

New study says it's time to stop assuming buyers and salespeople are in 'relationships'

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Professional buyers don't really buy that they're in "relationships" with salespeople—at least not the kind of relationship that people share with family, friends, or a romantic partner, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Scholars explore how companies can inspire customers to love their brands and emotionally bond in their business relationships," write authors Christopher Blocker (Baylor University), Mark Houston (Texas Christian University), and Dan Flint (University of Tennessee). "Are buyers' experiences with suppliers best conceived using a metaphor sourced from theory that explains family, friend, and romantic relationships?"

Modern marketing strategies tend to rely on "relationship marketing," which assumes that sellers can develop bonds with [buyers](#). This school of thought often draws upon theories from sociology and social psychology that explain close personal ties, like marriage, friendship, and parent-child relationships.

"But in these theories of human relationships, an authentic relationship is an end unto itself, love is voluntary and given freely, whether or not it is returned," the authors write. "Are there limits to whether an authentic relationship can be used to explain business transactions where the buyer and seller are both employees of their respective firms, with profit-and-loss responsibilities and motives?"

The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 38 business buyers and found that their "relationships" with suppliers differed in important ways from personal relationships. "Buyers speak in-depth about going through the normal 'script' of trying to behave as if seller interactions are 'real' relationships, and sustaining this activity as a 'polite fiction' to help them accomplish personal and corporate goals," the authors explain.

The authors found that buyers prefer to connect (and disconnect) with suppliers as needs arise and hold low expectations for future interactions with salespeople outside of their business dealings. "This study suggests that [business](#) buyers are not actually seeking authentic relationships, and sellers' efforts to develop them may even create negative tension for buyers."

More information: Christopher Blocker, Mark Houston, and Dan Flint. "Real Relationships between Business Buyers and Salespeople: Reality or Polite Fiction?" *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online June 28, 2011). ejcr.org

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