

## Chapter 2

# An Action–Based Approach to Retail Brand Engagement

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Academics have embraced “engagement” and produced thousands of articles related to the topic. Despite the attention though, the literature remains confusing as to exactly what “engagement” is and what “engagement” is not. A brief history of evolution of academic perspectives on engagement, including both conceptual and empirical works, is provided to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of this topic. This chapter attempts to shed some light on delineating engagement through illustrations drawn from retailer activities that represent attempts to engage consumers. Specifically, the chapter focuses on Walmart’s and Amazon’s engagement tactics. The activities are classified using a theoretical taxonomy. In the end, the chapter intends to aid future engagement in engagement research.*

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGEMENT**

Firms attempt to engage customers in many ways. Red Bull invites engagement by presenting original video content online. More than 7.5 million consumers subscribe to the Red Bull Youtube channel, which has been viewed 2 billion times in total (Youtube, 2018). Not all engagement marketing tactics find such success and sometimes, they can even backfire. McDonalds created #McDstories as part of a campaign promoting the company’s use of local farm products only to have #McDstories taken over by consumers Tweeting food horror stories, often involving McDonalds’ food (Lubin, 2012). Firms invest in customer engagement tactics in pursuit of a more loyal and passionate customer base (Ross et al., 2017).

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Each point of engagement represents a touchpoint for the brand and subsequently creates the potential for value creation. Indeed, the most critical points of engagement occur when consumers become customers by interacting with retailers at the point of sale. Post-sale, today's satisfied (and dissatisfied) customers have more ways than ever to spread positive (negative) WOM (mouth and mouse) and encourage others to get engaged as well. Contrary to popular belief, engagement is not always positive. Customers, or even non-customer consumers, negatively engage with brands by proliferating negative word of mouth and sometimes even creating fictitious, negative online reviews. Thus, negative engagement occurs either when consumers perceive something to have gone wrong in the firm's marketing mix or service delivery for which consumers hold the brand accountable or when people intentionally spread negative brand information, with little regard to its truth, out of pure animus or as part of a fraudulent pay for review scheme. Negative engagement may not just result in a loss of potential customers, but also a loss in confidence by investors. As one recent study found, publically announced engagement initiatives, on average, decreased the market value (stock price) of firms (Beckers et al., 2018).

The marketing literature clearly has embraced the engagement concept. As evidence, the exact term "customer engagement" generates 15,000 post-2014 hits on Google Scholar. Despite all the evidence of academics' engagement with the engagement concept, the recent literature continues to include conceptual articles trying to define engagement and related concepts (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Thus, although the literature is replete with use of "consumer engagement" and "customer engagement," researchers do not show clear consensus on just what "customer engagement" or "consumer engagement" means. Across the growing base of engagement literature, the question of what engagement is NOT is often overlooked. Is customer engagement distinct from customer involvement, interest, attitude, attention, affect, volition, and/or actual customer behavior? Engagement is, if it is unique in some sense, perhaps more defined by actions, such as patronage and word of mouth, and not by muted attitudes or volitions. Indeed, the most recent literature on customer engagement places particular emphasis on the behavioral aspect, even going so far as to define engagement as customer engagement behavior (CEB) which can be manifested in four distinct ways (Roy et al., 2018). These behaviors are suggested to result from consumers' cognitive and affective states; consumers' perceived fairness and trust of the firm, for example, lead to customers experiencing greater value and manifesting more engagement behaviors (Roy et al., 2018). Understanding the relationship and the distinction between consumers' cognitive and affective states and their behaviors is therefore, not only important, but also necessary for firms looking to utilize engagement tactics to produce greater value. In other words, if a consumer has a positive attitude but never becomes either a customer or advocate, can positive value result for either the consumer or the firm? Consequently, the theory on customer engagement must address not only what engagement is, but what engagement is not.

## **ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT**

There are many differing perspectives in the academic literature on what engagement is and how it should be measured. Some researchers argue that engagement is purely psychological, others argue that is behavioral, and most maintain that it is some combination of both. One of the earliest perspectives is that of Sprott et al. (2009), who developed and validated a scale proposed to measure engagement as a kind of self-brand connection or identification. Later, Brodie et al. (2011) would draw on relationship

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