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Godfather Marketing: A New Approach with Risks and Rewards

In the not-too-distant future, as multinational corporations amass more and more power, marketing may mutate. But there's a chance that consumer relations could evolve in a positive direction, reflecting dynamics that resemble mafia organizations, with beneficial individual and societal implications. "Godfather Marketing" has the potential to thrive in a credibility economy where quality of information prevails over quantity, in contrast to the traditional knowledge economy. This article highlights the risks and benefits of such an approach, emphasizing that the effectiveness of the model depends on shared ethics as well as checks and balances inside and outside companies.

MARKETING//LOYALTY//TRUST//CUSTOMER LOYALTY//VALUE CREATION

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According to the prevailing academic definition, the strategic goal of marketing is to "create value" for both the firm and consumers (cf. Gundlach and Wilkie, 2009), where "value" is understood as something that is objectively beneficial to both parties. However, it could be argued that the ultimate purpose of firms is to sell products, while for consumers it is to fulfill their needs – needs that are often shaped by the firms themselves, especially when they have significant influence over consumer choices. In such markets, customer satisfaction may not necessarily correlate with the actual quality of the product or service. A consumer may feel satisfied even when purchasing something that experts might consider to be of low intrinsic value relative to its cost. This highlights the distinction between quality and satisfaction, suggesting that the goal of marketing is not always to create objective value shared by both parties, but rather to generate satisfaction through perceived value (Guido, 2014). The underlying strategic objective is to foster loyalty, encouraging consumers to develop a lasting relationship with the company.

Today, with the concentration of power in the hands of a few holding companies and multinational corporations – veritable financial and business dictatorships operating on a par with democratic governments in many Western countries – influence over markets is no longer a possibility, but a certainty. In the future, marketing is likely to expand beyond the promotion of products and services to the provision of diversified solutions in various sectors. These solutions may be contingent on customers adhering to a shared "code of honor" that binds them to the company in a lasting way. From big tech to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), each company could leverage its power and networks to address consumers' most pressing needs, while expecting some form of reciprocity in return. In an approach reminiscent of mafia organizations – albeit without the criminal intent – companies could offer customers "favors" even before selling products, in an attempt to satisfy their basic needs and desires in order to secure their unwavering loyalty.

THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MODEL

Several factors in the current context could support the adoption of such a "Godfather Marketing" model (Guido, 2024). Global instability – driven by wars, pandemics, and financial crises – has intensified consumers' need for security (Gobrecht and Marchand, 2023). In addition, increasing societal fragmentation is exacerbating inequalities and weakening intergroup cohesion (Haidt, 2020), while rapid technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI) and smart devices are reshaping how individuals interact with themselves and others (Hoffman et al., 2022). In this climate of uncertainty, consumers may feel that time is running out to fulfill their life plans. The need for social recognition and self-esteem in a world where AI appears to perform tasks more efficiently, combined with the desire to connect with those who can help achieve personal goals, could lead to a profound shift in market dynamics, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between supply and demand. Consumers might approach companies as they would a Mafia godfather, willing to pledge absolute loyalty in exchange for the fulfillment of their most important needs.

CUSTOMER LOYALTY

While customer loyalty is already a central focus of today's marketing strategies, few studies have examined in depth the nature of loyalty and the ethical and strategic boundaries that companies are willing to cross to secure it. Consumers are considered "loyal" when they voluntarily or involuntarily limit their freedom by behaving in accordance with the company's expectations. Customer loyalty typically manifests itself in repeated purchases, positive word-of-mouth, and a reluctance to seek alternatives. So far, companies have sought loyalty through a generally accommodating approach based on the principle that "the customer is always right." They persuade consumers of the superiority of their products or services or incentivize repeat purchases with rewards. Coercive strategies such as exit penalties, cancellation fees, or refund restrictions are less common.

However, if companies were to adopt the Godfather Model in the future, these strategies of persuasion, reward, and punishment could be employed more systematically to retain customers. In this model, profit would become secondary to the primary goal of gaining power over consumers; it is this power – enabling firms to influence customer behavior to serve their own interests – that would become the true strategic goal of the godfather-company.

THE CREDIBILITY ECONOMY

In this context, the transfer of utility goes beyond mere value creation as outlined in the traditional transactional marketing logic, shifting to a model based on a sense of indebtedness and reciprocity (Watkins et al., 2006). The key difference is that those who create value and pay a price feel free of obligation, while those who receive a favor feel compelled to be grateful and, consequently, loyal. This marketing model seeks to create a deep, lasting bond between a select class of "quality" customers and the godfather-company that promises to support and protect them. The mafia it draws inspiration from is not the criminal kind, but rather a metaphorical representation – a "mafia spirit" (Nicaso and Danesi, 2013) – that reflects universal human values such as keeping promises, solidarity, and the importance of family.

Who wouldn't want a "godfather" to solve their most pressing problems, or to be part of a network of "friends of friends" ready to help in times of need? Godfather-company offers become indispensable not because consumers are forced to accept them, but because they are perceived as exclusive opportunities capable of satisfying needs at the top of their hierarchy.

In the coming decades, the real competitive advantage for companies will be their ability to access a network of credible interlocutors bound by a code of honor that ensures integrity and reliability.

This will become increasingly relevant in an environment where information is easily manipulated by technologies such as generative AI. While the traditional knowledge economy is built on the accumulation and processing of vast amounts of information, what I call the emerging "credibility economy" will prioritize the quality of information and mutual trust as the foundation of business-customer relationships.

A CODE OF HONOR

For a company to play the role of "godfather," it must adopt a code of ethics based on the principles of mutual protection and assistance. By facilitating a legitimate exchange of favors that is managed and coordinated by the company itself, this "code of honor" is designed to encourage cooperation among customers within the company's network. When customers request a favor, they are evaluated on the basis of their ability to reciprocate. Reciprocity can take many forms, such as purchasing the company's products, but the primary mode involves active participation in the customer network. This allows customers to offer favors to other members based on their expertise. Through this system, customers become more integrated into the company's operations, potentially evolving into "affiliates" who can share in the profits generated within the network. This approach not only strengthens the bond between the company and its customers, but also fosters a culture of cooperation and reciprocity within the organization.

In the Godfather Marketing Model, the granting of favors requires a careful assessment of both the quality of customers and the conditions under which these favors are granted. With regarding to customers, the firm must evaluate several key factors: the ability to fulfill commitments – since, contrary to what capitalism might suggest, nothing is truly free (Han et al., 2019); confidentiality, or "omertà" in Mafia terms, as the relationship between the godfather-company and customers is always dyadic, with the company being solely responsible for granting favors; and sincerity, which means that customers must abide by the rule of truthfulness within the organization, reflecting the Mafia's concept of "men of honor." As for the conditions under which favors are granted, four parameters (the 4Cs) should be considered: *complexity*, i.e., the level of difficulty for the firm in fulfilling the request; *context*, i.e., the scope of the favor, which must always comply with the law; *content*, i.e., the nature of the favor, which must be personalized and specific; and *channels*, i.e., the manner in which the favor is granted, ensuring that it appears as a gift even though it still requires a quid pro quo. These parameters, according to *nudge theory*, function as subtle prompts (Thaler and Sunstein, 2024) that guide the customer toward the desired solution.

To achieve its objectives, the godfather-company will not limit itself to traditional strategies of persuasion and reward, but may also employ punitive mechanisms, including revenge, as tools of social regulation designed to ensure compliance with shared norms (Haidt, 2020). However, true leadership in this model is not derived from the exercise of formal authority but rather from attracting consumers through voluntary membership. Establishing a deep connection with the "soul" of consumers requires companies to accurately understand their expectations and perceptions. By leveraging this insight, companies can positively influence consumer behavior and encourage customers to respond favorably to the offers and benefits they receive.

AVOIDING EXTREMES

The primary risk associated with the Godfather Marketing Model is the potential for this approach to deteriorate in the absence of a robust ethical framework and adequate control mechanisms. Without these safeguards, the model may exploit the most vulnerable parties, similar to the practices of criminal organizations. A strategy that could promote mutual benefit and social cohesion risks evolving into a form of control and dependency that demands unconditional loyalty – a so-called "fervent attachment" (Guido, 2016), similar to that of a fan for their team or a devotee for their religion. Such an attachment could compromise consumers' autonomy and expose them to unwanted risks. While the exchange of benefits, persuasion techniques, and loyalty demands are already prevalent in contemporary marketing, the conditions favorable for Godfather Marketing could incentivize more powerful firms, particularly multinational corporations, to seek the complete submission of customers to their corporate rules. In this scenario, satisfaction, rewards, and well-being would become contingent on this submission, leading to increased consumer dependence on the power structures established by these firms.

Consumers have long been treated as an undifferentiated set of individuals, "cows to be milked" for cash flows (Stern and Deimler, 2006), and for whom decisions are made "expediently," that is, effectively, efficiently, and profitably, without regard to equity or their actual well-being. In the future, even more than today, people may be increasingly driven to monetize not only their professional skills and knowledge, but also more intimate aspects of their personal lives, such as social relationships, friendships, their image, and in some cases even their bodies (a phenomenon already observed on digital platforms such as OnlyFans). In a dystopian scenario, where work will no longer be necessary since it will be performed by AI, it could be the same godfather-companies themselves that offer income to their customers, provided that their entire private sphere is made available to the company.

To avert the dangers of drift, a common ethic is needed, based on an individual's acquired awareness of the meaning of existence and one's role in society. Indeed, lack of clarity about one's identity and direction can lead to "educated" ignorance or, worse, to habitual behavior and fanaticism. Personal growth and the establishment of economic and democratic systems based on wisdom rather than opportunism therefore require both a solid knowledge base and the critical ability to evaluate it. Another element that needs to be explored is the idea that, the Godfather Marketing Model can be successfully applied to social interactions in general, with appropriate controls imposed from within companies and from outside through national and supranational regulatory bodies. In the perhaps distant but not entirely remote future, this approach could facilitate the management of entire local areas, in a kind of "new Renaissance" similar to the emergence of new grand duchies, courts and city-states (see Guido, 2002). This could, for example, foster ecosystems of collaborative actors under the leadership of patrons, philanthropic entities, and cultural referents who would offer shelter and support to those who adhere to shared ethical rules and behaviors.

Recently, Runciman (2024) has pointed out how humanity has progressively delegated its control to impersonal structures, such as states, corporations and, more recently, multinational corporations and artificial intelligences. However, while dictatorial regimes are usually viewed with suspicion and criticism, multinational corporations, which often exceed the revenues of many sovereign states and operate on a global scale, are sometimes treated as democracies. This is despite the fact that the decision-making power within such organizations is held by a small circle of shareholders and oligarchs. Those who are outraged today at the idea that the mafia model could inspire the societies of the future should reflect on the fact that, if deprived of illicit means and founded on a code of ethics that rewards merit and sanctions abuse, this model not only poses no threat to the stability of markets but could even contribute to the construction of a solid social fabric. In this context, mutual aid and cooperation would become the basis for a more equitable and sustainable future.

MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Strategic innovation**: Introducing a new marketing paradigm that moves away from the traditional logic of selling products.
- **Trust management**: The ability of companies to establish trusting and reciprocal relationships with consumers, thereby increasing their loyalty.
- **Adapting to global dynamics**: Recognizing and responding to the challenges posed by global instability, social crises, and rapid technological advances.
- **Ethical sustainability**: The importance of establishing a "code of honor" and shared ethics to prevent abuse and ensure a balanced relationship between the company and its customers.
- **The role of technology**: Using advanced technologies to improve interactions with customers and ensure the quality of information exchanged.

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