1. John F. Sherry, Jr. (1984), SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CONSUMER ORAL TRADITION FOR REACTIVE MARKETING, in Advances in Consumer Research Volume 11, eds. Thomas C. Kinnear, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 741-747.

Advances in Consumer Research Volume 11, 1984 Pages 741-747

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CONSUMER ORAL TRADITION FOR REACTIVE MARKETING

John F. Sherry, Jr., University of Florida

ABSTRACT -

This paper discusses some results obtained in an exploratory study of the oral tradition of consumers. A corpus or materia' from a variety of folklore genres which threatens or enhances the reputation of, or which involves the unintended use of products, services and channel members, is surveyed. Suggestions for effective marketing responses to consumer oral tradition are offered in conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Recently we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the exegesis of expressive verbal materials elicited from consumers through qualitative marketing research (Levy 1981). The projective dimension of personal experience narratives permits the analyst to explore the interaction of personality with culture from symbolic, structural and functional perspectives. Through such analysis, the relationship of products or services to the life of the consumer can be illustrated. Stories told by consumers shape and reflect not only social structure, but also ideologies underlying consumption.

Anthropological interpretation has been likened to constructing a rending of what happens during social interaction (Geertz 1973). Sensitive interpretation of oral tradition may permit marketers to react appropriately to the consumer concerns embodied in negative- and positive- word-of-mouth transmissions. Such interpreted-on should also permit scholars to probe the ideas that Zaltman (1983) has described as "hidden", "neglected" and "interesting" in their effort to understand the deep structure of consumption.

Any attempt to understand the ecology of consumption must include an analysis of the perceptual underpinning of the consumer's world. The concepts of "world view" and "ethos" are convenient vehicles for such an exploration. World view devotes she cognitive, existential aspects of culture from which the consumer constructs concepts of nature, self and society; it contains comprehensive ideas of order. Ethos denotes the moral, aesthetic and evaluative dimensions of culture which determine the tone, character and quality of social life; it is the underlying attitude that life reflects. There appears to be an empirically coercive tendency for a group to synthesize world view and ethos at some level (Geertz 1973). Market researchers conducting focus groups routinely unearth personal narratives illustrative of this tendency. Symbols mediate this synthesis.

The synthesis achieved by consumers merits considerable attention. Whereas "folk ideas" (i.e., basic premises, cultural axioms, existential postulates) constitute the building blocks of worldview, "folk values" (i.e., normative or evaluative postulates) are the basis of ethos. Being a descriptive construct, folk ideas are morally neutral, but they are typically associated with folk values. Further, these folk ideas may be mutually irreconcilable within a harmonious world view matrix (Dundes 1971). Thus, as American consumers, our image of unlimited good, when combined with our unshakable conviction that science can ultimately resolve all problems and a knowledge that salvation is attained through suffering (Dundes 1971) can produce dysfunctional cultural consequences in terms of over-consumption (Bodley 1976), which most of us are able blithely to ignore. Similarly, positioning strategies for pharmaceuticals, disinfectants, mouthwashes, exercise equipment and even vegetables can play off of our notion that efficacy or potency is a function of bad taste, smell, or texture.

Despite the paucity of research on the impact of objects on patterns of thought and emotion (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halten 1981), Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue persuasively that goods are used to create intelligibility. As a nonverbal medium for the human "creative faculty", commodities make the categories of culture stable and visible. Products and services are "good to think with" in precisely the way that totemic figures are employed in tribal society (Levi-Strauss 1962). Taussig (1980) provides an intriguing interpretation of the way in which commodity fetishism has shaped our American world view and ethos. This symbolic, expressive dimension of commodities is perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the anecdotes shared by consumers about experiences related to the use of products, services and channels. Folklore is a rich repository of insight into consumer behavior, insofar as it embodies one of the primary perspectives by which individuals construe the world: the common-sensical (Geertz 1973). Consequently an analysis of the various genres of consumer oral tradition can be expected to yield a pattern of folk ideas and values present in the culture.

SELECTION OF METHODS, INFORMANTS, AND CORPUS

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a mixed methodological strategy was employed. Participant observation in a variety of consumption settings was combined with directive and nondirective interviews. Wherever its use was deemed relatively unobtrusive, ar induced natural context approach (Goldstein 1964) was employed. Printed sources were culled as well for items which enjoyed oral circulation. An attempt was made to collect material primarily from informants who were active bearers of oral tradition (a traditor in von Sydow's (1948) sense). While undergraduate students were most heavily sampled, consumers from a variety of age, occupational, income end ethnic groups were also interviewed. The use of literary sources further diversified the constellation of informants. Finally, the attempt to elicit data from corporate informants met with mixed results. Clearly there are severe limitations to the kinds of generalizations that can be drawn from this procedure, and conclusions offered are tentative. The value of such exploratory research lies in the enfranchisement of speculation, and in the direction afforded for further research.

The nature of the corpus of oral tradition upon which the balance of this paper turns requires some explanation. Consumption data is contained in all of the genres of oral tradition described by Abrahams (1569). Forms may be as simple as an acronym (FIAT=Fix it again, Tony), a

proverb ("The whiter the bread, the quicker you're dead"), or a culinary folkway ("Avoid eating oysters in months containing the letter 'r'"). They may be as complicated as the brand-name inspired narratives involving bottled beer or cigarettes, which are frequently animated by plots employing puns and double ententre (Dundes and Pagter 1975). They may involve riddling, singing, or elaborate nonverbal communication. They may be entirely conversational in nature, as in the personal narratives reported by Levy (1981).

The anecdotes considered in this article serve either to threaten or enhance the reputation of products, services and channel members, or to illustrate novel or unintended uses c' same. The genres of "rumor" and "contemporary urban legend" are perhaps the most amenable vehicles to such an exposition. Rumor will be considered as information neither substantiated nor refuted (Rosnow and Fine 1976). Contemporary urban legend, a complex inchoate construct to which numerous interpretations have been ascribed (Brunvand 1981; Dorson 1973) is more akin to gossip, in that the narrative ray or may not have a known basis in fact. It is a realistic story treating recent alleged events, and usually involves an ironic twist (Brunvand 1981). While the precision of the adjectives "contemporary" and "urban" as applied to the corpus Of legendary material currently circulating is open to question (Ellis 1983), the vitality of legends in the oral tradition of American consumers is indisputable. Our fascination with rumor and legend has led among other things, to the devising of legal sanctions prohibiting rumor-mongering in certain spheres (e.g., verbal attacks against the Federal Savings and Loan Corporation), and to the enshrining of rumor-mongering as a credible source of information (e.g., the "Heard on the Street" column of the Wall Street Journal). The dialectics of the legend (Degh and Vazsonyi 1974) are such that consumers facilitating its transmission must resolve an exegetical dilemma: Can this be true?

ILLUSTRATIVE ANECDOTES

Before exploring some of the major themes in the oral tradition of contemporary consumers, several anecdotes can he used to orient the reader to the kinds of material in the larger corpus. Variants of these anecdotes will be familiar to the reader:

> I remember hearing a couple of years ago about Mcdonald's supposedly putting worm meat in their hamburgers. It was supposed to be cheaper than real meat, but in reality worm meat is probably much more expensive...and higher in protein. So, it wouldn't have benefitted them to have put that in. Burger King may have started that. Also about McDonald's...they were supposedly giving a percentage of their profits to devil worshippers, or whatever. That's who they'd become so successful.
>
> There was a rumor going around...that there was a Kentucky Fried Chicken. And there was construction going on next door to this Kentucky Fried Chicken. Somehow...someone ended up frying a rat...and serving it to a customer. I remember Kentucky Fried Chicken had a law suit against them.. To this day, I hesitate to go to Kentucky Fried Chicken.
>
> I remember hearing about a guy out West . . . a blue collar worker, He got a coffee break and went out to the Coke machine to get a bottle of Coke. He got halfway through it when he realized there was a decomposing rat in it. . . Supposedly he sued Coca Cola for a large amount . . . Supposedly he got real sick . . .

> Procter and Gamble's corporate symbol which appears on everyone of their products . . it's like a half moon with the face of an old man, and thirteen stars. Supposedly...the reason that Procter and Gamble is so successful is that they're in with devil worshippers and all that. If you went ahead and connected the thirteen stars in a certain way, it would come out to 666 -- that's a symbol of the devil. The half moon looks like the devil...
>
> This . . . candy, called Space Dust, or Pop Rocks it was called, also. It was candy you put in your mouth and it starts crackling. The rumor was about that kid Mikey, on the commercial of Life cereal...He had put some of the candy in his mouth and had a lot of Coke - Coca Cola - and that he died from that.

Even a cursory content analysis of just these few anecdotes reveals more about the world view and ethos of our consumer society than the theme of caveat emptor which links the stories.

SOME THEMES IN THE FOLKLORE OF CONSUMPTION

Credible Inedibles: Pollution and the Consequences of Contamination

Perhaps the greatest number of anecdotes in circulation among contemporary consumers concerns the ingestion of contaminated foodstuff by unwitting victims. The prevalence and frequency of these stories are not surprising, given their relevance to the fundamental processes of psychosexual development. Folklorists such as Fine (]980) have demonstrated the cultural and temporal latitude of the stories, and Domowitz (1979) suggests that the theme be considered a legend type. Eating is a root metaphor or conceptual archetype which profoundly affects our other consumption patterns. Our understanding of cultural traits, social institutions, national histories and individual attitudes is incomplete without a concomitant understanding of how these mesh with various modes of eating (Farb and Armelagos 1900). The threat of oral incorporation is addressed and resolved in consumer oral tradition.

The types and sources of foodstuffs susceptible to pollution, the nature of the contaminants themselves, and the imputation of motives to polluters is each intrinsically interesting. Schrank (1977) has proposed the concept of "eater's alienation" to explain our attitudes toward foods from whose production and preparation we have become separated. Food which is processed and mass-prepared anonymously by corporate chains is susceptible to imputations of pollution. Restaurants owning the largest shares of the market are especially vulnerable. However, there may be a tendency for consumers to invoke the Board of Health when an "unpopular" (read "foreign" or "outsider-operated") local restaurant goes belly-up. The phenomenal rise of fast food restaurants has been attributed to accessibility, quick service, convenience, reliability, neophobia, relative cost, and a shift in secular ritual behavior (Farb and Armelajos 1980). Misgivings arising from the change in traditional dietary patterns are enshrined in the contamination stories.

Foods most emblematic of this change are logical targets of oral criticism. Hamburgers, hotdogs and chicken are transmogrified in a variety of unpalatable, if credible, ways. (Perhaps the elements of democratic decision making and communal sharing account for the absence in the present corpus of one item which above all others would seem to have great potential for harboring adulterants: pizza.) Beverages with a particularly novel or hedonic dimension appear to invite imputations of pollution. Stories concerning the contaminating, corrosive and synergistic

effects of Coca Cola comprise a corpus so large as to have been designated "cokelore" by some scholars (Fine 1979). Victims in such stories are typically awarded large sums of money as a result of las suits or in the form of "hush money". Dr. Pepper is rumored to be composed primarily of prunes. In the attempt to interpret the significance of bottle shapes and colors, consumers have hypothesized that particular beers - especially those to which are ascribed relatively mild hangover effects - contain- such ingredients as formaldehyde or excessive carbonation. Predictably, chocolate milk is believed by some consumers to have higher levels of legally acceptable contaminants than its traditional counterpart. By extension, milkshakes are seen as sources of threat. Finally, foods that can be described as luxury items, toward which consumers might feel some ambivalence, or which might embody issues of social control (e.g., gatekeeping) may serve as vehicles for anecdotes. Dessert or candy products assume dangerous potential in many stories. Space Dust, Pop Rocks, and Bubble Yum become threats to young children (who not so incidentally delight in the telling of the stories). Leading candy manufacturers are vulnerable to rumors: Brach's by virtue of the production process, Hershey by virtue of proximity to Three Mile Island.

A surface reading of the contamination stories suggests merely that "things are not what they seem." Brunvand (1981) maintains that these anecdotes serve to reveal a world of "shocking ugliness lying just beneath a surface of tranquility and apparent wholesomeness." We can extend this interpretation along a number of dimensions. First, the issue of contamination itself must be addressed. These anecdotes frequently engender both disgust and incredulous merriment in those who hear them. This combination of revilement and humor is diagnostic of social stress, and is motivated by a clash of norms (Freud 1960, Jacobs 1960). Following Douglas (1968), we can view these anecdotes collectively as an "anti-rite" which devalues accepted norms and subverts order. Such stories exert a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas. They suggest that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary. The credible inedibles of the contamination stories are, in Douglas, (1968) sense, abominations: contradictions of basic categories of experience, hence threats to rational and social order. For example, the attribute "carbonation" so firmly, associated with the category "beverage" contradicts experience when transferred to the category "food", making a product such as Pop Rocks inherently dangerous (conceptually) - especially when consumed with a soft drink! Contaminants - quintessential "dirt" - can be conceived of as matter out of place, and are essentially boundary transgressors. Contact with such contaminants is considered degrading or polluting (Douglas 1966). The listener's disgust is a prophylactic response to the threat of oral incorporation (Angyal 1941). On a deeper level, our response to the threat of pollution is c reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction (Douglas 1966).

Whether rodents, insects or worms, saliva, hair or appendages, glass, Band-Aids or hallucinogens, or frozen, spoiled, substituted or recycled ingredients, the contaminants highlight the consumer's synthesis of world view and ethos. The shift in traditional preparation and consumption - use systems for food engenders ambivalence and enfranchises speculation. Perhaps the price we pay for convenience is guilt, tempered by suspicion Fearing s/he is sacrificing quality or evading responsibility by patronizing restaurants specializing in inexpensive, standardized fare, the consumer "knows" above all else that there is no free lunch. It is upon this belief that projections of victimization are predicated. Further, in times of economic duress, when consumers experiment with various food substitutes and extenders, while at the

same time guiltily patronizing restaurants in lieu of spending their money on foodstuffs perceived as more nutritious, is it any wonder that their fears are externalized in speculation that corporations might employ similar budget-or menu-extending strategies? A similar interpretation may attach to "foods" perceived as non-nutritious or nonessential. Despite our perceptions of ourselves as risk-takers end innovators, American consumers tend to debate the merits of new foods in oral tradition. How long will it be before aspartame appears in our folk corpus, especially given its association with Coca-Cola?

Finally our fascination with the back region - the place relative to a given performance where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly and routinely contradicted (Goffman 1959) - of production foci such as restaurants is evident-in the contamination stories. Fine (1980) has suggested that consumers may perceive fast food outlets as "unclean" as contrasted with the home kitchen, a perception which objectively may be false, but which can be rationalized in view of the consumer's ability to control and organize "dirt" in his/her personal space. One lifestyle trend in particular, our increasing reliance upon institutions, may help in interpreting our concern for back region activity. While imputation of unsavory activity to back region behavior is not an overtly comforting proposition, the consumer may be able to wrest a measure of control over culinary concerns through such attributions. Inexpensive, processed meals eaten in antiseptic surroundings may be more palatable insofar as the consumer feels that s/he has personally made the decision to relax vigilance, and to take the meal (or associated risk) with a grain of salt. Anecdotes surrounding contamination appear to serve as cautionary tales, and are selectively heeded by consumers. Corporations have alternately suffered and benefitted from the circulation of these stories. Even when purchase behavior is not affected directly, purchase consideration most definitely is affected. Both active and passive bearers of such oral tradition possess a new, potentially critical, evaluative element.

Mercantile Misanthropy: Ambivalence toward Big Business

Gardner (1982) has described the "corporate image" as the set of attitudes or beliefs about a company that enter into the interpretation or any of the actions or communications undertaken by that company. Noting that consumer dislike for "Big Business" increases during times of recession and unemployment, he attributes several perceptions in particular to "hostile" consumers: corporations lack concern for consumers; corporations are dangerous and require control; corporations are not apt to make social contributions. A large number of rumors and contemporary urban legends embodies just such perceptions, and seems to reveal an underlying ambivalence that consumers 'eel toward corporate activity. Giver that "Big Business" is an inescapable condition of modern life, with tremendous potential for both the gratification and immiseration of the common consumer, oral tradition is a responsive outlet for externalizing fears and re-exerting a measure of control over environmental forces.

Given that most contemporary urban legends are marvelously multi-vocal, and can be content analyzed for overlapping themes, several anecdotes ,n particular highlight this notion of ambivalence. In one story, a female consumer ;s shopping -n a large discount department store (typically K-Mart, but variants such as E. J. Korvette, Ayr-Way, etc. are common) for a particular product (usually a blouse or a woven good such as a rug) which has been manufactured in the Orient, when she is injured by a creature (variously a snake, scorpion other insect) concealed within the product. In some variants, the venom is so potent that the consumer is killed. Elements

of xenophobia, racism and protectionism are present in the story. Below these surface features however, may be the deeper concern that discount chains carry inferior products, and that consumers purchase from these chains at their peril.

Another legend with considerable time depth is that of the shopping mall castration or kidnapping. In the former version, a male child is allowed to use the lavatory facilities of a shopping mall unattended. Depending upon provenience, the child is castrated by several black or Hispanic adolescents as a rite de passage to their admission into a gang. In the latter version, a female child is drugged and nearly abducted by several women who intend to sell her into white slavery. Again, the story clearly reflects racial and ethnic tensions, but these are primarily surface features. The legend has retained its ritual dimension through the centuries, but a shift has occurred to a secure venue: the marketplace. The shift may suggest that consumerism is now the focal issue. An analogy may exist between the emasculation or deprivation of rights to generative power of the individual and the decimation of personalized downtown shops by impersonal, generic shopping malls. At base may be a fundamental fear that i' the consumer is grasped by the proper appendage, his heart and mind may indeed follow.

Our American predilection for interpreting misfortune in terms of conspiracy is evident in a number of the business anecdotes. Perhaps the most widespread conspiracy belief attaches to the domain of fashion, where clothing styles are said to be rigidly controlled by a powerful clique of foreign designers. More ironic is the anecdote that attributes support for gun control legislation to major breweries such as Anheueser Busch and Coors. Morris (1981) contends that anyone unable to find conspiracies evident in daily life is just not paving attention. He has suggested that the suppression of miracle patents be considered as a theme in consumer oral tradition. The one hundred-mile-per-gallon carburetor is treated in a number of fashions: it is mistakenly sold to an unsuspecting consumer, who either returns it for "hush money" or refuses to return the car despite tremendous inducements from Detroit; it is being introduced by the Japanese in increments of ten miles per gallon. Long-lasting light bulbs, permanent batteries, million mile tires, decay-proof dentifrices and a constellation of pharmaceutical panaceas are among the products reputedly withheld from consumers. Local restaurants as well as franchises (such as Red Lobster) substitute shark or skate for more palatable and more expensive scallops and shellfish. Shortfalls in availability of such critically valued products as oil or coffee typically produce rumors alleging that the scarcity is artificial, and has been induced by corporations that have stockpiled precious substances with the intent of escalating prices. Tobacco companies are rumored to lobby effectively against the legalization of marijuana, but to hedge their bets by registering popular names such as Colombian Red and Acapulco Gold against the day of deprohibition, market dominance is assured in either event.

Ambivalence toward business enterprises is reflected in notion.s of "fair play" that consumers adopt in their relationship to corporations. Consumers attempting to exact maximum compensation ,rom companies in any grievance precess will find sanctions for their efforts in oral tradition. Complaint letters detailing dissatisfaction with a product are said to prompt the delivery of an entire case of the product in response. Similarly, the belief that if an ad contains an incorrect (i.e., exceptionally low) price, the merchant must sell the product ,or that price, is widespread (Dickson and Goulden 1983). If the notion of fair play is combined with consumer perceptions of the nature of a "premium", a traditional story may be evaluated in a new light. It is widely believed that is a particular corporation receives enough box tops from a particular

product, that corporation will donate equipment (typically an iron lung or a analysis machine) to a local hospital. Fine (personal communication) is currently investigating this legend. The story assumes ironic - even tragic dimensions when the donation is predicated upon receipt of such items as cellophane cigarette package tear strips, beer cans or candy bar wrappers (Burnam 1980). A black comedic parody of the premium redemption process attributes good results to products which are potentially quite harmful. Consumers may thus attempt to attribute to or inculcate in such informally indicted companies a sense of social responsibility.

Technology as Mixed Blessing: Victimization and Deskilling

The consumer as endangered species is a recurrent motif in the anecdotes treating technology consumption. Jockey shorts cause sterility. Trojan prophylactics either burst under pressure, are discretely lanced by mischievous pharmacists, or can be held directly responsible for the procreation of at least one child in every neighborhood in America (tradition has lawsuits pending in most cases in the latter event). Butane cigarette lighters explode and injure consumers. Microwave ovens have killed pets when used in lieu of conventional hair dryers, and produced carcinoma in consumers, either directly in the form of radiation or indirectly in the form of unnaturally prepared (hence tainted) meals. Video display terminals damage eye sight. Contact lenses fuse to the cornea of the wearer if s/he views sparks 'rom arc welders or downed utility lines. Consumers willingly pay extra for goods which are guaranteed not to have been manufactured on either a Monday or a Friday. (In a related vein, vehicles ranging from automobiles to combines are most frequently and creatively sabotaged when. a supervisor personally walks them through the various stages of production on an assembly line at the request of a Very Important Consumer). Sugar is an active ingredient in toothpaste, and dental floss dislodges fillings. Corrugated paper clips are replaced by smoother versions which dislodge more easily, thus facilitating repurchase (Morris 1985). The quality of razor blades is alternately improved during periods of heavy promotion and lowered prior to the introduction of a new product, again to encourage brand loyalty. The practice of recording the initials of high scorers on selected arcade games is part of a diabolical/governmental hidden agenda. The phone company routinely monitors and records the conversations of consumers for use by government agencies, collection agencies, or Ma Bell herself. Deaths resulting from falling elevators occur frequently, but are not publicized (Dickson and Goulden 1983).

While substantively divergent, the stories of consumer victimization provide us with some common insights. Our acceptance of planned obsolescence may clash with ecological concerns, or our consumer's-eye view of the marketing concept. Our consciences might be salved and our continued patronage absolved in part through participation (vicarious, albeit) in the psychodramatic telling of such tales. Technology is perceived as a mixed blessing insofar as it disrupts familiar consumption-use systems. Role relationships are restructured and redefined as a result of technological "advance". Deskilling is a common result of progress in the technological sphere, and where that result cannot be literally forestalled, it may be figuratively resisted. (Epigrams such as "If my machine wants my job, it'll have to learn to drink first", which may be inscribed on equipment or in plant lavatories throughout the country, attest to this resistance.). Perceptions of corporate impersonality or exploitation may be countered with stories celebrating the activities of trickster figures wreaking their revenge. Implicit in some of the anecdotes is a critique of the work ethic and the contemporary work milieu.

Apostasy and Millenarian Marketing: Sacrilegious Dimensions of Consumption

A revitalization movement (Wallace 1956) is an attempt by a group of people to construct a more satisfying way of life in response to a rapidly changing cultural environment. This construction requires a drastic alteration of existing social relations. While such movements may have a secular cast, they typically employ the symbology and ritual pertaining to the domain of the sacred. In a society where consumption has become the essential ritual (Wright and Snow 1981), it is perhaps not surprising that consumerists consider themselves to be crusaders. Nor is it surprising that the consumption ethic - or the corporate activity which has helped foster it - would come under attack by groups espousing radical, conservative or reactionary reformation of contemporary social life. When consumption is perceived as a threat to cherished values, or when the secular humanism embodied in the "organization man" supplants more traditionally religious ideologies, exemplars of this unwanted change become scaPegoats.

Both Procter and Gamble and McDonald's have proven worthy targets of oral criticism. In a variation of a traditional theme, the success of Procter and Gamble has been attributed to a satanic alliance. While industry leadership and a "projectable" logo facilitated this belief, several other contributing factors may be cited. The devout Protestantism of the founding fathers (Schisgall 1981) may invite interpretations of corporate mission and operations in religious terms. In an increasingly conservation-oriented society, the company's intransigent response to the furor over detergent additives such as alkyl benzene sulfonate and phosphates (Schisgall 1981) may have fueled consumer discontent. That enzymes were popularly perceived as dangerous at the time they were removed from P & G detergents, despite proprietary "evidence" to the contrary (Schisgall 1981) has probably remained in folk memory with sufficient vividness to tarnish corporate reputation. Similarly, the belief that Mcdonald's is owned and controlled by a religious sect (typically the Unification Church, or "Moonies") has arisen only partially in response to the company's industry leadership and consumer hostility toward cults. The transformation of American dietary practices - structural and ritual - effected by the company has probably produced latent hostility among many consumers, and it stands to metaphoric comparison with the impact that cults are believed to have upon traditional religious dogma. Finally, while the secularized hagiography or child-centered mythology created by the company has been a tremendous commercial success, it also invites a religious interpretation of corporate activity.

The computer, as many revolutionary innovations throughout the ages have demonstrated, lends itself handily to diabolical imputations. With the advent of the universal product code, companies such as Olivetti, National Cash Register and Lear Seigler, as well as products as diverse as work gloves, shirts, tractor parts and fertilizer, which employ the number 666 in their codes, become linked with the beast of the Apocalypse. Organizations which use (or allegedly use) the number in the prefix of computer programs - Sears, J.C. Penney, Montgomery Wards, Medicaid, the World Bank, U.S. Army Recruiting, etc. - assume satanic overtones (Relfe 1981). By now the themes of corporate mistrust, forced conformity, conspiracy and the mixed blessing of technology are apparent.

Folk Pharmacology: Potions, Compounds and Elixirs

Much of our consumer behavior involves seeking, preparing and ingesting substances designed

to alter our metabolism or consciousness toward either primarily utilitarian or primarily hedonic ends, as the voluminous literature of ethnogastronomy, ethnopharmacology and ethnomedicine (Hand 1976, Romanucci-Ross et al 1983) attests. Within marketing there is an increasing interest in understanding patterns of OTC-, prescription- and illicit drug use. Given the exploratory nature of the present study, no attempt at a comprehensive description of a popular pharmacopoeia is presented here. Rather, several examples of the material circulating in oral tradition are offered in acknowledgment of its significance. Medicinal applications (eg., the use of cultured yogurt to treat hemolysis; the use of products such as Drano for predicting the gender of an unborn child; the use of certain beverages and soups as curative agents; diagnostic principles such as "starve a cold, feed a fever") and street druglore (eg., the 'Manhattan White" of New York City sewer system fame; trickster tales; functional equivalents) are not considered due to space limitations. In the vast corpus of consumer druglore (Dorson 1976) there are several recurrent properties attributed to products. Consumers routinely identify synergists, antagonists, aphrodisiacs, and contraceptives. Coca Cola, when combined with aspirin or when ingested in nontraditional fashion, has had each of these properties attributed to it. In what may be a variant of the popular "Alabama Slammer" drink, consumers combine the following ingredients to mix a "Hedge Hopper": 2 shots of gin, 2 shots of vodka, 1 shot of tequila, lemon lime, and a tablet of Bromo-Seltzer. From the consumer's perspective, absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream is facilitated, and hangover effects inhibited, thus promoting the ideal "high". Among the most intriguing of products to which aphrodisiacal qualities are attributed is the red-colored M & M candy, ostensibly due to its rarity. The potency of substances used for altering physical or psychological states is tempered with respect, and often with fear, in the anecdotes.

Creative Adaptations: Alternatives to Specified Use

Given the value Americans place on pragmatism, innovation and risk-taking, it is not surprising to discover a tradition of using products, services and channel members in creative fashion. This tradition, while grounded in the individual consumer, has occasionally been fueled by the marketer. For example, Harley Thomas Procter once offered one thousand dollars in prize money to consumers who might suggest "new, unusual and improved methods" of using Ivory soap. The tremendous response to this challenge prompted Procter and Gamble to publish a book containing these ideas (Schisgall 1981). Further, newspaper columns such as "Hints from Heloise" which exemplify our American tradition of self-help, have institutionalized - and in some sense routinized - the notion of consumer creativity. Through such vehicles, consumers are able to advise each other of the existence of "hidden" attributes, and of ways of improving upon mere surface benefit delivery. The directive "use only as specified" appears to serve implicitly as a challenge for some consumers. It is important to note, however, that consumer-derived alternatives to manufacturer-specified uses can result in detrimental effects to any of the components of production or consumption-use systems.

Numerous domestic chores are facilitated by the creative misuse of particular products. Appropriately enough to our American values system, cleaning agents proliferate. Rubbing alcohol, baking soda, hairspray, toothpaste and ginger ale are among the products reputed to remove stains. Repair work may be effected through a variety of agents: toothpaste doubles as spackling compound and adhesive; Super-Glue refurbishes broken fingernails; nail polish

disguises runs in hosiery. Whether analogic reasoning or homeopathic magic is invoked as explanation, some products are credited with attributes that deliver similar benefits across varying contexts. For instance, Crisco doubles as tanning lotion in consumer folk tradition; Coca-Cola serves a similar function, for reasons which may become apparent in further discussion. Gerber baby food products are used by many consumers to nurse fledglings and other ailing animals back to health. The use of products such as Vaseline and Crisco as lubricants on an organic level to enhance sensual experience, or on a mechanical level to condition such apparatus as bicycle chains, appears common. Hydrogen peroxide is used to prevent or wean children from nail-biting. Pam vegetable spray coating is employed as a fixative. Pam, Redi-Whip, and other products in propellant-based containers are used by some consumers to attain states of altered consciousness. The medicinal use of products such as base metals (copper), herbs (garlic), soft drinks (7-Up, tea), and soups is widely acknowledged.

While literally hundreds of products employed in unspecified or unapproved fashion can be cited, one product in particular appears to have captured the imagination of consumers engaged in multiattribute deciphering: Coca Cola. Consumers have been warned of the allegedly corrosive properties of Coke by authority figures as diverse as parents, health care professionals, and marketing professors, largely in the service of social control. Bell (1976) has referred to Coca Cola as a "nearly universal solvent" in his appraisal of consumer "cokelore" traditions. Informant; believe that Coca Cola will dissolve teeth fillings, and stomach wall linings. Coins, bolts, bones, various animals, and containers (paper through aluminum) are subject to such corrosion. Given the belief in this corrosive property, the absence of visible contaminants in any particular bottle does not appear to dampen consumer suspicion of the hygiene standards at bottling facilities. Not surprisingly, Coke is regarded as a digestive aid by many consumers - and is supposedly especially effective is assisting the decomposition of hamburger. Coke is employed by consumers to remove rust from automobiles, to clean corroded battery terminals, and to loosen frozen bolts, allegedly at the suggestion of trusted mechanics. Coke has also enjoyed a measure of notoriety as a contraceptive douche, due in part to attributes of availability, carbonation and perceived corrosiveness. Finally, Coca Cola is reputed to be an effective pesticide in areas where consumers believe vermin such as rodents are unable to process the effects of carbonation (a property also attributed to products such as Alka-Seltzer).

One of the most striking features of the cokelore corpus has to do with its relative effect on consumer usage patterns. While the anecdotes reflect many of the basic themes considered in this paper - contamination, ambivalence toward corporations, pharmacological experimentation, creative adaptation, etc. - the multimisattribution process does not appear to have nearly the impact on consumption patterns as similar stories circulated about other products. Informants report that Coke anecdotes do not deter them from drinking the product in great quantity or with great frequency. That Coke is a folk generic, and that it is a dense symbol of American life, may account in part both for the popularity of the anecdotes and the minor impact of the lore on personal drinking preferences. Similar factors may be adduced in interpreting some of the difficulties encountered in marketing the beverage abroad ("Cocacolonization") in countries with vital oral traditions, as in the rumor in Muslim quarters that each bottle of Coca Cola contained two drops of pig's blood.

IMPLICATION'S FOR REACTIVE MARKETING

Anecdotes in the corpus of consumer oral tradition considered in this article share some common features. Each appears to have strong basic story appeal, a foundation in actual belief, and meaningful message or moral (Brunvand 1981). The stories usually contain some semblance of supportive specific detail or a grain of truth, and can be attributed to a credible source (Dickson and Goudlen 1983). Such anecdotes facilitate the synthesis of consumer worldview and ethos. The surface structure is that of a cautionary tale or exemplum, while the deep structure is more a fundamental exegesis of contemporary social life. Both the legends and the rumors enfranchise speculation - consumers went anxiety, bisociate (Koestler 1964) to discover new insights, and informally indict or applaud business concerns. Delight, didacticism and direction are some of the more prominent ends of the stories.

The corpus may be considered a manifestation of extrajudicial complaint processing (Nader 1980) and orally articulated consumer dissatisfaction (Resnik and Harmon 1983, Richins 1983). It can also be understood as a form of hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) focused on issues of fantasy, feeling and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), which facilitates creativity (Hirschman 1980) and variety seeking behavior (McAlister and Pessemier 1982).

The stories appear to be motivated by a number of factors. At the level of the individual, transmission of anecdote bestows status on the teller, regardless of whether intent is benign or malevolent. As an effort after meaning, such transmission is a vehicle for tension reduction, ventilation, ego defense and dissonance reduction (Rosnow and Fine 1976). At the level of society, rumor and legend become part of a communication network linking individuals to each other. Oral circulation of stories becomes a form of group problem-solving. A course of action may be validated, or a shared world view or ethos affirmed so that any collective action undertaken will result in closure (Rosnow and Fine 1976). Drawing upon Warren's (1972) typology, Fine (1980) has done an excellent job of illustrating the way in which contemporary legends mirror the seven "great changes" in American community life: division of labor; differentiation of interest and associations; increasing systemic relationships to a larger society; bureaucratization and impersonalization; transfer of functions to profit enterprises and government; urbanization and suburbanization; changing values. Harris (1981) has masterfully catalogued the sources of our discontent, and has explored the ecology of consumer malaise in his discussion of contemporary American social life. Attempts to measure consumer alienation from the marketplace (Pruden, Shuptrine and Longman 1974) have generally ignored oral tradition as a source of insight. Consumer oral tradition is at base an adaptive strategy. Cultural change is partially negotiated through the stories. We interpret, resist, evaluate and facilitate change in our attempt to control it. Vigilance is enhanced through oral tradition. The stories reflect no core value more than self-reliance (Hsu 1972).

Informants routinely acknowledge changing their consumption patterns in response to legends or rumors in current circulation. Corporations such as McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Hygrade Food Products, Squibb, and General Foods have been harmed by the stories, while others (e.g. Gerber Foods) have actually been helped. Traditional wisdom dictates that the most effective way to stop rumor-mongering is prompt, unequivocal refutation from a credible source, but the existence of so-called "sleeper" and "boomerang" effects (Rosnow and Fine 1976) calls this procedure into question. Silence is advocated in some quarters (Brunvand 1981), but

indications are that merely ignoring the story in hopes that it will drop from circulation is not an effective course of action. Outflanking the rumor by indirection and selective response (Montgomery 1979) has also been attempted with the expectation that by limiting the provenience of the response and by not repeating the nature of the rumor in the rebuttal, harmful latent effects of reactive marketing will be eliminated.

As is the case with most intractable problems, symptoms are targeted for elimination while root causes are left untreated. Conventional reactive marketing strategies treat the rumor rather than the etiology (Rosnow and Fine 1976). Even such insightful, creative responses to combatting the harmful effects of oral tradition as the information processing approach advocated by Tybout, Calder and Sternthal (1981) address symptomology rather than etiology, and do not translate readily from the theoretical domain of the laboratory to the practical domain of the marketplace. If, however, we understand the stories to be an attempt by the consumer to synthesize world view and ethos, and we address the deep structural premises embedded in the corpus, it becomes possible to design responses which are sensitive to the consumer's needs.

Assuming that marketers monitor the consumer environment in a timely, comprehensive fashion, diagnosis becomes the first stage of reactive marketing. The nature of the story itself is at issue. Is it a pipe dream, a bogey or a wedge driver (Knapp 1966)? Does it represent a threat to or an enhancement of product or corporate reputation? Does it reveal hidden market niches or product attributes? Should the story be encouraged or discouraged? The decision passively to ignore or actively to refute an anecdote should be based on a thoughtful analysis of the deep structure of that anecdote. The marketer must ascertain the root concern of the consumer as reflected in the anecdote or anecdote complex. The actual circulation dynamics is also at issue. The marketer must identify (segment) the active bearers of tradition and their respective audiences. The provenience of the anecdote must be established.

The design of an appropriate response is contingent upon accurate diagnosis of the consumer's complaint. Once the grain of truth around which the story encysts is identified, the marketer may attempt to reposition the folk idea, value, or pseudo-fact in a favorable light. This repositioning must contend with potential sleeper and boomerang effects, and so must not be attempted at a purely cognitive level. The provision of sheer or mere information is insufficient. Rather, the affective dimension of the story must be considered as well. A possible strategy would be to acknowledge the consumer's fear while dramatically portraying its groundlessness in any given instance. Some consumer misgivings may be dispelled simply by illuminating the back regions of product preparation or corporate activity though advertising or physical design. In situations where consumer misgivings are more profound or more accurate, more complex strategies must be employed. Finally, problem diagnosis should not be undertaken solely in service of repositioning. The collective insight embodied in oral tradition may potentiate improved product design, service delivers, and quality of social life.

Implementing change is the most challenging dimension of reactive marketing. Where active intervention is indicated, a number of issues must be addressed. Appropriate messages must be designed. Credible reference figures must be enlisted. Conduits for message transmission must be carefully selected, so the message will enter into and remain in oral circulation. Perhaps the notion of a "hot line" can be combined with the concept of a "rumor clinic" to a successful end. The establishment of an agency perceived to be free of vested interest, sponsored jointly by

private business consortia, governmental commissions at several levels, consumer groups, and universities, charged with responsibility for identifying, studying and reacting to these anecdotes and stories, acting in effect as a clearinghouse for consumer oral tradition, is one such possibility. Such an agency would serve the needs of scholars, practitioners and consumers.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Two primary avenues of additional research are suggested by the findings of the present exploratory study. First of all, we need to know more about the dynamics of consumer oral tradition. Secondly, applied research geared toward helping marketers react effectively to consumer oral tradition is also indicated. Processes governing the genesis and circulation of rumor and contemporary urban legend must be illuminated. The impact of anecdotes on consumption patterns and on brand or corporate image requires further study. Consumer exegeses must be elicited and evaluated. Several data collection strategies are feasible. Material, complete with provenience data, could be collected systematically by genre, by segment, by brand or by corporate or channel affiliation. The social integration and complementary patterns of complaining behavior of active bearers of tradition require additional investigation (Warland, Herrmann and Moore 1983). Structural, stylistic, transmission network and impact analyses might be undertaken. The relationship of oral tradition to brand and industry leadership should be explored further. Parallels between rumor or legend cycles and product life cycles (or patterns of innovation and diffusion) might also be sought. Problems of access with respect to acquiring corporate data (e.g., proprietary studies, impression management, etc.) must be surmounted. A mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques would be most useful in approaching these issues.

(References cited are not provided due to space limitations. Interested readers are invited to write the author for a complete citation listing.)