

Dealers and Dealing in a Periodic Market: Informal Retailing in Ethnographic Perspective

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An ethnographic investigation of a midwestern American flea market is described in this study. In particular, the dynamics sustaining the practice of informal retailing are detailed. The social embeddedness of marketplace behavior is explored. Attention is devoted to ceremonial and ritual dimensions of informal retailing. The significance of the informal conduit of the marketing system for theory and practice is assessed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer researchers ply their trade in an increasingly fascinating marketplace. Consider for example the consumption of illicit drugs. Cocabucks have come to rival petrodollars in significance in world markets (Mills 1986); the cocaine trade has become the great growth industry of the 1980s (Nicholl 1985). The entrepreneurial Mafia, a postwar sociological phenomenon, has evolved into a critical factor in international trade (Arlacchi 1987), while wheeling and dealing (Adler 1985) has arisen as a recognizable lifestyle, if not subculture, unto itself. Illicit drug dealers in a number of the United States are required by law to pay tax on their sales; some states require dealers to register and buy luxury-tax stamps (Iori

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1986). While a rationale for the study of such illicit marketplace behavior has been available for a decade (Zaltman and Wallendorf 1977), consumer researchers continue to ignore this critical sector.

Consider also some implications of a particular work ethic. The Prime Minister of Jamaica has recently bent his rigidly controlled exchange rate policy to permit an emerging rural female entrepreneurial class—"higglers," who conduct black market import-export business in consumer goods—a greater scope of operation, and has expressed a wistful desire to place such women in charge of the national economy (Geyer 1986). The role of market women in sustaining local and regional economies requires much additional investigation (Babb 1987). In smokestack regions of the US plagued by capital flight, income earned off the books permits some towns a continued existence where none would otherwise be possible (Ansberry 1986). Street vendors (perhaps the archetypal American small-business entrepreneur) have become the object of crackdowns by local city governments and merchants' associations around the United States (Boaz 1986). *Carteneros*, Mexican migrants who gather discarded cardboard in the US border towns for resale in Mexico, have also become pawns in local mercantile politics (Moffett 1987). The ascription of urban street vendors in the developing world by survey researchers to the category of "traditional" (versus "modern") sector, often the result of a failure to enumerate small businesses in labor force surveys, belies their often superior efficiency, and has brought hawkers into direct confrontation with formal and public sector forces (McGee and Yeung 1978). In fact, the social construction of a self-regulating market mechanism is dependent upon both the subjugation of moral to political economy and the suppression of the antistructural characteristics of the traditional market (Agnew 1986).

It is within such a multi-layered context that a conception of an underground or informal economy must be forged (Ferman, Henry, and Hoyman 1987a). That economic estimates of the size of such an economy vary so widely (anywhere from 3 percent to 30 percent of the gross national product of the US, for example, and up to 70 percent of the GDP of other nations) is perhaps indicative of the deep structural significance of such a conception. Although consumer research has been most attentive to such issues as relative size, differential impact, and susceptibility to regulation of the underground economy, the findings have been equivocal. Recently, McCrohan and Smith (1986) examined a subset of legal source market activity of informal suppliers, which they determined to be "conceptually in the national accounts," and found no evidence of a large cash-fed underground economy nor any support for believing that signifi-

cant retailing (except perhaps in some service sectors) can be conducted in an informal manner. The authors are scrupulous in disclosing the limitations of their method and sampling frame, and are forthright in announcing not only that the public policy implications of their study are ambivalent, but also that the marketing implications are based on speculations about informal retailing.

Further research into informal market alternatives—buying, selling, and regulating activities—is clearly warranted (McCrohan and Smith 1986; McCrohan, Smith, and Harvey 1987), and ought not be restricted to surveys conducted on national probability samples. “Taking account” of these phenomena “means more than counting,” in both the conceptual and methodological sense (Ferman, Henry, and Hoyman 1987b). The articulation of market with non-market activities, of legal with illegal activities, of formal with informal economic transactions, and of each set with every other set in this formulation, remains to be investigated. Policy implications of such investigations are especially critical in the developing (DeSoto 1989; Jagannathan 1987) and re-developing areas of the world. It is not so much the sheer size but the nested complexity of the informal economy that exploratory work must discern.

Theorists in a number of disciplines (McCloskey 1985) have become more outspoken in their belief that the anonymous market of neoclassical economic models is largely a fiction. This contention revolves around the degree to which theorists envision economic activity to be embedded in social life. The embeddedness issue has long been a focus of intensive disagreement in anthropology, for example (Sherry 1989a). In sociology, Granovetter (1985) has usefully fixed the debate by characterizing the opposing viewpoints as either over- or under-socialized. Substantivists and Marxists subscribe to an over-socialized perspective of the marketplace. For them, internalized, consensually validated norms and values determine behavior. Formalists and neoinstitutional economists, on the other hand, focus on the narrowly utilitarian pursuit of self interest, promoting an under-socialized perspective of the marketplace. In his call for a more balanced view of the economy, Granovetter (1985) accuses each of these camps of promoting an atomized view of consumers as automatons. The embeddedness controversy further inhibits the theoretical significance of formal-informal sector analyses. For example, the investigation of linkages between formal and informal sectors is retarded by a dualistic view of the economy (Clammer 1987) that has been promulgated by these over- and under-socialized views. Further, the dualistic view has not resolved the debate over the nature of the informal sector; its essential backwardness and interstitiality or progressiveness and novelty continues to be

argued (DeSoto 1989; Portes, Blitzer, and Curtis 1986). Finally, hybrid or sector-spanning phenomena such as flea markets or networking units such as Avon, Amway, or Tupperware markets (Biggart 1989; Frenzen and Davis 1989; Smith 1987) remain incompletely understood in the wake of this controversy. It seems most productive to regard formal and informal sector transactions as part of a unified market system (Alexander 1987).

To promote such a unified understanding, the notions of underground and informal economies are merged in this article under the covering term of "informal sector." Because a comprehensive definition has proven elusive, Robles and El-Ansary (1989) have used the following parameters: activity (legality vs. criminality); tax status and degree of reporting (declared vs. undeclared); nature of transaction (market vs. nonmarket, substance vs. exchange); impact on national output; and occupational status of transactors to provide a taxonomic definition of the informal sector. Such a taxonomic approach reveals the interpenetrating nature of formal and informal sector activities, and suggests something of their structural isomorphism. The relationship between the sectors is a symbiosis of uncertain stability, in turn commensal and parasitic.

Until the informal sector is subjected to the rigorous scrutiny marketers have lavished on the formal sector, the disciplinary significance and managerial relevance of this symbiosis cannot be properly evaluated. Worse still, the term "informal" will remain a distracting misnomer. To encourage such scrutiny and evade terminological dispute, the term "alternative conduit" is employed in this article to refer to the ecology, social structure, and ideology of transactions that occur outside of the conventional conduit typically studied by marketers. Reformation of the conventional conduit will be facilitated by analyses of the alternative one. Ultimately, description and interpretation of both alternative and conventional conduits will lead marketers to an understanding of an overarching, unified market system.

Problem Focus

The present study explores one institution in the alternative (Miller 1987) conduit of this unified marketing system: the flea market. As some research is beginning to reveal (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990b), the flea market is a fascinating combination of formal and informal, economic and festive dimensions of marketplace behaviors. Private formal sector retailers operate within this periodic, open-air context. So-called "informal" retailers—dealers whose shops consist solely of portable stalls or modified vehicles, whose cachement areas are deter-

mined by whatever market circuits the vendor chooses to travel, whose income may or may not be reported accurately to tax authorities—who are either career professionals, “part-timers,” or consumers embarked upon some periodic divestiture, operate here as well. These latter retailers occasionally aspire to more permanent formal-sector status, and use the flea market as a proving ground for building entrepreneurial expertise or venture capital. More commonly, however, they have chosen their vocation as an explicit alternative to going retail in the formal-sector sense. The balance of this paper provides a description and analysis of dealer behaviors in one particular periodic market in the Midwestern United States.

Extant literature on flea markets falls into several broad categories. A body of practical information of the how to variety is perhaps the most widely known. It is avidly consumed by vendors and patrons alike. This literature contains information on the location, time, type, and quality of markets around the country (House of Collectibles 1987). Trade publications such as *Yesteryear*, *Swap Meet Merchandising*, *Collectors Journal*, *The Vendor Newsletter*, and *The Antique Trader* are similarly practical in nature. An occasional popular article will offer interpretations that are tantalizingly insightful—for example, McCree’s (1984) discussion of the American mythology, folk values, treasure hunting, and immediacy presumed to characterize flea markets—and which demand systematic investigation. Freedman’s (1976) essay on garage sale folklore is similarly intriguing. Magazine and newspaper articles (e.g., Bohigan 1982; Lynswander 1980; Redd 1984) frequently offer advice to prospective buyers and sellers that ranges anywhere from tips about bootstrapping one’s way into the career of vendor to guarding against counterfeit antiques. The investment potential of flea market material is occasionally plumbed (Rinker 1988; Wasserstein 1981).

A second, related body of literature, more managerial in tone, has arisen in response to the changing economic and social conditions accelerating the institutionalization of the flea market. Collins (1986) regards the growth in the number, size, and type of flea markets as part of a contemporary “retail revolution” that is also being shaped in part by such institutions as the factory outlet store. The swap concept itself is fueling change in the domestic mortgage industry (Weberman 1982), in both the process and philosophy of economic development (e.g., through vehicles such as debt-equity swapping), and in the ways that international business is conducted in an era of blocked markets (Kotler 1986). Such revolutionary awareness is already producing a range of innovative interventions in consumer behavior, from New York City’s efforts to reposition and redefine the concept of garbage among consumers (Bauch 1986), through the readi-

ness of entrepreneurial firms to provide consumers fearful of failing their employers' drug-screening regimens with clean urine specimens, to the efforts of US firms such as Implant Technologies, Inc. to imitate their Swedish counterparts in the salvage, stockpiling, and exporting of used pacemakers to Third World countries (*Wall Street Journal* 1988). It also raises a host of ethical concerns bearing upon such issues as charitable giving (Simon 1979), including variants like blood and organ donation (Burnett 1981; Pessemier, Bemmaor, and Hanssens 1977; Titmuss 1971) as well as recovered prostheses, fair-trade practices, and illegal transactions.

Flea market-like institutions have sprung up for items ranging from automobiles (our US variant having been inspired by an Israeli model) to orphan products (Persinos 1984; Valigra 1985). Both discount floor space and vacant plant floors—mordant chain stores (such as Woolco) and reconstructed manufacturers (such as International Harvester) providing two examples—increasingly are being recycled, as flea markets arise in the buildings of defunct businesses (Satran 1983; Stavro 1984). Space allocation and lease structures in contemporary shopping malls are being altered regionally in response to forces that have encouraged the flea market to flourish. Hypermarket zoning has been directly impacted by the popularity of the flea market (Floch 1988). Owners of drive-in cinema parks are supplementing, and in some cases supplanting, the income formerly derived exclusively through movies by running flea markets on their lots. While the "spectre" of the flea market may be feared by strip store owners, it has been predicted that the next great retail fortune will be made in the institutionalization of the flea market (Satran 1983). With more than 3,500 flea markets—at least a dozen of which are huge, on the order of the 60-acre Orange County Marketplace—operating nationwide to produce upwards of \$10 billion in gross sales, the accessibility of underdeveloped land near heavily populated regions may be the principal impediment to realizing such a fortune (King 1989). Not surprisingly, the flea market is also being used as a pedagogical device in grammar schools (Burks 1985), along the lines of such token economy concepts as Kinder-Economy or Mini-Society (Mackay-Smith 1985). Whatever other outcomes such educational games may facilitate, socialization into a particular variant of consumer culture must be reckoned among them.

With the exception of a recent naturalistic study of a Southwestern American swap meet (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; see also papers held by the Arizona State Museum Collection cited in this study) conducted by consumer researchers, ethnographic examinations of market

pitching in a West-coast swap meet (Sherry 1988) and in Western European periodic markets (Pinch and Clark 1986), a sociological investigation of flea markets and yard sales in Northeastern Georgia (Miller 1988), a sociocultural analysis of a Midwestern flea market (Sherry 1990b), and an earlier sociological study of a West coast flea market conducted by student researchers (Maisel 1974), academic accounts of flea market behavior have derived from survey data and have been concerned with aggregate patterns. The present study builds upon this emerging stream of naturalistic inquiry into flea market activity. Concomitantly, the study focuses on some of the experiential aspects of dealing. The oscillation of consumers between *homo economicus* and *homo ludens* [and occasionally *homo religiosus*, as Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1988) indicate] is apparent at the flea market. Here, the ergic (i.e., work) engages the ludic (i.e., play), structure engages antistructure, and formality engages informality. Turner (1974) usefully traces the etymology of our word "leisure" to its Indo-European base *leik-, which means "to offer for sale, bargain," in order to underscore the liminal sphere of the market, with its dissolution of normative social structural constraints. Whether we speak in terms of communitas (Turner 1969), flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), commercial libido (Drucker-Brown 1982), simultaneous perception (Sherry and McGrath 1989), or even of the sacred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), the experience of the flea market rather than its mere product assortment is most significant to consumers. It seems the virtual antithesis of the joyless economy (Scitovsky 1976). That such is the case from the vendor's perspective has not yet been adequately explored. Thus, dealing and its attendant activities are described in this paper.

An analysis of the literature suggests that the flea market is a more complex institution than is commonly imagined, that the extant academic research is in its infancy, and that comparative ethnography is an expedient approach to construing the scope and significance of flea market activity. The holistic perspective and ethnographic approach adopted in the present study are offered as correctives to reductionist views of marketplace behavior.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD SETTING

This article presents some results of a two-and-one-half year ethnographic investigation of the Dalton Valley Flea Market. DVFM is a Midwestern American periodic market that unfolds over 25 acres of fairgrounds on the first weekend of every month. Consumers are admitted to

the marketplace early Sunday morning, and dealing is concluded late Sunday evening. Using 1988 figures, the number of dealers selling at DVFM on a given Sunday ranged from a wintertime low of 356 to a summertime high of 1,310. During that same period, the market census (itself quite conservative, since it enumerates only those consumers who paid for admission to the marketgrounds on Sunday and ignores children as well as dealer-consumers) ranged from 5,045 to 23,685. Despite the seasonal fluctuation of the census, the channel is left open year-round. Dealers sell from three types of venue. Some set up their stalls in enclosed buildings on the market grounds, some operate from open-sided livestock pavilions, and still others work in stalls in the open air. Formal-sector retailers from national chains (such as Sears and Penney's) and local businesses sell at DVFM, but the bulk of the dealers are independent entrepreneurs, many of whom run family businesses on a periodic market circuit. A heterogeneous array of goods (from antiques and crafts of all descriptions to new, branded merchandise) and services (from chiropractic treatment to rustproofing) is available at DVFM. DVFM is effectively managed as a for-profit enterprise family business. DVFM managers provide dealers with a formal infrastructure and package of services that makes the delivery of an alternative market conduit possible. A conservative estimate places gross sales over an annual market season at \$1 million per weekend. A thorough ethnographic overview of DVFM, with particular attention to consumer experience, is provided in Sherry (1990). The present article concentrates solely on issues related to dealers.

A mixed strategy of data elicitation and recording was employed. Participant observation was coupled with non-directive and directive interviewing. Data were collected in naturalistic contexts at the market site itself, as well as in such off-site surroundings as homes, restaurants, garage sales, and other locations frequented by informants on non-market days. As in other recent naturalistic investigations of consumer behavior (e.g., Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Sherry and McGrath 1989), an emergent design guided by a constant comparative method was employed. Informants were able to adapt to the ethnographer's presence and contribute to the shaping of the research program because of the long-term nature of the field project. Informants were engaged in member checks (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of oral and written versions of the ethnography. Data were recorded in fieldnotes, as well as in audiotapes and photographs. The field project was conceived and executed within the research orientation, which has been described as "postmodern" (Sherry 1990a).

DEALERS AND DEALING: VIGNETTES AND THEMES

A series of ethnographic vignettes is presented in the following pages to illustrate a number of themes associated with the informal retailing that occurs at DVFM. The cases have been selected to demonstrate a range of issues connected to the activity of dealing. Informants are characterized by pseudonyms, native terms are denoted by quotation marks, and the passages are set in the ethnographic present.

Hank Wallace: The Propriety of Lateral Cycling

Working from the back of a rusted old van, aided by a high-school student seeking to learn “the business,” Hank Wallace alternates between unloading antique furniture (including the occasional “odd piece” he feels he must include to interest more customers) and engaging prospective buyers who pass by his stall. Wallace has travelled a three-state market circuit for the past 15 years, and has worked as an informal retailer full time for the past two years. He nets over \$25,000 each year from sales in periodic markets, just a little more than his wife earns as a teacher. Among his wares are a good many personal effects. Wallace views much of his personal property as commodifiable, esteeming it principally for its exchange value. When he feels he can get the “right price” at a particular market, he will sell whatever wardrobe, commode, table, or other item that has graced his home, and replace it with a piece that he can acquire cheaply and refurbish. Such rotation of inventory, from market through home to market—in effect, a transformation from exchange value through symbolic use value to exchange value again—is consistent with the sacralizing and desacralizing processes of consumer-object relations described by Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989).

Hank claims to buy no consumer goods other than food and appliances new. He feels that “marketers” and “corporations” are “too greedy,” and in particular, that their “markups are too high.” Thus, he seeks to purchase goods that are “well-made” (in terms of craftsmanship or durability) and to exploit their life cycles in a way that is inimical to a “throw-away” society. So also do many of his customers. For example, he recently sold a coffee grinder to a middle-aged woman who wanted to earn “more than just 5¼ percent on her savings”; she buys things she would personally own, and then resells them at a profit. It is such logic that speeds the circulation of goods through periodic markets.

During the winter months, Wallace shifts his attention to “mall shows.” Unlike his hardier compatriots, he prefers to sell indoors when

the mercury drops. He commands higher prices at mall shows, due to the larger numbers of consumers who are not knowledgeable that pass by his stall. He sells to consumers who “get sidetracked from Sears,” and who do not have the expertise to appraise accurately his merchandise. Wallace estimates that he spends 15 hours each week reading books and trade papers to gauge the value of goods and learn more about the antique world. Such expertise must be diligently acquired. He prefers to sell outdoors when the weather warms, because his overhead is much lower and his work ethic less taxed. He strives to work on a cash basis, preferring to “go lower” for “cash today” than risk taking a “bad check tomorrow.”

In addition to his selling at DVFM, Wallace conducts some limited market surveillance. He roams the grounds pricing pieces comparable to his own, and relies on the reports of other dealers who “keep an eye open” for him. He generally works with two other dealers, and the three always try to locate in contiguous stalls. By so doing, they are able to enjoy each other’s company, induce a bigger “draw” by displaying goods that appear related (complementing, in effect, each other’s product lines), and take turns “covering” for one another during absences. Wallace rates monetary compensation “dead last” among the reasons for his career choice. He enjoys “hunting” for “stuff” and refurbishing furniture. He enjoys “dickering” and “visiting” with consumers. The quality of the work life he now enjoys at DVFM and the other markets on his circuit has reinforced his decision to exploit this sector of the economy.

Bill Roberts: Professionalism of Informality and Threats to Legitimacy

In addition to his full-time job as a registered nurse, Bill Roberts works part-time as both an auctioneer and flea market dealer. He specializes in jewelry, watches, and Native American art. Although he owns no formal retail shop, his business card proclaims his specialty and his eagerness to deal. He has invested much effort in developing his skill as an appraiser (most often via estate sales) and in cultivating loan officers at a number of banks. He subscribes to 29 newspapers throughout the state as part of an environmental scanning strategy that also includes a large network of friends and associates “watching” for him. Roberts personifies many of the traits that Smith (1989) attributes to auctioneers: the ability to resolve uncertainty and ambiguity; the capacity to establish value, identity, and ownership of goods; the desire to entertain and to shape social relationships; facility in reallocating large sums of money. His case also supports Smith’s (1989) revision of neoclassical economic models of the auction

process, insofar as Roberts works to create and recreate social definitions both of value and of relationships among transactors.

Bill estimates that one third of his customers enter DVFM with goods “under the table” (i.e., smuggled in in defiance of market statutes), that they intend to trade to dealers illicitly. He is also less than sanguine about his fellow dealers’ ethics, believing only one quarter of them to possess tax numbers. Bill is fearful that flea markets will “get a bad name” (i.e., be stigmatized in the eyes of consumers and regulators) from unscrupulous or ignorant dealers who maintain less than accurate records. Still, he judges dealers to be a “tight” group. Dealers “watch out” for each other at markets and shows. For example, a dealer may buy a piece he knows a “neighboring dealer” (i.e., a vendor with whom the former dealer enjoys some physical proximity at a given market) would like, and sell it to him or her with little or no markup. Bill continues to “work shows” in the larger urban areas outlying Mt. Arden, the site of DVFM, despite the graft and lubrication he must contend with as transaction costs. In these lucrative urban markets, he must pay upwards of \$250—exclusive of aldermanic causes, payments to union workers who must unload his truck or plug in his electrical cords, and the like—to rent a single stall. Although his circuit requires him to travel three weeks out of the month, Bill still finds time to conduct extensive research into his product lines. Whether poring through books or writing directly to manufacturers to verify styles, patterns, and other details, he uses this research as both a practical data base to improve his business acumen and as a corpus of lore to enhance his personal sense of refined appreciation.

Mitch Jackson: Practical Aspects of Dealing

Mitch Jackson, an unemployed factory worker, has been a “regular” at DVFM for eight years. He has become a dealer full-time of necessity, and travels a circuit that will take him to 25 states over the year. While he enjoys meeting “interesting” people, and finds his work “exciting,” in the sense that he leads a “gypsy life, with no supervisor”—which allows him to “wheel and deal” and “fuck off” at his own risk—he maintains that he selected his current occupation chiefly to “make good money.” No pre-existing interest or hobby led to this selection; he simply heard that “the money could be really good.” His observations on the practical aspects of the dealing are instructive. He characterizes the patrons of DVFM into a range of types: “customers,” “window shoppers,” “sight-seers,” “other dealers,” “vultures.” Predictably, his client base consists chiefly of the first and fourth categories. He is sometimes able to convert

the second group, but seldom the third, into consumers. He has little use for “vultures,” a common emic term for opportunistic consumers. Vultures believe they can receive enormous reductions in price due to inclement weather (reasoning that dealers won’t want to “pack-up” early and “haul away” potentially salable items, thus incurring a “wasted trip”) or imminent closing time. Jackson may reduce his own prices 10 percent to 20 percent to avoid having to pack up “wet,” “sloppy” or damaged unsold goods, but believes most dealers do not offer massive discounts. In fact, dealers often refer to “eating a \$——— lot,” due to their misjudging of demand or weather and their unwillingness to deeply discount merchandise. His most profitable months are December and January, when, in his estimation, consumers eagerly seek out novel Christmas presents, or are flush with cash received as holiday gifts. He earns as much in a few hours at DVFM during these months as he does in days at other markets.

Jackson specializes in magazine covers and print advertisements, which consumers have taken to redefining as popular art forms. He carries a wide assortment to help ensure sales across widely divergent tastes and markets. His is a highly labor-intensive enterprise. He excises the ads, mounts them, and categorizes them by product and brand (and occasionally by date). He laments the amount of wastage involved in the work. He may have to purchase \$5,000 worth of magazines at one time to get the items he actually wants. His sales interactions are similarly protracted and variably productive. He is beset with lots of “lookers” who are drawn to his wares for a number of reasons, and who in turn engage him in much conversation about particular products or historical eras. He is also besieged with special requests for particular ads (for products, brands, firms, and so forth), despite the meticulous nature of his display.

Carl Avril: Aesthetic and Historic Dimensions of Projection

An interesting counterpoint to Mitch Jackson is Carl Avril. Avril, a middle-aged school counselor, sells only at DVFM. He comes from a nearby state that has been economically depressed, and supplements his regular income with his “take” at DVFM. (This depression is alleged by many regular DVFM dealers to have driven much of the state’s private-sector labor force into itinerant vending. Avril laments the rising incidence of child abuse he sees as a counselor, which he links to the depression.) Like Jackson, Avril also sells old print advertisements, which he clips and mats. He’s become so busy and so backlogged that he has recently taken to filing the ads against the day he’ll find time to mount them. He spends

two to three hours each night “flipping and clipping.” He buys old magazines in bulk (occasionally from other DVFM dealers), and sells many of the ads to dealers at DVFM.

Unlike Jackson, however, Carl Avril’s motivation to deal at DVFM is not chiefly economic. Rather, Avril’s avocation is an “aesthetic” and “therapeutic” pursuit. The enjoyment he derives from his role of dealer is alloyed with the pleasure taken in the projectible nature of his goods (Sherry 1990). Notes Avril:

You’ve got a little museum right in front of you. It’s interesting to see how products have changed. It’s wild to see the kinds of role and race stereotypes they allowed back then! I get black customers who come by. I used to worry about ‘what if I get a black customer?’ It doesn’t matter. They love ‘em [i.e., racist advertising depictions]. The more derogatory the better. I can’t keep the really bad ones in stock, they go so fast.

The bulk of his sales are made to collectors, many of whom spend a large portion of their search time at Avril’s booth declaiming the rationales for their collecting passions. In turn, he trades these stories with other collectors in the form of idle conversation or in the service of imbuing certain ads with cultural biographies (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Kopytoff 1986; Sherry 1990b). As if to echo his sentiments about the historic nature of his wares, Avril’s booth attracts many children and elderly browsers.

Frank and Alice Lavalle: Recycled Lives

After being badly disabled in a tractor accident, Frank Lavalle was forced to give up farming, and made the transition to periodic market dealing. Ironically, and tragically, many farmers have made a similar transition, as the cost of farming has grown prohibitive and as farmers have discovered the trend that has encouraged them to commodify their possessions for circulation in upscale urban markets. Frank and his wife Alice have packed much of their personal property and other acquired goods into an old reconditioned school bus, and travel a three-state market circuit. He enjoys the travel, but loathes the work; she hates to travel, but has grown to like dealing. Together they have forged a compromise that keeps them afloat. They do as well financially as dealers as they ever did as farmers.

The Lavalles sell a variety of merchandise at DVFM. Jewelry, furniture, quilts, tools, glassware, and handicrafts are included in their assort-

ment. They began their business with material from their farm, and then diversified, learning much about the trade from the dealers they encountered. They discovered “by accident” that they owned a number of pieces of “tramp art” that proved to be quite valuable. Alice had been an avid teapot collector during their more sedentary days, but the close quarters of their current condition prompted a divestiture of the conventional pots and a shift to miniatures. She has found a community of the road among the collectors she encounters along their circuit. They have learned to time their travels to take advantage of festive gatherings (thresherees, riverboat days, fairs) as well as depressive ones (for example, the dates for issuance of welfare checks in stressed and urban areas are carefully noted).

Alice and Frank must deal with contingencies imposed by their age. Loading and unloading their merchandise poses particular problems. The vagaries of weather—rain, dust, temperature extremes—are especially trying. They run a somewhat greater risk of theft than most of their fellow dealers, given age and mobility factors. Their road costs continue to escalate, with booth rental, gas, motels, food, and other expenses taking increasingly large bites from a fairly fixed income. They are currently subletting (in violation of market rules) booth space at DVFM to help reduce some of this burden.

Jack and Judy Arem: Work as an Extension of Leisure

Once again, a counterpoint example, this time to the Lavalles, proves instructive. Sitting outside their trailer in a makeshift patio comprised entirely of the goods they intend to sell at DVFM, Jack and Judy Arem welcome prospective buyers into what seems for all the world to be an outdoor living room. In addition to the furniture, their merchandise includes silverware, collectible plates, and a host of accessories. The Aremes are in their early 60s, and each is retired, she from a career in banking, he from real estate sales. A heart attack prompted Jack to rethink his previous work style. They have opened up a small antique shop. They also “do” four shows each year, and are relative newcomers to DVFM, the reputation of whose “huge size” and “medium quality” goods proved to be a powerful draw. They believe they have the right assortment for this particular market.

Jack has been an avid collector for most of his life, and professes to be “addicted” to collecting. Judy has only recently been infected with his enthusiasm. In fact, she used to hide his copies of the *Trading Times* and the *Antique Trader*, so he wouldn’t be tempted to go on spending binges. They have managed to harness this collecting “habit” into a lucrative

business. In effect, they have “retired to get busier,” and estimate they spend 60 hours each week in market-related activities. Jack has learned to identify and avoid counterfeit antiques—“reproductions”—and passes this information along to prospective buyers. He enjoys searching for merchandise, especially when it involves intricate bargaining. He enjoys as well the objects themselves, citing “beauty” and “craftsmanship” as the emblems of production of people “who cared.” Judy refers to some of their goods as “lucky accidents,” insofar as neither spouse realized their value when originally acquired. The coincidence of personal taste with intrinsic value is a happy discovery. The Aremes are almost always able to “double their price” (i.e., charge twice as much as they paid for an item), although they believe 40 percent to be the standard markup for antiques at DVFM. They invest much of their time refurbishing pieces, which increases the value of the goods enormously. When they don’t wish to “sink in the work,” they discount accordingly. The Aremes respect, and occasionally revere, the “history in the pieces”; both Jack and Judy elicit, refine, and transmit the cultural biographies attaching to their merchandise. Ownership is regarded as an amalgam of enjoyment, investment, and knowledge, and they attempt to enjoin this concept of ownership upon their customers.

Tim Wilson: Commoditization of the Hero

At least one dealer at DVFM has successfully targeted a youthful market. Tim Wilson specializes in the sale of baseball cards, and swaps a good bit of baseball lore in the course of his dealing. It is not unusual for young consumers to spend as much as \$150 on cards in Tim’s booth, and they leave not only with cards, but with Tim’s advice on issues such as portfolio management, price ceilings, and dealing with other dealers. Tim began his career as an itinerant dealer after a stint in the service, during which time his mother “pitched” (i.e., threw away) the collection of cards he had amassed during his childhood. He does over \$6,000 in business each year from his DVFM booth alone. He buys cards in bulk cases from a distributor, and breaks the bulk in a number of ways that permits him to resell the cards at a value range from five to thirteen times what he originally pays. For example, he may hold a particular case for a number of years, then sort the case, pull the “valuables” and “commons,” and “sell high” on valuables (i.e., prominent players). In repackaging the case into smaller lots, he places “good” cards on the top and bottom of a pack, thereby “sandwiching commons” between “goods,” to lure prospects into buying particular packs. As part of his sales pitch, he advises

his young customers to acquire the cards of promising rookies as an investment strategy. He explains his profit margins to these younger clients, seeking to whet their interest in collecting. Much ancillary trading of cards goes on around his booth among his younger customers. Tim is aware that for many of his young prospects, convenience supercedes the thrill of the hunt, that precollected packs are more attractive than solitary discoveries, and that investment potential eclipses the pride of possession.

Jay Clayton: Being in the Market

A college professor in his late 50s, Jay Clayton began carving duck decoys as a hobby. His initial sales efforts were successful, so Clayton became a part-time entrepreneur. He sells at DVFM until he grows “bored,” or “around hunting and fishing trips.” He is passionate about his craft, and is blessed with the gift of gab. Sales are subordinate to selling in his hierarchy of satisfactions. He knows he can sell whatever he produces, and is also aware that over two thirds of the decoys he sells are in turn resold at DVFM. A duck he sells at \$14 will often go for over \$100 as it travels from booth to booth across the market. He frequently tells disgruntled consumers who have discovered him to be the source: “You didn’t buy it from me!” He’s equally likely to conclude such an encounter with, “I’m glad you got the chance to meet me.” His rationale for tolerating such upscale reselling is simple: “I hope everybody makes money on my ducks. That way I know they’ll always come back. It’s not worth the aggravation to me to grow bigger or charge more.” He enjoys talking and dickering with consumers. This socializing is more important to him than the profit he nets. Just “being” in the flea market—an unconscious echoing of Richardson’s (1982) notion—provides him with a satisfying and meaningful experience.

Interpretive Summary

In examining the flea market as a sociocultural event, Sherry (1990) has called attention to two neglected facets of a pair of dialectics that characterizes marketplace behavior. Structurally, the informal dimension of marketing—“the less official (often clandestine), less controlled, less rationalized, reactive, and transient” aspect of exchange behavior—has escaped our attention. Functionally, the festive dimension of marketing—“the hedonic, experiential aspect of exchange behavior”—has been slighted as well. Increased attention to informality and festivity should not only enlarge our understanding of marketplace behavior, but also temper

and humanize the formal and economic dimensions of marketing practice. The preceding vignettes suggest something of these enlarging and humanizing potentials.

Workplace and lifecourse issues of considerable significance are mediated through informal retailing. Freedom from direct supervision, the exercise of individual initiative and celebration of autonomy, and the willing acceptance of personal culpability are evident among the dealers at DVFM. Transience may be highly valued or sorely lamented, but it conspires to produce a *communitas* among dealers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallengorf 1988, Gmelch 1977) that they believe is largely absent or undercultivated (and certainly underinvestigated by researchers) in the formal sector. This sense of community fostered by itineracy becomes a principal life satisfaction. Added to this fellow feeling are such intrinsically rewarding pursuits as connoisseurship and its transmission, historic and aesthetic appreciation and preservation, stewardship of material culture and guerilla consumption, wheeling and dealing, and professionalizing an avocation. The enjoyment of marketplace ambience itself is a powerful incentive to dealing. The ability to cope meaningfully with such major life transitions as physical disability, retirement, and underemployment through a combination of personal resourcefulness and persistence lends an aspect of mastery to lives that might otherwise be imperiled. This sense of mastery clearly extends beyond the immediate environs of the periodic market. Dealers are universally satisfied with their ability to supplement or transcend a formally market-mediated existence, through their flea market careers. This satisfaction obtains even when marketing expertise is employed to "beat the system."

SOME INTEGRATING THEMES

A set of infrastructural dimensions of informal retailing remains to be considered. Activities unfolding at DVFM exhibit a ceremonial character. That is, certain highly patterned and repetitive behaviors are performed which integrate dealers and consumers into a social unit, no matter how temporary or ephemeral. These behaviors constitute genres recognized by participants, and are enacted as a part of the dramaturgy that sustains the market as an event. At a deeper level of significance, other behaviors exhibit a certain ritual character. These rituals occur at the macro and the micro levels of marketplace behavior, and are also highly patterned and repetitive. Ritual allows buyers and sellers to transcend the mundane level of the sales encounter or the immediate experience of the market itself,

and to create a profoundly charged constellation of meaning of a cultural and psychological order.

Bargaining and Bantering: The Ceremonial Substratum of Dealing

Many consumers and dealers regard “bargaining” or “dickering” as an intrinsically enjoyable experience. For some, this “haggling” is the event that makes their sojourn at DVFM worthwhile (Sherry 1990). Bargaining behavior can be characterized as part of the “commercial libido” (Malinowski, in Drucker-Brown 1982) or “commercial athleticism” (Agnew 1986) exhibited by buyers and sellers in open-air markets. The occurrence of such behavior in conventional, formal-sector retailing awaits systematic study (Schouten 1986). Sherry (1990b) has provided a range of examples of the kinds of dickering that occur at DVFM. These examples are augmented in the present article. Bargaining takes a number of forms at DVFM, as the following paragraphs illustrate.

A passive, or implicit, form of bargaining is evident in the material culture of the market. For example, an excerpt from a cooperative newsletter, published jointly by DVFM management and a local radio station, is suggestive of the leeway consumers may be able to forge:

THE WATERFORD MAN is having a CLEARANCE SALE on Precious Moments Dolls . . . 50% OFF the store price! Also get 30% off WATERFORD Crystal . . . the good stuff! 50% OFF ORREFORS GLASS from Sweden . . . SAVE SAVE SAVE DURING THIS UNPRECEDENTED SALE! Look up the WATERFORD MAN on the grass in the NE corner by Harms Road.

Dealers from factory-outlet stores post signs (as do many dealers, in direct violation of DVFM statutes, the breach being as common as the observance) offering deeper discounts on already discounted merchandise. Dealers (and increasing numbers of consumers) often roam the market grounds sporting T-shirts or baseball caps with printed messages, which announce the wearer’s desire to purchase particular categories of goods, from old fishing gear to antique weaponry. Signs are posted in the windows of vehicles announcing purchase intentions. For example, a frequently appearing sign proclaims:

I buy one, two and even three previous owner used teddy bears.
Call (987) 736-2944 in Elmdale, IA.

Another reads simply:

Collectibles, RR2, Box 97, Mills, SD, (845) 554-9285.

Printed pleas for “neon clocks,” “signs,” “old beer advertising,” and a host of other merchandise have grown increasingly common at DVFM. All such passive engagement alerts potential exchange partners to the possibility of a bargaining encounter. The signs constitute an invitation to dicker.

A much more active and overt form of bargaining gives the market a kind of semiotic intensity it might not otherwise attain. Although market pitching (Pinch and Clark 1986; Sherry 1988) is not as prevalent and stylized a form of discourse at DVFM as it is at other markets, many dealers engage prospective consumers with a range of verbal challenges. Some of these challenges are little more than invitations to create a conversation. A browser handling a particular item may be greeted by a dealer with a simple, “I can make you a price on it.” An interested and cagey prospect might then respond with, “What do you need to get out of it?” A kind of noncommittal sounding may occur between potential exchange partners:

Buyer: Do you trade [i.e., take goods rather than cash]?

Dealer: Every once in a while.

A conversational hedging as a prelude to gauging issues such as honesty, flexibility, or the ability to pay is a common interaction ritual. Some dealers are more confrontational with consumers. A departing prospect who has shown some interest (which may be idle curiosity, or as is often the case, a feinting strategy) in a dealer’s wares may be re-engaged very directly:

Dealer: I hate to see you leave with money. Let’s see if we can find you some _____.

Similarly, interested prospects may be converted into buyers with a humorous (and therefore risk-acknowledging) investing of trust:

Dealer: Go ahead and make me an offer. If it’s good enough, I’ll maybe even take your check.

That mistrust can be expressed and diffused through humor is a tacitly understood dynamic of relationship management between buyers and sellers. A fieldnote excerpt captures this dynamic:

As if to echo Agnew’s (1986) observation, Wayne Albers deliberately employs theatricality in the service of increasing sales. Along with his name and address, Wayne has posted a

sign on his trailer that reads, “Customers wanted—Dead or Alive!” He is attempting to sell a variety of used goods and new handicrafts. He verbally engages prospects passing by his stall, who are then virtually obligated to respond to his cajoling. To enhance the intensity of the engagement, Wayne wears an outlandish garb that draws much comment from his prospects. In particular, he sports a fedora with a large butterfly affixed to the crown. In response to Wayne’s pitch, one prospect declares, “I’m leery of men that wear butterflies on their hats.” To which Wayne replies, “Naw, you’re leery of men that’s gonna give you free advice.” Another catcall responds: “My momma always told me to watch out for men with butterflies on their hats!” Wayne retorts, “Well I’m number 12 of 12 kids, and if my momma stopped at 11, I wouldn’t be here today!” The wisdom of mothers is offered up as a jocular bargaining chip, in Wayne’s extemporaneous pitch. He is able to draw and hold a crowd, and to stimulate word-of-mouth communication about his performance. Many consumers then seek out the “guy with the goofy hat,” and reward the performance with a purchase, or with a provision of additional catcalls which become a collective foil to Wayne’s ongoing pitch. Often both results occur.

That a species of joking relationship is forged between many dealers and consumers is reflective both of the informal, festive nature of DVFM, and of the tacit understanding that the conventionally adversarial buyer-seller relationship can be legitimately exploited in the flea market setting.

A pitch may be particularly aggressive, depending upon the dealer’s interpersonal style and the context of the encounter, as demonstrated in this fieldnote excerpt:

Interrupted intermittently from unloading his furniture by a steady stream of interested browsers, Bob Mott fixes his gaze on a group of prospects at the far end of his stall and barks, “C’mon! I came here to sell! Gimme a number!” Receiving no immediate response in the group, he swivels to address another prospect who is handling a piece.

Prospect: It [the piece] doesn’t have a Hampshire groove.

Deflecting what he perceives to be a cross between a whine and a derogation tactic, Bob responds:

Dealer: Nah, it’s just a pretty little piece.

Prospect: How about \$12?

Dealer: Nope.

Prospect: \$16?

Dealer: Okay, but I ain't wrappin' it.

He quickly completes the transaction, glowers across the table at the browsers, and returns to the task of unloading.

The gamesmanship underlying the exploitation of ambiguity is a staple of the sales encounter at DVFM. Both dealers and consumers feign greater or lesser expertise to press an advantage. Again, some fieldnote excerpts are illustrative:

A young father draws his son over to a table containing a large box full of toy train materials. What begins initially as an attempt by the father to employ the trains as a projective field to convert nostalgia into a meaningful opportunity for sharing the personal past with his son, culminates in the father's discovery of a potentially valuable item in the box. With studied nonchalance the father inquires of the dealer, "How much for the box of train stuff?" With equally considered dispassion the dealer replies, "Oh, \$65. I don't know much about train stuff. I'd be happy to get rid of it for \$65." Stifling his elation, and opting not to bargain, the father completes the transaction. The knowledgeable dealer has received a fair price. The father feels he has gotten a great deal, and can now regale his son with tales both of the old days, and of his present prowess as a shrewd businessman. Everyone is enriched in this encounter.

A middle-aged consumer discovers an old fountain-style mix-master blender partially concealed within a mound of badly battered old appliances. Noting her interest, the dealer picks up the blender and begins to wipe off some grime. In so doing, he assures the customer that the blender "probably works." Sensing her skepticism, he continues to insist that the appliance is in good working order. Brushing off these assurances with the observation that there is no way to test the claim, the woman continues to examine the blender. The dealer then requests \$10 for the appliance, seeking to assuage any remaining doubt. "Done," says the woman. As the dealer takes the blender back to his truck to "clean 'er up," the woman observes, "I don't really care if it works. I'm just going to show it anyway." Satisfied that her feigned concern has lowered the asking price without her having had to bargain at all, and that the dealer knows that he has been bested, the woman departs with her purchase. Relieved that his claim has not been tested, the dealer is also content with the sale.

Lateral Cycling and Singularization: The Ritual Substratum of Dealing

In his inquiry into the nature of social status, Thompson (1979) identifies three categories of possessable objects: valuable, valueless, and negatively valued. As perceptual elements of our worldview (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1979), these objects are assigned to one or another of the overt categories Thompson (1979) calls "transient" and "durable." Each of these categories is characterized by fixed assumptions that maintain that worldview determines action. Between these poles of transient and durable is a region of flexibility wherein action determines worldview; innovation and creativity arise in this region. A third covert category of object emerges in this region: rubbish. Over time, durable objects increase in value, transient objects decrease in value, and rubbish objects have zero and unchanging value. Thompson (1979) hypothesizes that a transient object may "slide" into the rubbish category where it can exist in a "timeless and valueless limbo" until it is discovered and transferred into the durable category. Thus, a "secondhand" vase may be transformed into an "antique" ceramic "object d'art." These boundaries shift in response to social pressures (Thompson 1979). Such transmogrified objects are the lifeblood of the flea market, and also of many kinds of auction (Smith 1989). Transmogrifications themselves are effected both onsite and off-site, through the processes of lateral cycling and singularization.

Lateral cycling (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) extends the life of consumer objects by promoting their circulation beyond the initial end-user. Goods that are not literally consumed may have additional utility wrung from them. This utility may be functional, aesthetic, or both. The wringing of such utility by successive users is the essence of lateral cycling. Jobbed, salvaged, and remaindered first goods, as well as second-hand personal effects, are given added circulation in the flea market. Lateral cycling is both a result of and response to commercial obsolescence and economic pressure. It benefits bargain hunters and consumers of scarce means. It also serves as an investment strategy for more affluent consumers, and as a cultural preservation strategy for aficionados. The picking expeditions of vendors that move goods from garbage dumps, garage sales, estate sales, auctions, and other outdoor markets to (and often within) the flea market itself mark the initial shift of goods up Thompson's (1979) continuum to durability. The sheer presence of these goods at the flea market, and their embellishment with cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) further catalyzes their shift. The social pressure abetting this shift emerges in part

from individual and social taste, and from the institutions which sanction, authenticate, and value those durable goods designated collectibles or antiques. Lateral cycling is a vitally significant socioeconomic process that has been virtually ignored by conventional consumer research.

Operating at a more intensely personal level than lateral cycling is the process of singularization. As employed recently in anthropology (Kopytoff 1986) and consumer research (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), singularization denotes the movement of an object out of the realm of mere commodity and into the realm of psychosocially significant—even transcendent—meaning. That is, objects that have been rendered relatively homogeneous by commoditization are appropriated by consumers, revived, and individuated. Through the successive divestitures and investitures of meaning by which cultural objects acquire a biography, the anticultural forces of homogenization are successfully resisted. Consumers see to it that some things remain “unambiguously singular” (Kopytoff 1986). The “past”, collectively represented by the artifacts and marketing styles preserved in the flea market milieu, is principal among these things, and consumers take great pains to reconstitute it meaningfully (Lowenthal 1985). Whether exhilarating or debilitating, nostalgia has become a cultural frame for the structuring of meaning (Stewart 1988). Even the intellectual left engages in singularization via recycling (a practice unkindly if accurately christened “aesthetic necrophilia” by critics), enjoying the “thrill of salvation” and fostering “reincarnation” through its “re-valuing the exploitation of the past without the guilt of having actually maintained the system” (Myers 1986). Among those objects most susceptible to singularization that circulate at the flea market are so-called “collectibles” and “antiques”; so also does the search for such objects assume grail-quest proportions.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to contribute to the reinvigorated stream of research attempting to broaden traditional notions of marketplace behavior. A need exists to view the marketing system as an articulation of conventional and alternative conduits, and to investigate systematically the dynamics within and across these conduits. In particular, the social embeddedness of marketplace behavior is incompletely understood. By focussing on the social and experiential aspects of a particular aspect of informal retailing—dealing in a periodic market—this study has provided an ethnographic grounding for the exploration of behaviors of increasing relevance to the discipline of marketing. Academics and practitioners can

no longer afford to ignore the impact that alternative markets are having upon the dynamics of buying and selling. It has been argued that the alternative conduit contains “the very foundation of all other economic activity” and that its emphasis on “mutual obligation and reciprocity”—in short, the salience of its embeddedness—is potentially transformative of our marketing system (Gaughan and Ferman 1987). So also must the cultural and psychological significance of marketplace behaviors be thoroughly investigated. Ethnographic investigation of particular markets, which in turn will promote cross-market comparison, is one route to such deeper understanding.

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