

The Response of Business to Consumer Resistance: an Exploratory Study

Federico Brunetti

Professor of Business Management

Dipartimento di Economia Aziendale

Università degli Studi di Verona

Via dell'Artigliere, 19

37129 Verona – Italia

federico.brunetti@univr.it

The Response of Business to Consumer Resistance: an Exploratory Study

Abstract

Consumer Resistance has mainly been studied from the point of view of the consumer, in an effort to understand the underlying motivations for such movements and the way they manifest themselves.

This paper aims to approach the question from the point of view of business. This perspective is significant as the world of business is the inevitable counterpart to the Consumer Resistance phenomenon.

The paper seeks to shed some light on the business world's current response to Consumer Resistance, while suggesting that such response can be seen in terms of the opportunities it presents rather than in terms of the threat to business.

Keywords

Consumer Resistance, Business response, Cooperation, Opportunity

INTRODUCTION

One of the main features of Consumer Resistance (CR) has always been the great variety of ways in which it manifests itself.

On the one hand it could be said that the search for originality, or a certain eccentricity or inborn predilection for mould-breaking are some of the key features of CR movements.

On the other hand a significant part of the various forms of resistance comes within the sphere of daily routine (Peñaloza and Price 1993; Dobscha 1998), with no particular kinds of behaviour being apparent to the outsider, leading us to observe that such variety is even greater than first appears, where individual ways of doing things are by definition different one from the other.

This characteristic has been noted since the earliest works on the subject (Peñaloza and Price 1993), and remains still very much true today.

Three further factors contribute to the heterogeneous nature of CR. Firstly, the increase in the scale of the phenomenon itself, this associated with the passage of time and the inevitable quest for the various groups driving CR to differentiate themselves one from the other. The search for consensus, for a greater impact, remains a problem. The wish to be independently distinguished and recognised however results in the further proliferation of the forms of CR. In the second place there is the “over abundance of the possible” (Fabris 1993), that is to say the explosion in the potential of and the freedom provided by technological means, more especially increased socio-psychological freedom and subjective sovereignty, and the wish to explore the frontiers of creativity and the broadening on the part of the community at large of what is deemed acceptable conduct. The tolerance of the post-modern ethos encourages the individual and combinations of individuals to experiment, innovate, free the imagination and hence produce the great variety of these forms that are under discussion here.

Thirdly, and finally, there has in recent times been a willingness on the part of consumers to increasingly make use of the extraordinary communications and coordination tool that is the Internet. The digital network provides a fundamental infrastructure for the consumers to act socially, insofar as it permits easy, economic and individual connections between all the people that are interested in “resistance”.

As a consequence, the forms of CR currently in existence are certainly numerous and diversified.

Leaving aside any discussion of the label “resistance” itself, the category is not limited solely to initiatives, attitudes and behaviour necessarily antagonistic to the business world.

The CR world also embraces initiatives driven by ambivalent attitudes where variably composed mixtures of aversion to, or acceptance of, business may exist side by side (Dalli and Corciolani 2007; Roux 2007). The motivating impulse may in each case also be quite different in nature.

The motivating factors behind CR are not therefore necessarily rigidly rooted in an ideological opposition to the world of business, but may be driven by a search for cheaper products, or by generosity or by altruism, by curiosity, by a desire to try out different suppliers, by a preference for an “invisible badge” (Walker 2008) or simply by a wish to play some kind of game just for fun.

Consumers may exchange files or books, barter durable goods, give away products they no longer use and obtain others free, make group purchases of groceries or used goods, buy anonymous or unknown goods on purpose, take part in parties, meetings or festivals or effect changes in advertisements. These actions may be aimed at obtaining savings, at doing something useful, at simply feeling good and satisfied, at finding products or ways of buying that are different from the usual channels and enjoying the ultimate satisfaction of uniqueness, at being self-sufficient or at just joking about and having fun.

All these motivating factors have the common denominator of leading the individual to slip outside or distance him or herself from the market circus in its strict sense, without necessarily being openly antagonistic to it as a silent and anything but sad retreat from the traditional market.

It would be incidentally interesting to take a more detailed look at the aggregative aspect of the CR movements, and whether they can be regarded as a sort of consumer tribe (Cova 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) brought together not by a brand (Muniz and Hamer 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) but by rejection of the business world or of particular aspects of it.

If this were the case, the CRs in question would just provide another group for people to join, to provide a sense of belonging. The “protest” element would slip into the background, with the overriding motivation of being member of a group.

To proceed with the study by examining consumption aspects would be something of a challenge, on the basis of what has been said up to now. Such studies are naturally ongoing, with new subjects opening up and with areas already considered being examined in further detail.

It is the author’s intention to investigate the effects of CR initiatives, or more particularly the direct and indirect responses of the business world to the ever greater and increasingly diversified demands of consumers.

It is perfectly true that the existence of a “recursive interplay between the actions of the resisters and the structures of domination” was observed early in the history of this literature (Peñaloza and Price 1993, 123). The recognition that there were and must be two agents involved in the CR phenomenon is not something new. It is also however true that of the two players involved, much more attention has been paid to the consumer while the other player, the company, has received considerably less consideration.

THEORY

The areas of theory that have been primarily drawn upon in the writing of this paper are the literature on CR, that on Corporate Social Responsibility and the linked areas of Quality-of-Life Marketing and Consumer Well-Being Marketing.

The greater part of the studies on Consumer Resistance, as has already been stated, has logically concentrated on the consumer side of the equation. There is a wide range of literature addressing both the content of and the methodological approach to the phenomenon. A still larger number of articles and papers can be found on the subject when the different labels attached to CR are considered, with articles appearing on critical, responsible and ethical consumption and so forth.

As regards the actual content of the studies themselves, they take the form of general research (Herrmann 1993; Dobscha 1998; Kozinets and Handelman 2004), albeit each study with its own focus, as well as very specific arguments (such as those considered in the works of Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 2002; Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Hemetsberger 2006; Close and Zinkham 2007).

As regards methodology, the range includes field observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews, case method, diaries, participant observation, netnography and all those methods that operate within computer-mediated environments and not of course to forget the quantitative studies.

Two distinct trends are every more clearly emerging from the study. On the one hand, there is the “normality”, so to speak, of those involved in CR, and on the other hand there has been the development of what can be described as the “dialectical relationship” between the companies and the market.

With regard to the first of these trends, it should be noted that the people who instigate or involve themselves in conduct that comes under the umbrella of Consumer Resistance are not only members of subcultures, or of colourful minorities, or socially marginalised individuals

but are often ordinary members of the community with personal profiles that in no way stand as unusual in the general social and cultural context (Brunetti and Giaretta 2007; Roux 2007). As for the second trend of the above trends, business and the markets on the one hand, and consumers on the other, are not isolated entities but exist through their connections with others. Their relationship between each other is essentially that of mutual dependence, exchange and reciprocal influence (Holt 2002; Dalli and Corciolani 2007; Roux 2007). CR is in other words a co-determined social process where one agent could not exist without the other.

A second area of theory relevant to this discourse is that of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Such studies are numerous, large scale and of considerable topical interest, where increasingly the concept of the citizenship of the company has been affirmed and where the reciprocal exchange between the company and the community has seen the development of pacts or charters of mutual benefits and duties.

Corporate Social Responsibility is fundamentally perceived as a mandatory option for companies, following an essentially prescriptive approach. CSR is thus rarely seen in its concrete application but is primarily considered in terms of a moral imperative for company conduct.

The CSR phenomenon tends to develop on its own terms independently of considerations of trends in Consumer Resistance. Connections between this and CR are infrequent, with a self-referential approach to the subject being the rule.

This area of research thus evolves parallel to that of CR and its repercussions on business, and is thought worthy of its reference, despite an only peripheral contribution to the argument in hand.

A third area of study pertinent to this paper is to be found in the studies on marketing, specifically and recently in the area of Quality-of-Life Marketing (QOL Marketing), and of Consumer Well-Being Marketing (CWB Marketing).

“QOL marketing is marketing practice – the business mechanism that plans, prices, promotes, and distributes consumer goods to customers – designed to *enhance* customer well-being while *preserving* the well-being of the firm’s other stakeholders (e.g. stockholders, distributors, suppliers, employees, local community and the environment)” (Lee and Sirgy 2004, 45).

The QOL Marketing construct is made up essentially on the one hand of “marketing beneficence”, or improved consumer well-being, and on the other hand “non maleficence” marketing, or the preservation of the well-being of other stakeholders.

QOL Marketing is based on a number of philosophical foundations in marketing thought. It is a concept embedded in Societal Marketing, is an ethical extension of Relationship Marketing and is finally embedded in Stakeholder Theory. Primary aspects involve customer well-being (consumer satisfaction with product acquisition, material possession, both product acquisition and material possession and consumer satisfaction across the various stages of the product life cycle). The outcome is customer trust and commitment, benefits for the corporate image and company goodwill.

CWB Marketing could be thought of as an extension of the previous marketing concept.

Consumer Well-Being can be defined as “a state in which consumers’ experiences with goods and services – experiences related to acquisition, preparation, consumption, ownership, maintenance, and disposal of specific categories of goods and services in the context of their local environment – are judged to be beneficial to both consumers and society at large” (Sirgy and Lee 2006, 43).

CWB Marketing is a business philosophy grounded in business ethics, particularly in the form of ethical duties, such the duty of beneficence and of non-maleficence (Sirgy and Lee 2008). Notwithstanding their different labels, QOL Marketing and CWB Marketing have many points of contact, such that it may be difficult to demarcate a clear line of distinction between them. Such an argument is not however part of this discussion and both labels may be regarded as the transposition and modern application of certain principles of Business Ethics and of Corporate Social Responsibility within the area of Marketing studies.

In each case there is no direct connection between them and Consumer Resistance research area. Among the factors that induce the adoption of the quality of life approach over that of consumer well-being are environmental factors (such as social consciousness and an ethical climate in industry), organisational factors (such as organizational ethics and long term company orientation) and individual factors (such as the autotelic personality, moral idealism, cognitive moral development and a caring attitude). There is however no specific reference to the demands of CR movements or initiatives.

QOL marketing and CWB marketing, on the one hand, and Consumer Resistance, on the other, illustrate a certain mutual independence and self-sufficiency where there is no consolidated integration between them, which would as the case may be have to be constructed.

METHODOLOGY

Given that total objectivity in the social sciences is virtually impossible to achieve (Myrdal 1966), there is a duty to air certain personal preferences explicitly. From this point of view, there is agreement with the methodological approach that favours relevance over rigor (Sheth and Sisodia 2005) and the search for “approximate answers to important problems or issues (...) rather than precise answers to wrong, well-defined, narrow problems” (Raju 2005, 18). It is preferable to understand and interpret the essence of the phenomena and trends that are deemed most important, and to seek to predict and set forth future developments rather than claim to obtain precise data on more restrictive and specific subjects.

That said, this paper is primarily exploratory in nature. It is a preliminary effort to collate business conduct in relation to CR. There is therefore no initial definition of a specific and circumscribed research objective, but just a sketching out of the boundaries of an area to comb. There is thus no a priori research key but rather collections of material on the conduct of business that are relevant to the area of study. The aim has been to build up a picture of the types of business behaviour that has a relationship with the various forms of consumer resistance.

Given the nature of these objectives, secondary sources have been largely drawn upon, particularly editorial sources and documents from leading consulting companies and from independent web-based agencies over a time period from May 2005 to May 2008.

It has not been deemed useful, at least at this stage, to make use of questionnaires or direct interviews with entrepreneurs and managers. Although the persons actually running the companies are of course an essential source for any understanding of the phenomenon, it has been thought it more important preliminarily to establish an overview of the situation rather than enter immediately into analysis of the reasons underlying the decisions behind the company conduct in question. Such study could well follow on, once a “census” of and suitable classification of responses to CR is available of use.

The first source consulted was ordinary newspapers and journals, rather than specialist titles dealing specifically with business and economics. This was because the intent has been to gather as much raw material as possible, covering the width of range assured by the non-specialist nature of the titles, the relevance of the material gathered, ensured by the way the material is gathered, and its freshness, coming from a topical source.

A selection process has of course been required when using press resources. Certain ‘broadsheet’ titles have been chosen, such as *Corriere della Sera*, *Internazionale* and “D” (“la

Repubblica delle Donne”). Though restricted in number, these sources have proven particularly fit for purpose for the type of research in progress.

In parallel to the above sources, use has made of material from two the major management consulting firms of Accenture and McKinsey. They both operate in close contact with the business world at global level and support companies producing goods and services in diverse sectors, dealing with all aspects of company life.

The documents from Accenture and McKinsey have proven to be important for a number of reasons. Firstly by virtue of the fact that these firms occupy a front line position and play leading roles in determining managerial approaches, tools and strategies. Since they inhabit the frontier areas of business, they are able to accurately detect changes in this environment, including with regard to developments in new areas such as CR. Their usefulness is underscored by the fact that they are possessed of a great body of experience and finally because they apply themselves with commendable diligence to the task of producing content and contributions that are of real use to management.

Constant monitoring has been carried out of two independent websites, both close to the business world though less directly involved, i.e. “Brandchannel” and “ChangeThis”.

Brandchannel (www.brandchannel.com) is, in its own words, “an online magazine committed to providing a global perspective on brands. To further enhance your brand awareness, Brandchannel offers a cadre of tools and information including weekly feature articles, a glossary of branding terms, and global listings for conferences, courses and careers.

Brandchannel provides the opportunity for an open exchange on the subject of brands and branding from practitioners around the world. Editorially independent, Brandchannel.com is sponsored by its parent company, Interbrand”. This, in its own turn, describes itself as “a leading brand consultancy, serving clients worldwide” and “supports Brandchannel’s endeavor to create an objective, central resource for the branding industry”.

The ChangeThis (www.changethis.com) website is an open platform for the publication and circulation of “big ideas” linked in general terms to business, to personal improvement and to the development of better quality of life. ChangeThis furnishes PDF documents – known as “manifests”, which are previews or abstracts of volumes that will shortly appear through the normal publishing channels, as well as on the spot contributions. The authors are selected for publication on a free vote of readers of the manifests and include academics, essayists, consultants, bloggers, journalists and generally people that are deemed to have something interesting to say. The essential features of all of the works are their originality, freshness and

impact, as well as the absence of copyright issues with the circulation of the content actively encouraged.

Less systematic but no less significant in terms of this research, is direct monitoring of the public that is the recipient of company initiatives. Since primary communication in the form of facts and actions, and secondary communication or communication per se from business, are the objects of study here, and given also that there is a particular focus here on the world of business, it is natural that some of the results illustrated below have been derived directly from personal observation.

FINDINGS

It seems appropriate, before moving on to the results of this exploration into the area of the behaviour of business in relation to CR, to take due note of two categories of companies whose conduct is not specifically a response to CR, but are nevertheless interesting and help to complete an overall picture.

The forms of behaviour in question originate from the companies themselves as part of their own natural strategies and, while not strictly a response to CR, are in a sense nevertheless preventive with regard to potential criticism that may be directed from a CR movement.

Firstly there are those businesses whose fundamental strategy is not profit prioritised and, secondly, those that have decided to compete in their markets with a cost leadership strategy. There have always been companies with strategies that are not profit prioritised, or are “intrinsically ethical”, indeed the longest living companies seem to be those with a radically ethical and solid base.

The difference is that recently the attitude has lost its discreet veil that was placed over it. The strategy of not maximising profit is no longer perceived of as something to be ashamed (the first point set forth in the mission of GM stated baldly “GM is in the business of making money, not cars”) (Rowe, Mason and Nickel 1986). This aspect becomes entirely visible, enshrined in the very formulation of the company’s purpose and becomes an identifying element of the company, and as such proudly given a high profile.

Despite the fact that the consumer has become ever more demanding, more selective and more sophisticated, seeking also individual answers, all factors that form the basis of a competitive differentiation strategy, it is increasingly frequent for space to be occupied by companies with a quite different competitive strategy, a cost leadership strategy.

Such firms, which we refer to as “low cost” companies, pursue their financial and economic objectives that do not follow the logic of premium price, or that of trading up, or *masstige* (mass prestige) (Silverstein and Fiske 2003), which until recently held exclusive sway or at very least was by far the predominant trend.

It is true that cost leadership has never been finally abandoned as an idea or in practice but it remains however true that in today’s markets, where price does not occupy first place in the factors determining consumer choice, other tactics are opted for in preference (Ridderstråle and Nordström 2003; Kim and Mauborgne 2005).

Examples of “low cost” companies may be found in many sectors of industry, with a process of imitation having been set in motion, given that new businesses are always aware of the presence of some players operating within the strict logic of maximum cheapness for entirely acceptable quality.

Such companies in a sense come into being anticipating and warding off CR criticisms, or at least some of them. They on the one hand hold themselves out as being close to their customers, offering them the chance to obtain goods and access services that would otherwise be beyond their reach. On the other hand they send out a message, or present an image to the consumer of essence or substance over form, a soberness that sits well with the “less is more” trend (Schwartz 2004) as well as with the vision of those involved in CR.

“Intrinsically ethical” and “low cost” companies, even if avoiding the attacks of CR, are nevertheless an interesting case because they illustrate another aspect of the multifaceted nature of the reality of commerce. Whether through an endogenous and different way of perceiving the role and the business of the entrepreneur, or by opting for a less elitist and more “democratic” strategy, in either case they are witness to the possibility that exists for the establishment of quite different business models.

Apart, then, from the existence of firms that in one way or another ward off the criticisms of CR, the results of the study also highlight a series of responses that are listed here below in the form of eight different categories.

The first response to list is that of those *companies that seek to combat such phenomena as file sharing and peer to peer exchange*.

In this case the reaction of business is evident and often forceful, from public awareness campaigns attacking piracy by taking legal action. While there are different positions among the copyright holders themselves, whether their rights relate to books, or to films or especially to music, with some appreciating the free circulation of their work and others demanding its

protection, the businesses involved in the production and distribution are unanimous and decisive in their opposition to peer to peer exchange. This is however a case that in reality lies a little outside the central area of this argument, and for two fundamental reasons.

In the first place, the main motivation for file sharing among consumers has nothing to do with conflict and much more to do with the clear economic advantage accruing to them. The consumers download audio and video products free of charge not so much for ideological reasons or in any opposition to the logic of business as for the financial savings involved. Symmetrically, the response of business to file sharing, and the legal battles against peer to peer platforms, are motivated by the loss in revenue from losses of sales, rather than any particular ideological interests.

A second form of response may be termed *image repositioning*. Some companies are particularly controversial because their very size and their ways of operating attract the attention of consumer movements. Wal-Mart, McDonald's and Nestlé are, for example, often at the centre of some scandal or other or find themselves the subject of journalistic investigation or academic papers (Schlosser 2001; Ritzer 2004; Fishman 2006), or even film treatments (such as "Super Size Me").

These companies seek to minimise or attenuate the negative effects of CR or any poor reputation that may get attached to them.

Nestlé, for example, launched its Nestlé Image Monitoring system whereby half-yearly analysis was used to keep consumer perception of the company under some sort of control. It also charged an external certifications body with the task of carrying out an annual audit of its compliance with the company principles.

McDonald's, for its part, bases its message on the "I'm lovin' it" slogan. As well as inspiring a positive perception in the reader it has also been used in visual communications in the place of the controversial company name itself, superseded by the famous golden arches logo.

In such a grey area as this, it is by no means easy to clearly distinguish "normal" actions in support of the brand emerging from within the company from responses to consumer attacks and criticism.

It is yet more difficult to decide whether they are symptoms of an authentic sea change in the company's attitudes or they mere window dressing aimed at placating any consumer unrest. The repositioning in sustainable mode is nevertheless, at least at the level of communication, a fact of life of the largest companies. This can without question be seen as one of the effects of CR.

A third type of response can be found in the *re-use of the brands with changes in meaning* effected by consumers in general and by resistant consumers in particular.

This behaviour is a mirror image of that of consumers engaged in so-called creative resistance (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). As these ironically distort the brand's message, so the companies may act similarly by incorporating into their branding similar changes in meaning (Holt 2002; Carducci 2006).

The fact is the relationship between the brand and the consumers is a dialectical play of reciprocal influences where each produces content that is taken in, absorbed, re-processed and re-inserted in the communications cycle.

Such a process has been explored only in few cases, probably because the necessary sense of irony and trust in themselves is not sufficiently developed in too many companies to give rise to the entertain meta-argument and distance themselves to this extent from their own message. The point is not to take a head count of companies capable of operating in this way, but is simply to register that at least some are willing to give the consumers a taste of their own medicine.

A fourth form to include in our list is that of *changing censurable conduct and/or the introduction of new company behaviour and policy*.

The list of boycotted companies is a rather long one, including the likes of Del Monte, Nike, Levi's, Gap, Disney, Shell, Procter & Gamble and Chicco to cite only the most famous cases (Klein 2000; Gesualdi 2003).

In some cases the actions of consumers have been successful and the company has decided to take on board the points made in protest and to suitably change their behaviour (Argenti 2004).

In other cases the business decides of its own free will to accept criticism from the environmental lobbies and alter their policy accordingly.

The well-known British retailer Marks & Spencer, launched its "Look behind the label" campaign informing shoppers of its ethical trading stance. Marks & Spencer held itself up as a responsible trader, citing its commitment to Fairtrade, Sustainability, No-GM, to Animal Welfare and to Washability.

What is interesting to note is that, unlike those normally small companies that are "intrinsically ethical" because their owners have been personally committed from the outset to ethical trade, in this case the company's 'awakening' is later, though not for that any less binding as a commitment. It may indeed be more significant to the cause in that the size of the

company has a major impact and the result is a higher profile involvement that may lead the way for others to follow suit, or at least take into account.

A fifth form of response is the monitoring of conversations with consumers on line, or *blogmetrics*.

This consists of monitoring blog statistics and following the utterances, opinions and evaluations of all those who use the web as a collective communication channel, both in social networks that have arisen spontaneously and in virtual communities set up by the companies themselves, as for example that established by the motorbike clothing company Dainese.

Just like that of netnography, the approach is a useful research tool for monitoring web conversations so that the company can hear many views in a way that would otherwise be very difficult or impossible.

An awareness of what people say in favour of and against the company and its products is as fundamental as ever, since such knowledge is indispensable for non causal action or action based on a partial view of the facts.

Web conversation monitoring need not only be of resistant consumers but also of product users or enthusiastic customers. The customer-company relationship – collaborative innovation (Sawhney, Verona and Prandelli 2005), customer knowledge management (Prandelli and von Krogh 2000) or wkinomics (Tapscott and Williams 2006) – are among the most recent entrants to the realms both of theory and of business practice.

Given its intelligence nature, it is a confidential activity that is naturally not subject to easy measurement and whose contribution may be underestimated. It should however be taken into account at least as an indirect response to CR. In other words, it tries to anticipate and understand what the opinions and the feelings about the company are.

Another category in this response list may be described as *consumer support*. The term covers a whole range of responses and initiatives.

Amazon, a household name in on-line sales, offers CDs, DVDs and new books or, at a lower price, used books from other customers.

In February 2008, the Amsterdam Ikea held a Swap Furniture Day, for furniture and decor or all kinds and brands.

The publishers Harper Collins and Random House, contrary to what might reasonably be expected, help consumers carrying out bookcrossing or reading a book to ‘free’ it in a public place for others to read and continuing the crossing if they wish.

The Italian Coop and the Italian Esselunga supermarket chain have an agreement with CTM Altromercato to sell fairtrade products at their outlets and thus give their customers the option to buy from this source and above all provide a much higher profile for such goods than they might otherwise expect.

Other major Italian retail chains take part in the Last Minute Market initiative whereby foods that can no longer be sold by retailers but may still be used for free distribution to canteens and other social outlets.

There are many other cases where businesses have relationships with their consumers that is not strictly speaking commercial in nature, offering various kinds of support and cooperation. It is of course outside the scope of this work to review all individual eventualities, but it can indicate the establishment of forms of conduct that to a greater or lesser extent diverge from purely economic considerations and that may to varying degrees be a result of changes in the consumer climate.

In the *gift giving* category there are companies that offer free goods or services to consumers in various ways and in pursuit of different aims.

The most well-known cases involve software houses that make their programmes available to users free of charge, particularly as regards the entry-level programmes (e.g. Adobe, Real Player and Macromedia Flash).

Other cases include musicians and writers who decide to allow people to download all, or more often as part, of their work free (e.g. Radiohead and Paulo Coelho).

In still other cases publishers permit access on their web sites to copyright material such as published articles (New York Times, Corriere della Sera), both as regards the paper’s daily news and also archives of all past publications (since 1851 in the case of the New York Times, since 1992 for Corriere della Sera and from right back to 1785 in the case of Times of London).

As for radio transmission, there is much radio on line such as, for example, Soma FM, which plays free to air Internet music 24 hours a day with no advertising breaks.

It is quite clear from this brief review how a fundamentally gift-giving culture has arisen with the Internet that has made easy, fast, economic and universally accessible content of all kinds available, whether it be the written word, audio, still images or video. All material capable of

conversion into digital form has been freed by the Internet, such that content has been separated from the physical support in which it had previously been incorporated (Evans and Wurster 2000).

Gift giving, thus, is one of the characteristics that are peculiar to digital culture and the working of the web, where this aspect was identified early on in its life. The process continues to gather pace today, both as a general mechanism and as a mechanism for the generation of or accumulation of wealth, even though this demands new skills, competencies and the putting into effect of new “generative factors” (Kelly 2008).

The embracing by profit-seeking companies of “freelosophy” can be explained in various ways: by the attempt to reach a critical mass of users so as to establish a standard and thus exclude the entry of potential competitors, by the wish to win over customers by having them try out the product or simply by the wish to encourage debate in accordance with the dictates of the Cluetrain Manifesto (Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger 2000).

Though it cannot be considered a response to CR in a strict sense, gift giving has all the same been included in the list as an example of a changing attitude that is taking place in the business community – or at least in a part of it. It seems it could somehow be interpreted as a signal of a less-impelling urge for profit seeking on the part of firms.

The last section regards *associations* and hence initiatives set in motion by groups of companies rather than individual concerns.

The Better Business Bureau (www.us.bbb.org) is “an unbiased organization that sets and upholds high standards for fair and honest business behaviour. Businesses that earn BBB accredited business status contractually agree and adhere to the organization’s high standards of ethical business behaviour”. Its purpose is to create “an ethical marketplace where buyers and sellers can trust each other”.

Business Alliance of Local Living Economies (BALLE, www.livingeconomies.org) is an association coordinating 52 local business networks in North America. Each network aims to support local economic development in the conviction that companies that are locally owned and run are better able to serve its community than global business.

Planet Life Economy Foundation (www.plef.org) is a “free not for profit foundation that seeks to foster and make practical sustainable development principles within a market culture”. The Foundation has established the new science of “Planomia” (or Planetics), which “studies human conduct aimed at maintaining the planet’s vitality and hence the healthy development and survival of all living species through the proper use of scarce, compatible

and sustainable resources”. It must be stressed that the founders and promoters are a group of successful Italian managers and entrepreneurs, people well versed in market economics, the principles of which they would like to reformulate.

All of these associations are involved in initiatives moving in the direction of sustaining alternative models of economic development.

DISCUSSION

Fully aware that the collection may be at once incomplete and excessive, the observed reactions to the CR movements are numerous and varied, albeit taking in a wide view of what comprises CR. Just like consumers, business too has expressed a great heterogeneity of behaviours in terms of their overt expression and their underlying motivations.

Before the discussion begins, the exploratory nature of the paper should be underlined one more time. Its main intent has been to gather a broad collection of responses: in some case such an intent led to find responses that are not – or just weakly – linkable to a specific action of resistant consumers. Nevertheless, as the aim was to begin to take into consideration what the counterpart of CR is doing, the selection criteria were deliberately kept quite loose.

To better understand the nature of the phenomenon, there are three keys to be used in sequence as an aid to interpreting the overall situation. The first is to distinguish the results on the basis of the genesis of the response by business. The second works at the level of the nature of the response itself. The third relates to the positive or nature of the reaction.

As for the genesis of the response, there are responses that have been evoked and those that can be described as spontaneous. The ‘evoked’ responses have been stimulated from without while the spontaneous responses are clearly ‘initiatives’ of business, i.e. responses that are not properly speaking ‘responses’ at all, being actions rather than reactions.

On the question of the reaction of business, there are primary communication responses, consisting of facts and actions, and there are secondary communication responses (communication in the strict sense) (Balmer and Greyser 2003).

As regards the negative or positive nature of the reaction or response, the distinction is between those with a plus sign, that is to say involving to a greater or lesser degree of acceptance of the claims of CR, and those with a minus sign, i.e. with varying degrees of intensity rejecting such claims or demands.

Looking back at the list of observed responses, and applying the above interpretation process, the following conclusions emerge:

- anti file sharing and peer to peer measures	directly evoked – primary comm. – rejection
- image repositioning	directly evoked – secondary comm. – acceptance
- culture jamming re-use	directly evoked – secondary comm. – acceptance
- changed or new conduct	directly evoked / spontaneous – primary comm. – acceptance
- blogmetrics	spontaneous – primary comm. – not available
- consumer support	spontaneous – primary comm. – (acceptance)
- gift giving	spontaneous – primary comm. – (acceptance)
- associated responses	spontaneous – primary comm. – (acceptance).

From the point of view of the *genesis* of the response, it should be noted that they can be divided in two great groups almost equivalent in number: directly evoked and spontaneous ones. This means that – apart from the cases of responses to avoidance, confrontation or active rebellion on the part of consumers – there is no small number of the so-called “spontaneous responses”. It is thus difficult to clearly draw a line between CR initiatives and the response of business. The fact is that a true and direct stimulus is in many cases not apparent, and yet business has on its own account conducted itself in line with CR. For this reason, by the way, the term “acceptance” is put in brackets.

It can thus be claimed that the spontaneous actions of the business world are not a result of an explicit prodding by CR but by the environment in which the demands of CR are an ever present theme to which business shows itself to be sensitive (Spar and La Mure 2003).

That said, it would be fair to ask whether the spontaneous initiatives themselves would in fact ever have seen the light of day in the absence of any prodding of any kind. Careful analysis suggests that the “seeds” cast by the more active consumers have taken root, albeit perhaps after the passage of much time and in not entirely predictable ways. That’s why, in the end, even these spontaneous initiatives can legitimately be regarded responses to CR.

As to the matter of the *nature* of the reaction, companies mainly respond through primary communication, that is through facts and actions. Only in the cases of image repositioning and the re-use of culture jamming (and in the case of changes to challenged behaviour or the introduction of new behaviour, as natural support to primary communication) the response has been at the communication level. The actions in question may, it is true, often be “small-scale”, like Ikea’s Swap Furniture Day. Often elements of secondary communication are added to the thrust of primary communication in order to give a higher profile to company’s

efforts. In general terms, however, the reactions encountered have consisted in concrete facts, even if sometimes of limited scope.

With regard to the *plus or minus sign* applicable to the response, the positive responses to CR predominate. Though detailed analysis of each specific case would be required to fully assess the effectiveness of CR initiatives, it is clear in general terms that there is tendency for companies to make concessions in various ways towards meeting the demands of resistant consumers.

When carrying out any overall evaluation of the results, it must firstly be borne in mind that by focussing attention on the business response there is a risk of overestimating this response in quantitative terms. Such a distortion of perception may arise as a consequence of the cognitive efforts concentrated on a specific subject matter (Schkade and Kahneman 1998).

Another aspect to consider is that the response, even though on paper an exemplary commitment on the part of the company, may remain little more than a declaration of intent or action of minimal impact while falling short qualitatively. Looking at the situation pessimistically, but perhaps realistically, the strong suspicion may arise that business has only really changed its conduct in the most superficial of ways, calculated to create an more an impression of changes in attitudes and behaviours.

It remains nevertheless true that the variety and sometimes the substance of the responses observed lead to a belief that something is stirring, that there is trend towards a greater balance between business and consumer.

The formal declarations of commitment should not however be overlooked or downplayed (Solnit 2008). Psychologically they create the frame within which the picture can be completed and establish the communication groundwork on which the game will be played out. A mere verbal acceptance of the legitimacy of CR demands is significant in itself since the inclusion of one or another claim in the dialogue is a necessary step in the process of change.

The above-observed forms of conduct are of course only represent a small part of the possible examples that could be taken from business as a whole. Further studies need naturally to be made both for a more complete view of the categories of conduct proposed and for a more precise understanding of the link between forms of resistance and business responses. Further work would also have to be carried out to obtain a better understanding of business's perception of CR as well as of the underlying motives, conditions and settings behind its responses. Shortly, after having gathered a wide range of responses, these should be analyzed one by one more in detail.

Despite the limitations, the results do suggest that the most intelligent approach open to business in relation to CR is that of partners in dialogue, rather than going down the road of confrontation. The data gathered shows that adopting a flexible attitude to the demands of consumers has advantages over a confrontational approach, in particular making it possible to achieve results earlier and better suited to meeting the needs of both sides. Looked at in such a light, CR can even be regarded as representing an opportunity rather than a threat.

To this end, affiliation could be the by-word (Evans and Wurster 2000). That said, it is clearly not an easy course to follow, even though, as has been seen above, in its most modern forms CR offers an incentive for cooperation rather than an enemy to be defeated.

If the consumers themselves, apart perhaps their most vociferous representatives, are willing to engage in a dialogue that goes beyond the opposition-integration dichotomy (Dalli and Corciolani 2007; Roux 2007), why should business not see advantage of following suit?

It would for business mean no more than recognising and admitting the social roles that, after the withering away of the aristocracy, religion, ideology and the state, are already being reciprocally played out by business and the consumer, and which seem not to have been fully understood or acted upon up to now (Csikszentmihalyi 2003).

Such recognition on the part of companies would also see the recognition by all players of the full legitimacy of the role of business, with evident reciprocity of benefits for all parties involved.

REFERENCES

- Argenti, Paul A. (2004), "Collaborating with Activists: How Starbucks Works With NGOs", *California Management Review*, 47, 91-116
- Balmer, John M.T. and Stephen A. Greyser (eds.) (2003), *Revealing the corporation: perspectives on identity, image, reputation, corporate branding, and corporate-level marketing*, London: Routledge
- Brunetti, Federico and Elena Giaretta (2007), "Consumer resistance of the ordinary people: The experience of Italian Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidal Buying Groups)", Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Global Business & Economic Development *Creativity & Innovation: Imperatives for Global Business and Development*, Chandana Chakraborty, Ram Misra and Richard Lord (eds.), Kyoto, August 8-11
- Carducci, Vince (2006), "Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6, 116-38
- Close, Angeline G. and George M. Zinkham (2007), "Consumer Experience and Market Resistance: An Extension of Resistance Theories", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 34, 256-62
- Cova, Bernard (1997), "Community and consumption. Towards a definition of the 'linking value' of product or services", *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (3/4), 297-316
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2003), *Good Business. Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning*, London: Hodder & Stoughton
- Dalli, Daniele and Matteo Corciolani (2007), "Il consumo tra comunità e mercato. Evidenze empiriche dal caso Bookcrossing", Proceedings of the VI International Congress on *Marketing Trends*, Umberto Collesei and Jean Claude Andreani (eds.), Paris, January 26-27
- Dobscha, Susan (1998), "The Lived Experience of Consumer Rebellion Against Marketing", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 25, 91-7
- Evans, Philip and Thomas S. Wurster (2000), *Blown to bits: how the new economics of information transforms strategy*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- Fabris, Giampaolo (2003), *Il nuovo consumatore: verso il postmoderno*, Milano: Franco Angeli
- Firat, A. Fuat, and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (March), 239-67

- Fishman, Charles (2006), *The Wal-Mart Effect. How an out-of-town superstore became a superpower*, London: Allen Lane
- Gesualdi, Francesco (2003), *Manuale per un consumo responsabile. Dal boicottaggio al commercio equo e solidale*, Milano: Feltrinelli
- Giesler, Markus and Mali Pohlmann (2003), "The Anthropology of File Sharing: Consuming Napster as a Gift", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 30, 273-79
- Hemetsberger, Andrea (2006), "When David Becomes Goliath. Ideological Discourse in New Online Consumer Movements", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 33, 494-500
- Herrmann, Robert O. (1993), "The Tactics of Consumer Resistance: Group Action and Marketplace Exit", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 130-34
- Holt, Douglas B. (2002), "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 70-90
- Kelly, Kevin (2008), "Better than free", <http://www.kk.org>
- Kim, Chan W. and Renée Mauborgne (2005), *Blue Ocean Strategy. How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make Competition Irrelevant*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- Klein, Naomi (2000), *No Logo. Taking aim at the brand bullies*, New York: Picador
- Kozinets, Robert V. (2002), "Can Consumer Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 20-38
- Kozinets, Robert V. and Jay M. Handelman (2004), "Adversaries of Consumption: Consumer Movements, Activism, and Ideology", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (December), 691-704
- Lee, Dong-Jin and Joseph M. Sirgy (2004), "Quality-of-Life (QOL) Marketing: Proposed Antecedents and Consequences", *Journal of Macromarketing*, 24, 44-58
- Levine, Rick, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger (2000), *Cluetrain Manifesto: the end of business as usual*, London: ft.com
- Muniz, Albert M. Jr. and Lawrence O. Hamer (2001), "Us Versus Them: Oppositional Brand Loyalty and the Cola Wars", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 28, 355-61
- Muniz, Albert M. Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn (2001), "Brand Community", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (March), 412-32
- Myrdal, Gunnar (1966), *Il valore nella teoria sociale*, Torino: Einaudi
- Peñaloza, Lisa and Linda L. Price (1993), "Consumer Resistance: A Conceptual Overview", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 123-28

- Prandelli, Emanuela and Georg von Krogh (2000), "Fare leverage sulla conoscenza tacita dei consumatori: verso una nuova economia cognitiva", *Sinergie*, 51, 49-84
- Raju, Jagmohan S. (2005), "Revitalizing the Role of Marketing in Business Organizations: What Can Poor Academics Do to Help?", *Journal of Marketing*, 69 (October), 17-9
- Ridderstråle, Jonas and Kjell A. Nordström (2003), *Karaoke Capitalism. Management for Mankind*, Stockholm: Bookhouse Publishing
- Ritzer, George (2004), *The McDonaldization of Society*, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge
- Roux, Dominique (2007), "Ordinary Resistance as a Parasitic Form of Action: A Dialogical Analysis of Consumer/Firm Relations", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 34, 602-09
- Rowe, Alan J., Richard O. Mason and Karl E. Dickel (1986), *Strategic Management. A Methodological Approach*, Reading: Addison Wesley
- Sawhney, Mohanbir, Gianmario Verona and Emanuela Prandelli (2005), "Collaborating to create: The Internet as a platform for customer engagement in product innovation", *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 19 (4), 4-17
- Schlosser, Eric (2001), *Fast Food Nation. The dark side of the all-American meal*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- Schkade, David and Daniel Kahneman (1998), "Does Living in California Make People Happy? A Focusing Illusion in Judgments of Life Satisfaction", *Psychological Science*, 9 (5), 340-46
- Schouten, John V. and James H. McAlexander (1995), "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (March), 43-61
- Schwartz, Barry (2004), *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, New York: Harper Collins
- Sheth, Jagdish N. and Rajendra S. Sisodia (2005), "Does Marketing Need Reform?", *Journal of Marketing*, 69 (October), 10-2
- Silverstein, Michael J. and Neil Fiske (2003), *Trading Up: why consumers want new luxury goods--and how companies create them*, New York-London: Portfolio
- Sirgy, Joseph M. and Dong-Jin Lee (2006), "Macro Measures of Consumer Well-Being (CWB): A Critical Analysis and a Research Agenda", *Journal of Macromarketing*, 26, 27-44
- Sirgy, Joseph M. and Dong-Jin Lee (2008), "Well-Being Marketing: An Ethical Business Philosophy for Consumer Goods Firms", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 77, 377-403
- Solnit, Rebecca (2008), "Contemplo e agisco", *Internazionale*, 753, 18/24 luglio

- Spar, Debora L. and Lane T. La Mure (2003), "The Power of Activism: Assessing the Impact of NGOs on Global Business", *California Management Review*, 45, 78-101
- Tapscott, Don and Anthony D. Williams (2006), *Wikinomics. How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, New York-London: Portfolio
- Walker, Rob (2008), *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*, New York: Random House