

Why would a struggling community shun corporate gifts? A study of Hurricane Katrina and Mardi Gras

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Gifts and support from people of different social positions strengthen communities, especially in hard times, according to a new study of post-Katrina New Orleans in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. But gifts from corporations are not always welcome.

"This study looks at intracommunity gifting, [gifts](#) given from members of a community group to other community members in another [social position](#), to try to understand how these gifts celebrate ties between people within a community, especially one that has experienced challenges," write authors Michelle F. Weinberger (Northwestern University) and Melanie Wallendorf (University of Arizona, Tucson). "Further, the paper tries to point out why corporate sponsorships of local events are sometimes not welcomed."

The authors conducted an [ethnographic research](#) project in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the first community celebration of Mardi Gras (carnival) following [Hurricane Katrina](#). They looked past the debauchery and commercialism of the tourist-oriented Mardi Gras to the local experience. For locals, Mardi Gras involves families setting up lawn chairs along parade routes where they share food and conversation and catch gifts tossed from floats. Mardi Gras has traditionally been bankrolled by wealthy individuals and Krewes (teams of people who fund parades and balls).

Six months after the devastating hurricane flooded 80 percent of the city, some wondered whether New Orleans would be able to continue its Mardi Gras tradition, which had included a longtime ban on commercial funds and logos in parades. The city sought corporate sponsors for that celebration, which brought up mixed feelings among residents.

"A corporation's gift through sponsorship threatens to erode the status, cultural capital, and cultural authority that elites get through their gifting and the feelings of cohesiveness for other community members," the authors explain. "Corporations seeking to provide sponsorship of events that have historically been provided by groups within the community may be negatively regarded for usurping the community's ability to help its own."

More information: Michelle F. Weinberger and Melanie Wallendorf. "Intracommunity Gifting at the Intersection of Contemporary Moral and Market Economies." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2012 (published online September 17, 2011).

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