in the public sphere (Thompson 2005). In the spirit of conceptual flexibility, there is also room in the private marketplace sphere for the idea of consumer-citizen loyalty to corporate citizens. Hayden (2004) agrees that citizenship (especially global citizenship) needs to reflect concrete social relationships that make up interaction and communication as opposed to just participation in the public sphere. He argues that citizenry can emerge through creative processes of world building and the nurturing of social imaginary, motivated by solidarity, in particular,"alternative solidarities" (p.3).

The notion of consumer-citizen loyalty (instead of customer loyalty) is reflective of an alternative solidarity - a relationship between consumer and corporate global citizens. GlobalScan (2008) asked people their opinion about how their respect for a company would change if that company partnered with an NGO, a national government or/or the United Nations.

32

On average, 80% said their respect would increase (the corporations' reputations would be enhanced) because companies could be trusted more if they aligned with a trusted sector of society, more so if these were multi-sector partnerships. This inclination to trust a firm more if it partners with a trustworthy societal sector comes at a time when trust in social institutions is at an all time low, declining in all sectors, especially TNCs (GlobalScan). Would the company's reputation be enhanced if the corporation partnered with consumer-citizens in a loyalty relationship? This paper posits that the answer is yes.

What would this new loyalty relationship look like? Taking direction from Thompson (2005), firms could augment the concepts of stakeholder representation and interest with the notions of *championing and stewardship,* as they reframe customer loyalty. Corporations would then assume that consumer-citizens are working in concert with them for issues of social and environmental responsibility, as well as a sustainable bottom line. Champions and stewards take on the character of *acts-citizenship,* a matter of acting in a way that invokes a civic virtue (Thompson). Basically, this paper proposes that people will more likely be loyal to a firm if that firm respects their voice as a fellow global citizen. More than being just paying customers displaying ongoing patronage, consumer-citizens would be partners in the betterment of society. Lichtenstein et al. (2004 p.17) submit that "when a corporation behaves in a manner that is perceived as socially responsible, consumers are likely to infer that it has certain desirable traits that resonate with their sense of self. As a result, consumers are more prone to identify with the corporation; in so doing, they behave in a manner that supports the corporation's goals," thereby enhancing loyalty and enriching the loyalty relationship manifested in continued patronage of the firm. The customer loyalty relationship identified by Dick and Basu (1994) would transform to a consumer-citizen loyalty relationship managed by the corporate citizen to the benefit of the firm and for social and ecological betterment.

Corporate Citizenship, Reputation and Consumer-citizen Loyalty

A company's reputation (and reputation capital) will improve if a multi-faceted approach to CSR is adopted, combining operational performance with citizenship commitments (GlobalScan 2008). This multi-faceted approach could include the new concept of consumer-citizen loyalty. This conceptualization represents more than semantics. Taking steps to ensure that consumer-citizens remain loyal to a firm (instead of customers remaining loyal) means corporations would focus on monitoring their CSR practices with the sole intent of retaining the loyalty and patronage of other like-minded

citizens. They would relate to consumers as one global citizen to another, in solidarity for the betterment of society (while respecting obligations to primary stakeholders, see Maignan, Ferrell & Hult 1999). This globally beneficial partnership could lead to a less adversarial relationship and make corporations less inclined to avoid stakeholders (Kolk & Pinkse 2006). Because nearly all stakeholders in North America and Europe (94%) agree that corporations should assume CSR monitoring responsibilities (GlobalSpan 2008), it is not prudent to avoid these stakeholders.

Customer loyalty refers to the behaviour of repeat customers who are patrons of a firm. Consumer-citizen loyalty could refer to their behaviour of repeat patronage of a firm, *loyal patrons* because of the latter's CSR performance and their role as corporate citizens. Firms do have a triple bottom line to worry about - profitability and performance, as well as both social and environmental issues (Thompson 2005). This obligation does not disappear if firms decide to nurture consumer-citizen loyalty relationships. What will change is the assumptions they bring to this relationship. Rather than trying to retain *customers*, they will be sustaining fellowship with like-minded global consumer-citizens along the mutual journey for social betterment, more plausible if the firm is profitable while maintaining *citizenry-reputation*

capital. A consumer-citizen loyalty relationship would mean that a firm's corporate identity (its sustaining character and underlying assumptions and value systems) would have to change and likely its corporate image (perceptions of the firm).

Strategic Advantages of CSR and Consumer-citizen Loyalty

CSR has strategic importance for many companies, especially those taking direct and visible steps to communicate their CSR initiatives to consumers (at this point in time only 2.5% of firms, Thompson 2005). Research shows that keeping consumers satisfied will keep them loyal, and that keeping them informed of CSR initiatives enhances satisfaction. Also, if firms can accommodate customers' social norms, it is in a better position to win the social contract, allegiances and customer support for the firm (Luo & Bhattacharya 2006). However, even though CSR initiatives can represent a robust public relations strategy and increase customer loyalty (Lockwood 2004; Luo & Bhattacharya; Pirsch, Gupta & Grau 2007), the loyalty relationship must encompass more than after-the-fact reporting of CSR successes or initiatives undertaken by the firm. To remain loyal, consumer-citizens need to know their voices count and that they have a role to play in the corporation's decision processes vis-à-vis activities that better society. A well-managed, transparent relationship serves to enhance this

34

loyalty and patronage.

This loyalty is even more pressing in light of Environics International (1999) finding that, while consumers are holding corporations more responsible, the same consumers are very skeptical that corporations can assume this role, rating non-government organizations and governments four times more likely to meet their accountability standard. This lack of confidence in the firm can lead to loss of loyalty, but can be mitigated with enhanced relational integrity. To that end, firms concerned with CSR obligations can deliberately choose to engage with stakeholders out of a sense of moral duty to ensure that their activities contribute positively to well-being of various actors (Barraclough & Morrow 2008; Kolk & Pinkse 2006), especially customers, and now consumer-citizens.

Conclusion

Integrating three notions of citizenship informs the development of the construct of consumer-citizen loyalty (see Figure 1): global citizens, consumer citizens and corporate citizens. Furthermore, just as customer loyalty entails voluntary patronage of a firm, CSR involves voluntary contributions by a firm to a better society and cleaner environment (Weber 2008). This inclination to volunteer both patronage and societal contributions may mean it makes sense to ask corporations to *voluntarily* embrace the idea of consumer-citizen loyalty relationships to better ensure success with the environmental and social aspects of their enterprise.

Making sense of CSR processes within corporations is a new trend that could inform the future development and uptake of this theoretical concept. CSR processes pertain to how managers think, discuss and act with respect to key stakeholders and the world at large (Basu & Palazzo 2008). For instance, Thompson (2005) asserts that hard definitions of citizenship require status recognition to be a legitimate actor in a political community. From a more flexible stance, this paper does not advocate that firms confer citizenship status on customers; rather, it proposes that firms change their CSR processes so that they perceive customers differently, shifting to the notion of consumer-citizens. This way, both the corporate citizen and the consumer-citizen enter into a more even relationship that could affect loyalty to a firm (while benefitting society and the environment).

This paper proposes that corporate citizenship vis-à-vis CSR can be informed by the notion of a *consumer-citizen loyalty relationship* leading to the improvement of the triple bottom line. Everyone could win in this alternative form of global solidarity - the firm, all members of society and the ecosystem - with corporations taking the lead as global citizens. Both consumer-citizens and corporate citizens could become *loyal*

patrons of each other, society and the environment, thereby all becoming global citizens with a sense of loyalty to humanity at large.

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Figure 1

Integration of three types of citizens to develop the consumer-citizen loyalty construct

Global Citizen
Sense of loyalty to humanity at large

Consumer Citizen
Socially aware, morally defensible consumption decisions; balanced loyalty to self and others

Consumer-citizen Loyalty

Corporate Citizen
Loyal to primary and secondary stakeholders
and society at large