Serving Customers and Consumers Effectively in the Twenty-First Century: A Conceptual Framework and Overview

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In this article, the authors first propose and discuss a conceptual framework pertaining to the theme of this special issue. This framework portrays "markets" as consisting of "customers" and "consumers," specifies the distinction as well as linkages between the two, and outlines specific components of individual linkages between pairs of entities within markets. Using this framework as a backdrop, the article then provides an overview of the rest of the special issue by discussing how each of the remaining articles relate to the framework and to one another.

The seeds that spawned this special issue were sown more than 3 years ago, soon after the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) released its list of research priorities for 1996 to 1998. The "capital topic" or highest research priority on the list was "Customers and Consumers." Understanding markets and delivering superior value—that is, effectively serving customers and consumers—was a common theme cutting across several key subtopics under this capital topic:

- Drivers of customer preferences and behavior in the twenty-first century,
- lifetime value/economic worth of customers and consumers,
- components and drivers of customer loyalty,
- "total" value proposition delivered by the supply chain,
- creating and delivering customer value,
- impact of technology on customer service and market structures, and
- building and managing customer relationships.

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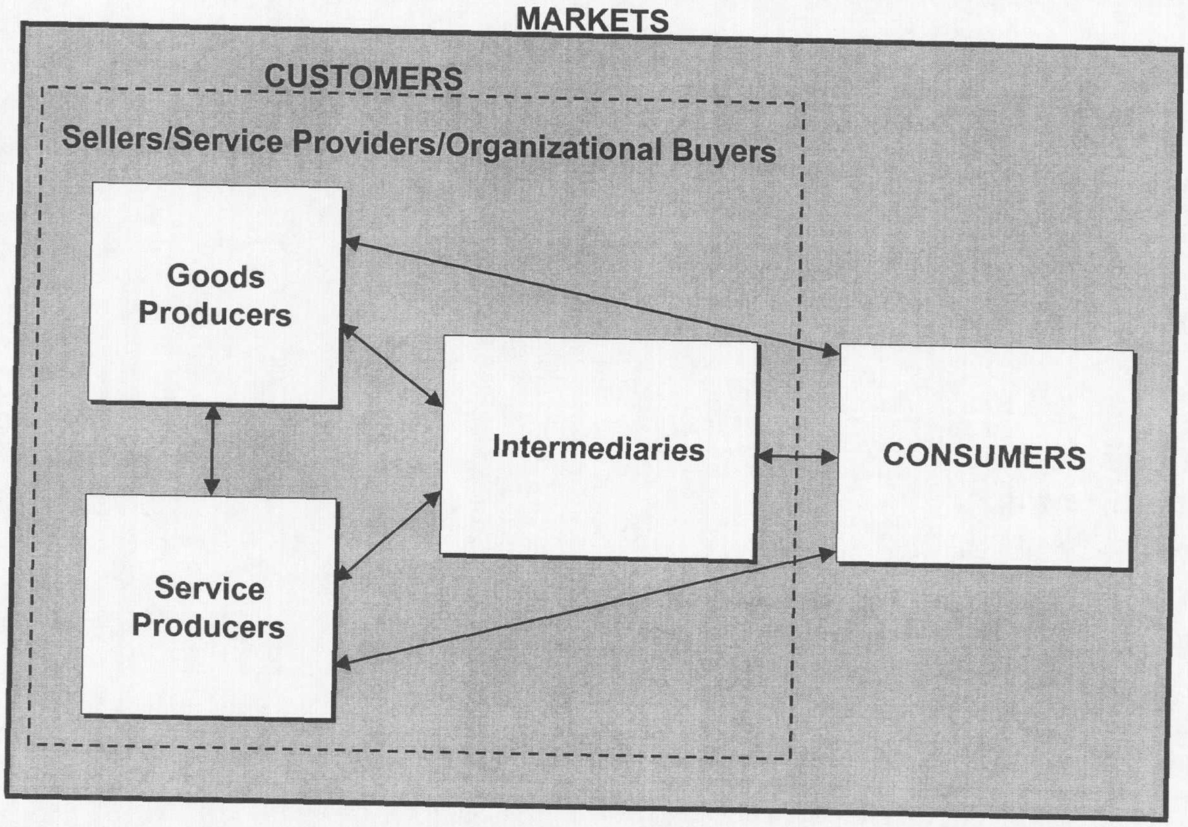
Consistent with Day's (1996) suggestion that the "Marketing Science Institute Research Priorities, published every two years, would be a valuable source of guidance . . . for developing high quality, influential special issues" (p. 16) and with cosponsorship from MSI, we began planning this special issue by first organizing a conference devoted to the aforementioned issues. This conference, titled *Serving Customers and Consumers Effectively in the Twenty-First Century: Emerging Issues and Solutions*, was held in Miami in December 1998. A number of renowned researchers with a record of important scholarly contributions in areas pertaining to the conference theme were invited to make presentations based on their current research and thinking. Within the general confines of the conference theme, we gave the invitees a great deal of flexibility in terms of choice of topics and mode of inquiry (i.e., conceptual, empirical, or a combination of the two). We encouraged them to address issues such as (a) challenges of, and opportunities for, serving customers and consumers excellently in the next century; (b) new insights for being customer oriented and market oriented and fostering customer loyalty; and (c) important questions wor-

FIGURE 1
A Conceptual Framework of Seller-Buyer Linkages



thy of further investigation and directions for addressing them.

The conference attracted presentations by some of the leading scholars in the marketing discipline. All presenters prepared articles based on their talks for inclusion in this special issue. The articles were reviewed and then revised on the basis of the reviewer feedback (colleagues who served as reviewers are acknowledged at the beginning of this issue). We believe that the ideas, issues, and research findings that are discussed in the following articles offer intriguing insights for scholars and practitioners alike.

In the remainder of this overview, we provide a road map for exploring this special issue. We first propose and discuss an overall conceptual framework that serves as a general backdrop in which to anchor the various articles. We then preview each article and indicate its relationship to the overall framework as well as to other relevant articles.

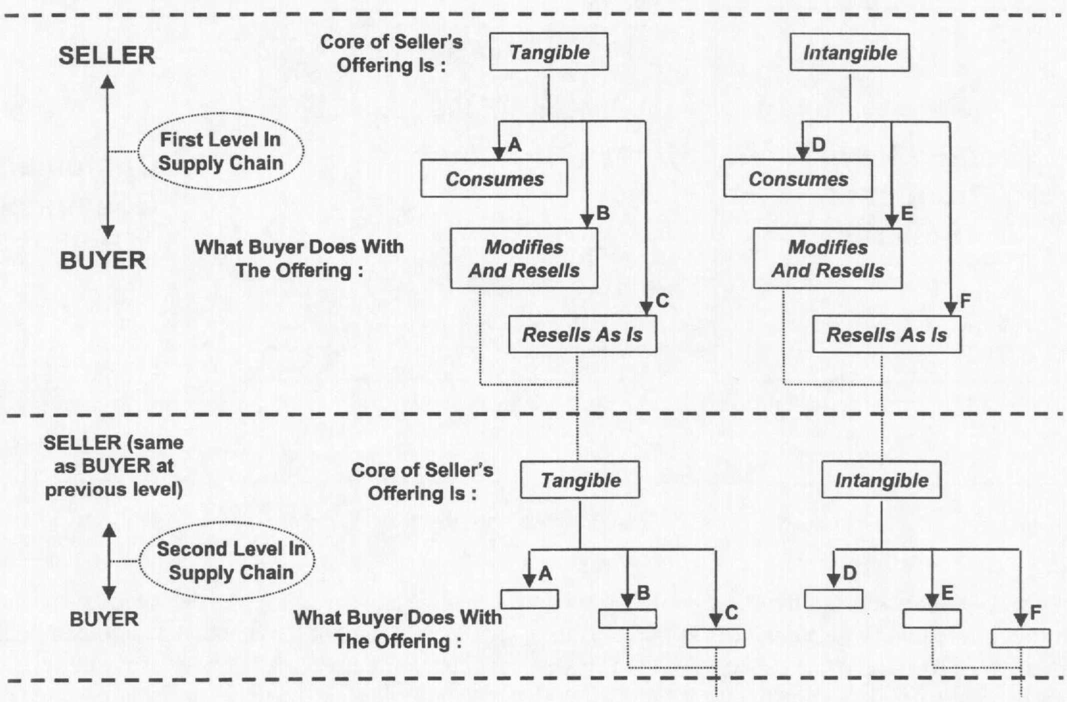
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents our overall conceptual framework in simplified form. It depicts markets as consisting of two sets of entities—customers and consumers—and shows all possible linkages within and between the two sets. The various two-way linkages in the framework emphasize the special issue's main theme of serving customers and consumers because serving invariably involves interactions between two parties, regardless of the nature of such interactions (e.g., face-to-face vs. arm's-length, discrete vs. continuous [cf. Lovelock 1983]).

The terms *customers* and *consumers* are at times used interchangeably both in scholarly writings and in the popular press. However, in the context of this special issue, it is beneficial to clarify and retain the distinction between the two. As Webster (2000 [this issue]) observes in the next article,

> One must be more careful than ever not to confuse the words *consumer* and *customer*. A *consumer* is a person who uses or consumes the product. A *customer* is an individual or business entity that buys the product, meaning that they acquire it (legally, and probably but not necessarily, physically) and pay for it. Obviously, a major class of customers are all those types of marketing intermediaries or channel members who buy for resale to *their* customers,

FIGURE 2
A Typology of Seller-Buyer Linkages in Supply Chains



SOURCE: Adapted from Parasuraman (1998:311).

> including wholesalers and retailers of all types as well as business customers (original equipment manufacturers or OEMs) who integrate products into the products they manufacture. (P. 20)

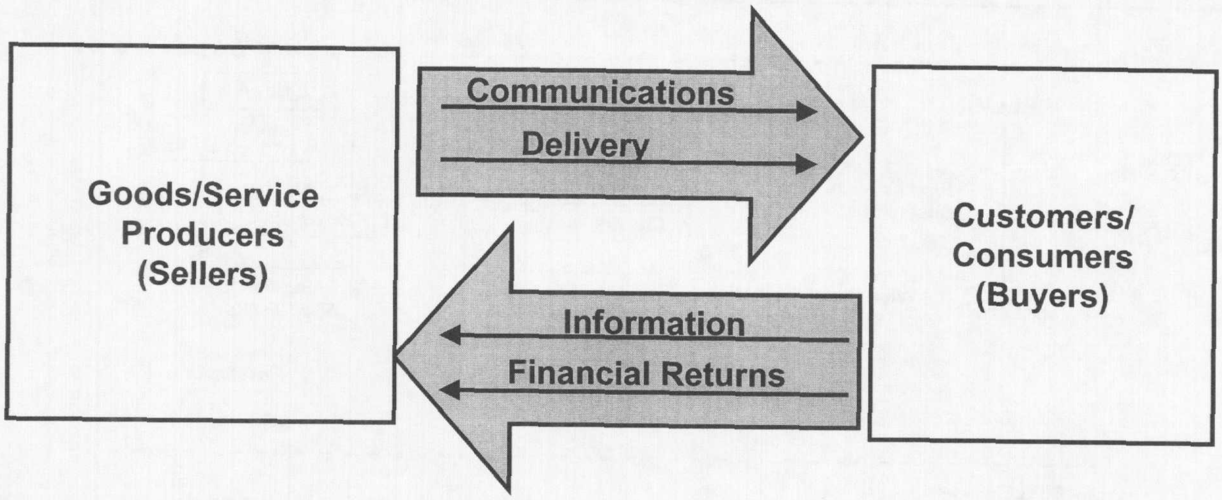
The "customers" box in Figure 1 is consistent with Webster's portrayal of the term. However, it also explicitly acknowledges the growing importance of customer service in business-to-business contexts by incorporating service producers (in addition to goods producers) as a distinct component. As Parasuraman (1998) has argued, regardless of whether the core of what is exchanged between organizational sellers and buyers is tangible (e.g., chemicals, packaged goods, electronic components, cleaning supplies) or intangible (e.g., legal services, phone services, information services), customer service is becoming increasingly critical:

> Research and writings in the field of business-to-business marketing have been dominated by a [tangible] product focus. However, recent and ongoing changes in the business environment . . . are making it difficult to compete effectively on the basis of traditional marketing mix variables alone. . . . The focus is now shifting from merely selling to customers to serving them effectively. (Parasuraman 1998: 309)

The role and relative importance of customer service could very well vary depending on the type of seller-buyer dyad and the nature of the product exchanged between the members of the dyad. Parasuraman (1998) has developed a typology of such dyads within a supply chain on the basis of (a) whether the product has a tangible or intangible core and (b) whether the buying organization buys solely for internal consumption (e.g., cleaning supplies, legal services) or for resale to the next level in the supply chain—either without much modification (e.g., packaged goods, long-distance phone capacity that is purchased in bulk to be resold) or after some processing (e.g., chemicals used as raw materials, electronic components installed in other products, information purchased from various sources and synthesized for resale). Figure 2 shows an adapted version of this typology. This figure also constitutes a more detailed, richer depiction of the various linkages among goods producers, service producers, and intermediaries shown in the customers component of Figure 1.

The linkages labeled A, B, C, D, E, and F in Figure 2 represent six different types of seller-buyer dyads within each level of the supply chain. The relative importance of

FIGURE 3
Components of Seller-Buyer Linkages



customer service across those dyads is yet to be established through research (Parasuraman 1998). However, it seems reasonable to assume that sellers in each of type of dyad can strengthen their competitive positions through superior service. As such, Figure 2 highlights the need for inquiries focusing on uncovering what constitutes superior service within the domain of each type of dyad.

Figure 3 offers a microscopic view of the two-way linkages included in Figure 1. The primary flows from sellers to buyers are communications (marketing or promotional messages, product/service information, etc.) and delivery (including not only the transfer of products/services but also the process of interacting with customers/consumers). The primary flows from buyers to sellers include information (market research/intelligence, inquiries from customers/consumers, etc.) and financial returns (including not only immediate benefits such as revenue/profits but also potential benefits through positive word-of-mouth communications, increased loyalty, etc.).

Figure 1 (along with the elaborations of its components in Figures 2 and 3) serves as a framework for synthesizing the principal themes of the articles in this issue. While each article has its own unique focus (as our more detailed preview in the next two sections will show), collectively the articles can be considered as taking either a macro or micro perspective. By a macro perspective we are referring to insights and implications pertaining to markets (Figure 1) as a whole. In contrast, a micro perspective pertains to a focus on one or more components of the seller-buyer linkages (Figure 3). Creating this macro/micro dichotomy perhaps runs the risk of oversimplifying, and, more important, classifying an article as one that takes either a macro or a micro perspective is necessarily subjective. In light of these potential shortcomings, we offer the macro/micro classification primarily as an expositional convenience to capture concisely the wide range of issues the articles address and as an initial road map for readers.

MACRO PERSPECTIVES

Focusing on the three-way relationships among goods producers, intermediaries, and consumers in Figure 1, Webster (2000) suggests that there has been an overwhelming bias toward treating branding issues purely from the point of view of consumers, and that the meaning of manufacturers' brands to intermediaries is virtually unexplored. Citing Procter & Gamble and Intel as examples, Webster cogently claims that the customers of these companies, respectively, are retailers and OEMs rather than consumers/end users. As such, there is a pressing need for broadening the scope of, and research on, branding to include the roles of producers' brands in the producer-intermediary and the intermediary-consumer linkages. Observing that "[i]n this three-way relationship [among producers, intermediaries, and consumers], the quality of that relationship for any single player depends on the quality and strength of that relationship between the other two" (p. 20), Webster offers several important insights for designing effective marketing strategies that recognize and leverage the broadened scope of brands in the supply chain. Implementing such strategies will lead to supply-chain synergies that maximize brand value to all members in the chain.

Whereas Webster (2000) discusses market relationships from a branding perspective, Day (2000 [this issue]) examines them from a "capability" perspective. The extant literature on relationship marketing and customer/consumer loyalty generally touts the benefits—especially financial benefits—of customer/consumer retention vis-à-vis defection (e.g., Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997), although some authors have also emphasized the need for identifying the right customers/consumers at whom relationship marketing efforts should be directed (e.g., Berry 1995; Reichheld 1993). Consistent with, and expanding on, the latter notion, Day (2000) begins with two basic points:

> One is that a strategy of investing in or building close relationships is neither appropriate nor necessary for every market, customer, or company. . . . Second, market relationships create sustainable advantages precisely because they are so difficult to manage. Not every firm can or should try to master the market-relating capability. (P. 24)

Day (2000) then proposes a "Relationship Spectrum" along which are arrayed three types of relationships: transactional exchanges, value-adding exchanges, and collaborative exchanges. He suggests that an increasing amount of market-relating capability is required as one moves from transactional to value-adding to collaborative exchanges.

Day portrays market-relating capability as a three-dimensional construct composed of relationship orientation, relationship-specific knowledge and skills, and integration and alignment of processes. The three capability dimensions, while mutually reinforcing, are distinct. Day depicts them as three vectors emanating from the origin of a three-dimensional space and suggests that firms whose capabilities place them close to the origin can (and perhaps should) only compete on the basis of transactional exchanges; attempting to move toward the collaborative-exchange end of the relationship spectrum would require a commensurate upgrading of capabilities along each of the three vectors. Day's framework and his discussion of it offer insights into building different degrees of seller-buyer linkages, determining which types of linkages are appropriate in a given market, and ascertaining the capabilities needed for effectively forging those linkages.

The article by Roberts (2000) focuses on the nature and implications of the market turbulence and structural changes being engendered by the proliferation of rapidly evolving technologies such as the Internet and by phenomena such as increasing globalization and interdependence among industries. Roberts offers an enlightening discussion of (a) traditional research approaches for understanding markets and strategic approaches for addressing them, (b) possible shortcomings of those approaches in light of the radical changes that are currently occurring, and (c) improved research methods for calibrating the new markets and enhanced strategies for effectively serving them.

Companies with a strong market orientation have typically been portrayed as being market driven—that is, as companies that make concerted efforts to gather and internally disseminate relevant market information and develop appropriate marketing strategies in response to that information. The new calibration metrics for new markets discussed by Roberts (2000) primarily fall within this market-driven domain. Jaworski, Kohli, and Sahay (2000 [this issue]) discuss a broadened interpretation of market orientation by augmenting it with a driving markets facet, which involves influencing (rather than merely reacting to) the market structure and/or behavior of entities in the market. They position being market driven and driving markets as complementary strategies and suggest that a company can pursue both simultaneously (e.g., Barnes and Noble Bookstores systematically gathers information from the traditional book-distribution channels and formulates its marketing strategies on the basis of that information; at the same time, it is also aggressively pursuing a Web-based strategy that may contribute to significant changes in the very nature and structure of book sales and distribution). Jaworski et al. propose three approaches for driving markets: eliminating certain players (deconstruction approach), altering the market structure by introducing a new or modified set of players (construction approach), and changing the functions performed by players (functional modification approach). They also propose, and discuss the implications of, a conceptual framework that identifies different types of market orientation depending on whether a company treats the market structure and the behavior of players in it as given or whether it attempts to shape one (or both) of them.

Sheth, Sisodia, and Sharma (2000 [this issue]) predict that the marketing function (at all levels of the supply chain implied in Figures 1 and 2) will increasingly gravitate toward customer-centric marketing, which "emphasizes . . . the needs, wants, and resources of *individual* consumers and customers rather than those of mass markets or market segments" (p. 56, emphasis added). They base this prediction on three important trends: intensifying pressures to improve marketing productivity, increasing market diversity, and rapidly growing technologies conducive to practicing customer-centric marketing. They indicate how this form of marketing differs from one-to-one marketing and relationship marketing, and they discuss five significant and nonintuitive changes in the nature of marketing that are likely to result from a customer-centric focus: viewing marketing as supply management, customer outsourcing, cocreation marketing, fixed-cost marketing, and customer-centric organizations. The authors offer a conceptual framework and a corresponding set of propositions that have the potential for stimulating further debate and research on customer-centric marketing.

MICRO PERSPECTIVES

Zeithaml (2000 [this issue]) reviews the extant literature on various aspects of the relationship between the quality of service delivered by sellers and the financial returns they obtain from buyers, and she offers an insightful synthesis of what is known about this relationship and what remains to be investigated. She proposes a conceptual model that delineates multiple pathways through which service quality could contribute to profits. For instance, firms can use service quality as the basis for implementing defensive marketing strategies (focused on retaining customers) to increase profits (e.g., through cost reductions). Firms can also leverage service quality in implementing offensive marketing strategies (focused on gaining new customers or greater market dominance) to increase profits (e.g., through an increased market share). These offensive strategies should enhance sales and profits. Using this conceptual model as a backdrop, Zeithaml presents a comprehensive examination and discussion of the literature, which covers all four facets of the buyer-seller linkages shown in Figure 3. Her enlightening analysis concludes with an agenda of issues and challenges that need to be addressed to deepen our understanding of the link between service quality and profitability. A number of items on this agenda imply a call for developing creative measurement approaches and calibration metrics to enhance the richness of information (from and about customers/consumers), a key component shown in Figure 3.

The article by Rust and Oliver (2000 [this issue]) focuses on customer (and consumer) "delight," a concept that has been receiving increasing attention, and addresses some of the issues identified by Zeithaml (2000) as needing more research attention (e.g., the optimal amount that should be spent on providing superior service). This article pertains directly to the delivery and the financial returns components of Figure 3. Rust and Oliver (2000) begin with a conceptual definition of the delight construct and provide an interesting discussion of three forms of delight: assimilated, reenacted, and transitory. Building on these concepts as well as on other insights from the customer satisfaction literature, they formulate a formal mathematical model of customer delight. Analytical insights from this model suggest managerial implications pertaining to important issues such as the competitive effects of customer delight and the conditions under which delighting customers is likely to be profitable. Not all of these implications are obvious. For instance, while the model results suggest that delighting customers increases their expectations and makes satisfying them more difficult in the future, they also show that by raising the bar on performance expectations, the competitor is likely to be hurt more than is the delighting firm.

Just as Rust and Oliver's (2000) work brings to the fore the pros and cons of delighting customers, the article by Bolton, Kannan, and Bramlett (2000 [this issue]) does so for loyalty-reward programs, which are growing in popularity in a variety of industries (e.g., airlines, credit cards, supermarkets, restaurants, video rentals). A fundamental issue that Bolton et al.'s study addresses is whether and under what conditions loyalty-reward programs are beneficial (from a company's perspective). Drawing on insights from the current literature, Bolton et al. first propose a conceptual model of repatronage behavior. Their model posits that repatronage behavior will be influenced by a variety of service experiences (including experiences with loyalty programs and competitive offerings) and interactions among them. Bolton et al. test the model's hypotheses with cross-sectional, time-series data from credit card customers of a multinational financial services company that offers a loyalty-reward program. The results of these tests offer several intriguing insights for both further research and managerial practice. For instance, the findings suggest that members of this company's loyalty-reward program tend to overlook or discount negative evaluations of the company vis-à-vis competition and perceive they are getting greater value (better quality and service for the price).

While the primary focus of the three preceding micro-perspective articles (i.e., Bolton et al. 2000; Rust and Oliver 2000; Zeithaml 2000) is on the benefits or financial returns from the delivery of service-related initiatives, the article by Steinman, Deshpandé, and Farley (2000 [this issue]) concentrates on the self- and buyer perceptions of the seller's market orientation. As such, the implied emphasis of their article is on the communications and information flows in the seller-buyer linkage shown in Figure 3. Invoking insights from the extant literature on market orientation and from social identity theory, Steinman et al. develop a series of propositions about the impact of relationship length, relationship importance, and national culture (collectivist vs. individualistic) on the size of the market orientation gap between sellers and buyers. They then test these propositions with data from leading Japanese and U.S. business firms and their key customers (the authors collected data from two respondents within each firm of the seller-buyer dyad, thereby producing a *quadrad*—a combination of two buyer-seller dyads—which they take as their unit of analysis). The results from the authors' quadrad analyses have several important managerial and research implications pertaining to market orientation and relationship marketing.

Slater and Narver's (2000 [this issue]) article examines the role of intelligence generation in the creation of superior customer value, and, therefore, its principal focus is on the information component in Figure 3. However, this article also indirectly involves the delivery and financial returns components because the authors investigate the impact of intelligence generation on performance outcomes such as customer satisfaction, sales growth, product quality, and product success. Specifically, they propose four types of intelligence generation—market-focused intelligence generation, intelligence generated through collaboration, intelligence generated through experimentation, and intelligence generated through repetitive experience—and hypothesize differential effects of each on the various performance outcomes (in other words, not all types of intelligence generation will be equally effective in all contexts). An exploratory study the authors conducted in the electronics industry supports the general proposition that different intelligence-gathering approaches have differential effects on sources of customer value and performance. The findings and their implications underscore the need for firms to commit organizational resources (time and money) toward the creation—and constant updating—of their intelligence-generation capabilities.

Berry's (2000 [this issue]) article relates to the communication and delivery components of the buyer-seller linkage (Figure 3) and focuses on the special significance of branding in service contexts. On the basis of powerful findings from in-depth primary research with 14 mature, high-performance companies, Berry (2000) convincingly argues that branding is "a cornerstone of services marketing for the twenty-first century," presents an insightful branding model that details the antecedents of brand equity, and discusses four strategies for building a strong service brand (i.e., "cultivating brand equity"). Berry's (2000) branding model emphasizes the important distinction between "brand awareness" and "brand meaning" and demonstrates why the latter has a much stronger impact on brand equity. The four strategies he recommends for developing strong service brands are dare to be different, determine your own fame, make an emotional connection, and internalize the brand. Through the use of apt examples and insights from his research, Berry (2000) provides a rich discussion of the meaning and implementation of these strategies.

Similar to Berry's (2000) article, the article by Bitner, Brown, and Meuter (2000 [this issue]) also focuses primarily on the communication and delivery facets of Figure 3, but from the perspective of the increasing role of technology in serving customers and consumers. Bitner et al. develop a conceptual framework (called the Technology Infusion Matrix) that depicts technology's potential contributions in effectively performing three types of service-related tasks that are key drivers of satisfaction and retention—customizing service offerings, recovering from service failures, and spontaneously delighting customers—from the standpoint of customers/consumers as well as employees. Their conceptual framework is therefore a 2×3 matrix. The authors offer a detailed and enlightening discussion of this matrix by drawing on concepts from the literature and using a number of company illustrations. From this discussion they derive a set of important implications for managers and directions for further research.

Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000 [this issue]) develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that articulates—in much greater detail than current models—the role of trust in fostering customer/consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Their framework builds on, and extends, extant models by integrating insights from agency theory (rooted in economics) and trust research (rooted in psychology) and showing how the interplay between the two might shape encounter-specific satisfaction as well as long-term loyalty. Moreover, they portray trust as a two-dimensional construct (consisting of competence and benevolence) that permits a fine-grained understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics that drive ultimate loyalty. Their discussion of the framework yields a rich propositional inventory as well as potentially fruitful avenues for further research. Singh and Sirdeshmukh's article is a general theoretical framework that nicely complements several of the earlier articles that imply specific strategies for fostering trust, satisfaction, and loyalty (e.g., through loyalty programs [Bolton et al. 2000], branding [Berry 2000], and technology [Bitner et al. 2000]).

In the final article, we first synthesize insights from prior research we have done with colleagues on service quality, perceived value, and loyalty. Then, by integrating this synthesis with a recap of relevant main themes from the preceding articles, we generate a list of issues that are especially deserving of further research. Our intent in this article is to basically highlight and summarize—on the basis of our own research and the collective contributions from the articles included herein—critical research issues that still need to be addressed for enhancing our understanding of how to serve customers and consumers effectively in the twenty-first century.

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The authors contributed equally to this article.

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