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The Bitter Breakup: What Happens when Consumers Dump their Brands?

It's just like a bad breakup: People get emotional when they end a relationship with a brand. A new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#) examines what happens when people turn their backs on the brands they once loved.

“Customers who were once enthusiastic about a brand may represent a headache for the associated firm beyond the lost revenue of foregone sales because they sometimes become committed to harming the firm,” write authors Allison R. Johnson (University of Western Ontario), Maggie Matear (Queens University, Kingston, Ontario), and Matthew Thomson (University of Western Ontario).

Online forums are overloaded with customer complaints from people who once loved or were loyal to particular brands but now strongly oppose them. “I used to love (name of store), let me tell you all why I plan to never go back there again; I hate them with a passion now,” writes one unhappy former customer, for example.

Why do these people feel so strongly about brands they once favored? According to the authors, some people identify so strongly with brands that they become relevant to their identity and self-concept. Thus, when people feel betrayed by brands, they experience shame and insecurity. “As in human relationships, this loss of identity can manifest itself in negative feelings, and subsequent actions may (by design) be unconstructive, malicious, and expressly aimed at hurting the former relationship partner,” the authors write.

What's a company to do to prevent such heightened emotions? “Rather than trying simply to win customers back, which may only exacerbate the situation, companies may want to explore responses that promote forgiveness, indifference, or effective disengagement,” the authors suggest.

Sometimes a company may want to help embarrassed customers move on—even if it means directing them to a competitor. “The sooner the customers are happily involved with a new brand, the faster one might expect damage to their self-concept to be repaired and the faster the motive to harm the offending firm might dissipate,” the authors conclude.

Allison R. Johnson, Maggie Matear, and Matthew Thomson. “A Coal in the Heart: Self-Relevance as a Post-Exit Predictor of Consumer Anti-Brand Actions.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2011. Further information: <http://ejcr.org>.

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