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14

Commercial Activity at Home

Managing the Private Servicescape

Kent Grayson

Sociologists have long recognized that consensus about social rules is necessary for successful social interaction (Goffman 1959, 1974; Schutz 1970; Thomas 1966). For example, it is generally accepted that, when having a conversation, participants will take turns speaking. If one of the participants breaks this rule and interrupts frequently, then the conversation is unlikely to run smoothly. In consumer behavior contexts, agreements about interactional rules result from a negotiation among three forces: (1) what the marketer wants, (2) what the consumer wants, and (3) what the broader social world will allow (Deighton and Grayson 1995). Often in our everyday consumption, this negotiation process is not salient because tensions among the three forces have already been resolved as part of our socialization as consumers. For instance, a young child at a restaurant may find it frustrating to wait for the waiter to bring over a piece of chocolate cake from the dessert tray. But over time

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we all learn that at a sit-down restaurant, the waiter (not the patrons) brings the food. That's just "the way we do things" and, as a result of socialization, it becomes part of our implicitly accepted social reality. Implicit agreements allow us to go to the movies, fill up at the gas station, and stay at a hotel without having to negotiate the rules every step of the way.

But there are so many rules for so many situations! For instance, at some hotels, it is appropriate to complain if your television has a bad picture, while at others you are lucky to have a television at all. How do we know when to complain, to whom, and in what manner? The answer comes in great part from servicescapes. As Goffman (1959) emphasized nearly forty years ago, we often look to the social environment's physical elements for clues about what to expect in a situation, and for instructions about how to behave (see also Rapoport 1990). A doorman stationed in front of a hotel tells us that the hotel is service-conscious and that we will probably get a quick response if we complain to the front desk about our television. A play area near the front of a furniture store suggests that young families may feel comfortable bringing children along. Classroom chairs arranged in a circle tell students that discussion during class will be encouraged.

The foregoing commentary captures the essence of a social truth but also exaggerates the simplicity of social life. In practice, social rules are flexible; they allow for multiple interpretations. Because of this, interactants may sometimes disagree about the social rules that apply to a situation. Even the most taken-for-granted social rules can be challenged by someone who does not know them or who wants to operate under a different social consensus. In situations like these, the social negotiation process moves from the background into the foreground (Garfinkel 1967). Consider the following examples:

> A European friend of mine recently visited the USA for the first time. While waiting at the airport for a connecting flight, he pulled out his pack of cigarettes. Perplexed by not seeing any ashtrays, he went from gate to gate and came eventually to a small airport bar, where he lit a cigarette. Still not seeing an ashtray, he asked the bartender for one. When the bartender

explained that smoking was not allowed anywhere in the building, my friend was astonished. Only after this incident did he notice all of the No Smoking signs around the airport.

One warm evening last spring, I had a dinner engagement with some colleagues and a job candidate at a fine restaurant across town. Because of the nice weather, I decided to walk from work to the restaurant. So I set off, removing my coat and rolling up my shirtsleeves as I went. When I arrived at the restaurant, I was greeted by a well-dressed maître d', who stood at a large and well-polished podium near the front door.

"Hello," I said to him, "has the Grayson party arrived?"

He checked his reservation book. "Not yet, sir." Then he inclined his head toward a plush waiting area. "Perhaps you would like to wait?"

I nodded, but as I started to turn, he gave me a tight-lipped smile. "And you may find that our air-conditioning is rather cool, sir, so you may want to put on your coat."

I recently chaperoned three children to a new "indoor playland" at a nearby shopping mall. Neither I nor the children knew what an indoor playland was, but it had been recommended by some neighbors, so we decided to give it a try. When we arrived, paid for entry, and walked inside, we were confronted by a colorful landscape of slides, ladders, bridges, a pool of soft balls, a child-sized castle, and a jungle of huge stuffed animals.

My three charges walked tentatively through the separate play areas, carefully watching other children play and occasionally touching some of the playland's soft surfaces. Finally, the oldest of the three jumped into a play area and began to climb a ladder to a treehouse. "C'mon!" he yelled to the other two as he climbed. "It's like a playground, only it's puffier!"

One day while working in Manhattan, I stopped at a busy restaurant to get some pizza to go. It was during the lunchtime rush, so there were a lot of people waiting to give their orders to the man at the counter. But because the line moved quickly, I still hadn't decided what kind of pizza to have when I reached the counter.

"Yeah?" the man asked, a white paper plate already in his left hand, a pizza spatula in his right.

"Ummmmm," I said, looking at the menu board.

"Listen," he said sharply as he pointed me to the end of the line, "if you don't know what you want, don't get in line. Now, who's next?"

These examples illustrate what can happen when the marketer, the consumer, and the broader social reality do not share a consensus about what rules do (or should) apply to a particular situation. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the strategies that marketers employ in such situations to influence the social consensus. To do so, I have chosen a consumption situation in which the rules for behavior are not well established. That situation is network marketing, a retail selling approach that is sometimes also known as multilevel marketing.[1]

One of the reasons that the social consensus about network marketing is not broadly shared is that its salespeople tend to use their homes (and the homes of others) as central retail selling venues. As this chapter will argue (and as many readers will already appreciate), today's broader social world does not generally consider the home to be an appropriate servicescape. Business is not usually welcome in the household. How, then, does a home-focused network marketer work within (or around) this social consensus? To answer this question, I first briefly outline the social history of the Western home and emphasize why, as a servicescape, it is not currently conducive to retail selling. Following this, I describe the results of exploratory research into the strategies used by network marketers who must negotiate within and around the home servicescape every day.

Implicit Social Agreements About the Home

Research on domestic life in the Western world has documented a number of significant transformations in the home's structure and

[1] Readers unfamiliar with network marketing may nonetheless be aware of prominent network marketing companies such as Amway, Mary Kay, Herbalife, and Cabouchon. Although network marketing companies take a similar approach to sales and distribution, they can differ greatly in terms of the type of product they market. Cosmetics, insurance, fragrances, health food, telephone services, vitamins, jewelry, water filters, and household cleaning products have all been offered by network marketing organizations. For a more detailed description of this industry, see Grayson (1996).

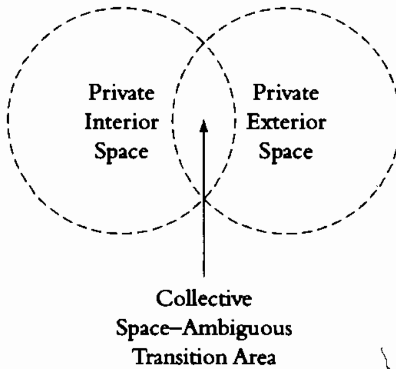
meaning since the Victorian era of the nineteenth century. One of these, which affected many socioeconomic groups throughout the West, was an increased clarification of the boundary between the public and private spheres of social life. Although, a division between public and private domains did exist before the 1800s, it was graduated; it blurred distinctions at the margin and therefore placed less emphasis on differences between the two domains. In contrast, social rules governing the twentieth-century home have been influenced by a much clearer line between public and private, a line that is drawn both physically and socially. This section describes the ways in which this transformation took place.

Preindustrial social life was characterized by a number of features that both reflected and contributed to what Daunton (1983) describes as "an ambiguous boundary" or "an uncertain threshold" between public and private domains. The home was a much more active location for commerce, so there was less reason for distinguishing between a person's profession and his or her home life. A cobbler worked in one part of the house, stored materials in another, sold finished products from a third, and ate and slept in yet another (Barley 1963, 13). Those who did not have freestanding houses were likely to live in apartment-type buildings that centered around enclosed courts or alleys. Here, courtyards, dead ends, and communal landings were used not simply for traveling from the street to the home, but also for socializing, exchanging goods, and doing household chores (Lawrence 1990). This physical melding of public and private was mirrored socially. As Shorter's (1976) research suggests, the preindustrial family was "pierced full of holes," which allowed

> people from outside to flow freely through the household, observing and monitoring. The traffic flowed the other way, too, as members of the family felt they had more in common emotionally with their various peer groups than with one another. In other words, the traditional family was much more a productive and reproductive unit than an emotional unit (Shorter 1976, 5).

The resulting relationship between public and private domains is illustrated in Figure 14.1. Although people did have areas that they

FIGURE 14.1 The Preindustrial Western Conception of Public and Private Space



Source: Adapted from Lawrence (1990).

considered to be private as well as those they did not, a transitional area existed that was both private and public (Lawrence 1990).

A change in the distinction between public and private was catalyzed in large part by two related societal trends experienced throughout the West during the nineteenth century: a rapid increase in population and a wave of industrialization. Social scientists have offered four general explanations for why these trends encouraged greater separation between public and private spheres:

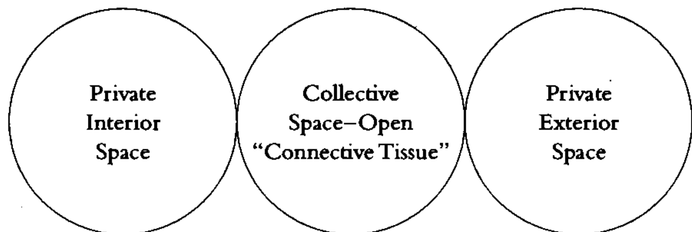
1. When humans (and some other animals) are placed in close proximity, they experience sensory overload, higher stress, and higher intraspecies aggression (Evans 1974; Hediger 1950). To avoid these tensions when placed in close urban proximity, city dwellers may have developed a more defined personal space (see Altman and Chemers 1980; Taylor and Brooks 1980).
2. A society's built environment is assumed to reflect its social, political, and economic structure (Hillier and Hanson 1984). The increasing complexity of social life during industrialization may have been mirrored by a more segmented use of space (Kent 1990; Rapoport 1990).

3. Growing public controls were imposed on individuals during the Victorian period, and a rising spirit of individualism was associated with the rise of capitalism. These almost paradoxical forces may have encouraged individuals to create an individualistic private sanctuary from the more controlling public sphere (Lawrence 1990; Shorter 1976).
4. On a practical level, home workshops were put out of business by larger factories, and the remaining cottage industries were quickly centralized. Barley (1963, 13) argues that this trend "revolutionized" homes in the Victorian era, transforming them into "merely machines for living in."

While no one factor or explanation can account for the dramatic change in perspective on public and private space during the course of the nineteenth century, there is little doubt that the boundary between public and private became "less ambiguous and more definite, less penetrable and more impermeable" (Daunton 1983, 12).

The result was a sense of public and private resembling that pictured in Figure 14.2. Here, private and nonprivate areas are separated by transitional space. In addition, divisions between areas are clearly defined at each point of contact. What is most relevant to this research is that business was socially banished from the home environment, and inhabitants became less and less comfortable when

FIGURE 14.2 The Industrial Western Conception of Public and Private Space



Source: Adapted from Lawrence (1990).

matters of commerce crossed the threshold from public to private. The home became a place where individuals had ultimate control, and where those seeking to persuade, influence, or otherwise diminish domestic autonomy were not welcome.

The social rules of the Victorian age maintain a strong influence on the Western conception of the home. The household still defines personal territory (Saile 1985; Taylor and Brower 1985), marks a clear distinction between public and private (Korosec-Serfaty 1985), and provides a basis for individual (as opposed to social) identity (Bachelard 1964; Lee 1976; Taylor and Brower 1985; Trilling 1971). For this reason, those who market to consumers in their homes are vulnerable to concerns about invasion of privacy (McLean 1994; Miller and Gordon 1994). In addition, people feel more relaxed in their own space (Edney 1975), emphasizing that one's home environment is more informal and fluid than the public arena. Perhaps because of this, people often face difficulties when trying to combine home duties and work responsibilities (Hochschild 1989). Telecommuting (or working from the home) has been criticized by some because the rules governing the home are too unstructured and undisciplined (Connelly 1995). Thus, network marketers, who make extensive use of the home as a selling and servicing environment, sometimes find that their business goals conflict with the prevailing social consensus.

An Exploratory Study of Network Marketing Sales Strategies

Almost without exception, network marketing companies market their products exclusively through independent household-based distributors. These distributors work from their own homes, distribute products to other people's homes, and often give sales and training presentations in the home environment. Furthermore, unlike other types of direct-selling agents, network marketing distributors are rewarded for encouraging others to become not just customers, but also successful distributors. Network marketers must therefore convince others that they, too, can operate a home-

centered business. As a result, distributors face the challenge of operating in a social environment where the established rules of conduct do not support their endeavors, and where they must convince others to do the same.

Method

For this exploratory research, I conducted semistructured interviews with 17 network marketing distributors (7 women and 10 men). These data were collected as part of ongoing research on the network marketing industry, so my analysis was also informed by other interactions with network marketing practitioners and customers, attendance at sales presentations, and examination of previous research on the industry (e.g., Biggart 1989; Butterfield 1985; Peven 1968). Three different network marketing companies were represented in the sample of informants for this chapter, all three of which had an international presence that included both the United Kingdom and the United States.[2] Nearly half of these informants lived and worked in heavily populated urban areas, while slightly more than half lived and worked in smaller towns and suburban areas. Informants' level of experience with network marketing ranged from just under 1 year to over 11 years. The informants are identified by their gender and their years of experience as a network marketing distributor.[3]

During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions about informants' selling experiences, asking them to pay particular attention to the advantages and disadvantages of different selling environments. The following questions are typical examples:

- "What has your experience been with making presentations in other people's homes?"

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[2] Although three companies were represented, a majority of the informants worked for only one of the three.

[3] Those with the same gender and years of experience are further distinguished by the letter *A*, *B*, or *C*. Thus, two men with seven years of experience would be identified as (Male A, 7 years) and (Male B, 7 years).

- "How does this compare with your experience presenting in other environments?"
- "What strategies do you recommend to your new recruits about presenting in a home environment?"

Informants reported that their decision to use the home environment as a place for selling is sometimes influenced by practical considerations. For example, if the prospect and the distributor live too far apart, then they will often agree to meet at a public location halfway between their homes. While recognizing these practical concerns, this chapter focuses on the more sociological issues raised during the interviews. As reflected in the remainder of this chapter, every informant focused considerable attention on how he or she uses and manipulates the social environment to guide the rules operating within the situation.

General Themes

Because many Westerners still distinguish between public and private—and between business life and personal life—network marketing does not fit neatly into a recognizable social category. Thus, new network marketing prospects face a situation similar to the one that the children and I faced at the indoor playland: We needed guidance about the consensus that was operating within that somewhat unfamiliar social setting. For this study, informants described two related approaches to guiding prospects in this way. These approaches are illustrated in the columns of the matrix in Figure 14.3. The first approach is to arrange the selling environment so that *physical cues* offer signals for the social rules that should be followed. Secondly, they orchestrate the selling process so that *procedural cues* offer similar types of signals. While procedural cues are themselves rules for behaving, they also indicate to interactants that other rules must be followed as well.

Within these strategic similarities, distributors differed in terms of the *type* of social consensus that they hoped to encourage with their cues. Three different types were described by informants and are illustrated in the rows of Figure 14.3. First, distributors can

FIGURE 14.3 Examples of Cues Used to Signal Different Types of Social Consensus

Type of Consensus Signaled		Type of Cues: Environmental	Type of Cues: Procedural
	Business-Oriented Consensus	Chairs lined up in rows in front of stage area	Not serving beverages before the presentation
	Home-Oriented Consensus	An informal living room setting with sofas	Serving beverages before the presentation
	New (Mixed) Consensus	Business materials laid out in the middle of the kitchen	Answering personal phone calls during the presentation

emphasize that the social rules for network marketing are the same as those that govern a professional business, and that network marketing should therefore be viewed as being distinct from other home activities. Second, they can foster a consensus that network marketing is similar to many other personal and home-based activities, and that it therefore fits easily into one's home life. Lastly, they can try to break through the social distinction between home and business, and instead foster a consensus that network marketing successfully integrates the public and private domains within a single activity. While most of the informants for this study fell clearly into one of these three categories, a few pointed out that they may try to foster a different consensus in different situations.

The next three sections examine these three approaches (i.e., the rows in Figure 14.3) individually, and each section focuses on the physical and procedural cues (i.e., the columns in Figure 14.3) offered by distributors. Before moving on, however, it is useful to note one theme that emerged in a number of interviews, regardless of approach. Overall, informants tended to show a sensitivity toward *territoriality* when describing their use of space for selling and servicing. In particular, informants generally recognized that people have more control over guiding the social consensus when they are in their own personal space. All things being equal, informants

preferred *not* to present in prospects' homes, and instead preferred their own homes or more public spaces. "You're not in control, unfortunately," said one informant (Male C, 8 years) about presenting in other people's homes. "There could be pets, there could be children, . . . a television going on, and you can't ask people to turn their television off." Note that it is only social consensus that keeps a distributor from taking control of the situation—for example, asking a prospect to turn the television off. The social rules of the home dictate that the homeowner has every right to organize the environment as he or she wishes, and that the guest has little prerogative to suggest alterations.

Fostering a Business-Oriented Consensus with Physical and Procedural Cues

Although network marketing is generally home based, some distributors view a home orientation as a threat to their business. To them, the relatively casual environment of the home can encourage prospects to take a too-cavalier attitude toward the business. Thus, some distributors downplay the social implications of working in the home and instead make explicit attempts to foster a consensus in which the rules for network marketing are similar to those for operating any other small business. This consensus management often begins during a distributor's initial contact with a prospect. For example, although some distributors use the word *party* to refer to in-home presentations (see below), one informant (Female, 4 years) makes sure *not* to use this word and instead makes a point of calling it an "in-house presentation." This gives an initial indication to the prospect that formal rules will apply to the upcoming interaction.

Physical Cues That Emphasize a Business-Oriented Consensus

Given the casual and informal social environment of the home, one of the best ways to emphasize the business aspects of network mar-

keting is to make presentations outside of the household. One informant (Male A, 4 years) described this as meeting on the "neutral ground" of a moderately nice restaurant, a hotel meeting room, or a formal pub. Neutral ground refers to the fact that individuals have more control over the social consensus when they are in their own homes, but in a public place, neither the prospect nor the distributor has more control.

However, an out-of-home environment is hardly neutral. It emphasizes to the prospect that network marketing should be regarded as part of the public domain, where commerce "appropriately" occurs. By making a sales presentation outside of the home, a distributor can diminish the effects of the more informal home environment, and can emphasize a more professional approach. One informant (who also uses the phrase *neutral ground*) explained his strategy for using public spaces as follows:

> [If] the person is really looking at the top sort of business angle, then I like to meet on neutral ground and make it a very professional—as professional as I can, being a relative newcomer at it. As professional as I can by meeting, you know, being the part and making it a, a proper business presentation. When I'm in the home, it tends to be a bit more chatty (Male B, 3 years).

There are other ways in which distributors can manage the physical cues of an out-of-home environment. Many informants mentioned that not just any out-of-home environment will do; many prefer a restaurant or pub that is quiet and tasteful to one that is noisy and casual. Alternatively, distributors working in the same geographic area will sometimes combine their resources and rent a hotel function room for weekly presentations. These rooms, with their plush carpeting, chandeliers, and presentation technologies, are beyond the financial reach of most individual distributors. By cooperating with one another, distributors can purchase an environment whose physical cues suggest a more formal professionalism than would be suggested by a home environment.

In these hotel function rooms, distributors augment the existing environmental cues. A welcome desk is often placed at the door, where prospects are asked to sign in. Chairs are arranged in rows in front of a speaker's stage or podium. Distributors presenting at these

events tend to wear business suits, just as if they were holding a conventional corporate meeting. A small amplification system with a microphone can bring further attention to the presentational aspects of the gathering. All of these environmental cues signal to the prospect that, even though network marketing is home centered, "the way we do things" in network marketing is to treat it like a professional business.

However, business-oriented presentations do not always occur outside of the home. Although many distributors see the advantages of public presentations, some also prefer the more individualized one-on-one attention that they can give prospects in a home environment (Coughlan and Grayson 1994). Yet those wishing to foster a business-oriented consensus sometimes find it challenging to present in a home environment, which tends to signal more casual and informal behavior. To counteract these signals, distributors present other physical cues to signal a formal businesslike consensus. These cues help the distributor to carve out a social consensus within the home environment where, for the moment, the rules that generally apply to the home are no longer accepted.

Perhaps the most explicit strategy for doing this is to give the presentation in an area that is clearly defined as "a place for doing business." As one informant (Female, 6 years) advised, "Move them to an area where it's going to be more professional, like an office." When prospects arrive at this informant's house, she immediately ushers them upstairs to her office, where she has chairs waiting for them as if they were meeting her for a job interview. Another informant lamented that the environmental signals in his living room encouraged prospects to behave more informally than he would like:

> I have to use my front room because of a space problem I've got. But I'd like to have a specific area where I actually did it (Male B, 3 years).

Regardless of whether the presentation occurs in a separate office, distributors fostering a business-oriented consensus tend to arrange the furniture so that it sets the stage for a more professional consensus. If several prospects are coming to visit, distributors will

arrange the furniture just as they would for a hotel conference room, with rows of chairs facing the presenter's area. The presenter's area will sometimes have a white marker board or a flip chart. If only one or two prospects are visiting, the distributor will still set up an area that requires the prospects to focus on the presentation:

> Get them sat 'round the table, and have your products on the table or whatever, so that you're away from them wanting to sort of lounge and take up your time. Because if they're sitting comfortably in their chair and you provide them with coffee, they may say, "oh, this is a nice evening out . . . ; I'll stay here for the rest of the evening" (Female, 6 years).

Just as an airport removes ashtrays from the environment to signal that smoking is not allowed, a network marketer removes comfortable seating from the environment to signal that casual interaction is not allowed.

Procedural Cues That Emphasize a Business-Oriented Consensus

While social gatherings tend to be fluid and improvised, business gatherings are focused and efficient. Thus, in contrast with distributors who foster a home-oriented consensus, business-oriented distributors ensure that their presentations have clear beginnings and endings. When a room is arranged as previously described—with a stage area placed in front of rows of chairs—this gives the presenter procedural control over the way in which the presentation will progress. When the presenter steps up to a podium or presentation table, this indicates the start of the presentation; when the presenter steps down, that is the end. However, this strategy is not always as effective as distributors would like:

> We would sometimes have a problem that people wouldn't quiet down when the presentation started. And sometimes worse, they might stay around too long after the presentation. You know what I mean, just chatting and enjoying themselves without any intention of signing up. And the hotel staff would be asking us when we were planning to leave (Male A, 4 years).

One group of distributors addressed this problem by playing loud music when prospects first arrived. The music was then shut off to indicate the beginning of the presentation, only to be started again to signal the presentation's end. Other distributors darken the room to use 35 mm slides or computer presentations. Darkening the room is of course a necessary step to ensure the visibility of such presentations, but it also helps to put procedural boundaries around the event. Note also that these technologies are used primarily by distributors fostering a business-oriented consensus and are rarely used in the home.

In the home, what a distributor does *not* do can give procedural cues that foster a business-oriented consensus. For example, one informant tells new distributors not to follow the conventional social rules for invited guests:

> I also tell them not to—although they never listen because people are nice and they want to entertain people—but I try and ask them not to serve any drinks or food or anything until I finish. Because, you know, nobody's going to concentrate. If they start having a glass of wine, then they're all going to be chatting amongst themselves, and it's going to be a big social event. And this is my work. This to me is work. You know, there's plenty of things I could be doing on a . . . Friday, Thursday night, eight o'clock, rather than go to talk to these people. So I don't want their attention taken away from me. . . . I think making them feel relaxed, you can make them too relaxed, and the whole thing is a waste of time. You know, it's got to be serious (Female, 9 years).

By not serving drinks before the presentation, a distributor can procedurally signal that the situation is not a social home environment, and that the rules to be followed are more akin to those of a formal business presentation.

The Challenges of Signaling a Business-Oriented Consensus

Perhaps the biggest challenge for a distributor who wishes to foster a business-oriented consensus is attempting to do so in a prospect's

home. Because the homeowner has control over the consensus, and because the home is a more casual and informal environment, a distributor is likely to face a situation in which the prospect will be following rules that are not conducive to a business-oriented consensus. To address this, some distributors will initiate the social negotiation process as soon as they arrange to meet with the prospect. For example, one informant (Male A, 4 years) described how he uses questions to suggest that the presentation environment be more formal and businesslike: "You can say to them, 'Look, would it be quiet to come around and talk to you that night? I mean, would there be a bit of space for us?'" Another informant emphasizes procedural boundaries with prospects by making several telephone calls in advance and by laying out specific rules for behavior:

> On the phone I will say, "Allow an hour . . . ." I tell them that I can give them an hour of my time, is that all right? And I also confirm it, and I say, for example, if they're coming tomorrow or the next two days, if there's any reason they can't make it, to let me know because I'm extremely busy and I'd rather give that appointment away to someone else. And I treat them as though they're a very professional interview, but relaxed. I don't let them think they can waste my time or that, you know, it's OK to not turn up (Female, 5 years).

Here, the marketer makes the social negotiation process very explicit and is firmly guiding the rules for behavior in a direction that best serves her needs. If the prospect is not willing to follow these rules, then the distributor is not interested in doing business. In other words, if you don't know what kind of pizza you want, don't get in line.

Fostering a Home-Oriented Consensus with Physical and Procedural Cues

While business-oriented distributors put social fences around network marketing to keep it from being defined by the home, others

believe that these social fences raise more difficult hurdles in prospects' minds. "The minute I start to use offices and too much high technology," said one informant (Male C, 8 years), "the average person says, 'It's OK for him because he's got that. It's OK for him because he's got this.'" Another informant gave the following reasons for preferring home presentations to hotel presentations:

> It's fairly duplicatable. In other words, it's something that they can do later. In other words, it may not be suitable for them to go and set up a hotel meeting. You know, I mean anybody can either get someone to their home or go and visit them in someone else's home (Male, 11 years).

Still another informant described how difficult it was for her to recruit once she opened an office in the city:

> I think people got the impression that we were successful because we had an office in the West End. Therefore they got the message, "Well, I can't do this because it's beyond my reach" (Female, 7 years).

Thus, while business-oriented distributors foster a consensus that network marketing is a business and should therefore be viewed as being separate from the home, home-oriented distributors foster a consensus that network marketing is home-based and should therefore be viewed as being different from a business. "It's like inviting people to a dinner party," said one distributor about his in-home presentations (Male A, 3 years), "and that is quite successful." Another (Male A, 8 years) described the home selling situation as like "inviting friends 'round for a game of Monopoly." Still another (Female C, 1 year) said, "A new distributor, he's invited his friends, or her friends, to his home. So they are more relaxed in their friend's home." By fostering agreement that network marketing is like visiting a friend's home for a dinner party, network marketers can integrate their business into the home environment while deflecting the concerns that might otherwise arise from bringing a business into the home arena.

Physical Cues That Emphasize a Home-Oriented Consensus

One of the ways in which a distributor physically emphasizes the similarities between home life and network marketing is by giving sales presentations in a home environment—either his or her home or the home of a fellow distributor. (Later on, I will discuss the unique difficulties of presenting in the *prospect's* home.) This is successful because, when visiting someone else's home, a prospect already accepts the consensus that this environment is casual, informal, and not businesslike. To further foster this social consensus, network marketers strive to make their presentation environment as homelike as possible. Just as a polished podium and a well-dressed maître d' can set the stage for a formal dinner, a fireplace and casually dressed distributors can set the stage for casual interaction.

One might question whether such physical cues reflect a strategy at all. After all, the space is already in a home, so the distributor does not have to do much to make it homelike. While this is true, the informants who pursued this strategy recognized that they could alternatively take a more businesslike approach to their presentations, and emphasized their conscious decision to foster a different orientation. One informant described his approach as follows:

> You arrange the furniture [so] that it's not too formal, that it's, you know, they're in a relaxed frame of mind right from the word *go.* You don't have rigid chairs and tables, or whatever. Have it informal (Male, 9 years).

Another distributor (Female, 7 years) described her choice of selling location as follows: "I personally always like to do it in my living room, and my living room does *not* look like an office" (emphasis hers). While home-oriented distributors do not usually have to alter the physical cues of their environment as much as business-oriented distributors do, their decisions about physical cues are no less strategic.

Procedural Cues That Emphasize a Home-Oriented Consensus

Whatever the room arrangement, prospects generally know that they have been invited to the distributor's home for a business presentation. Therefore, to further emphasize that "this is just like home," network marketing distributors make it a point to begin the interaction as if it were a social visit. Both distributors and prospects know that the rules governing such situations require the host to offer food and/or drink to guests, and to talk with them informally and personally. As one informant (Male, 11 years) said, "I mean, invariably when you go to someone's house, you offer them a cup of tea. You know, or a cup of coffee or something." Another informant made a similar point:

> We create an atmosphere so we get to know each other. So I start off—I don't talk business. I just start off by telling them about myself, from a personal viewpoint, get to know me as a person, and then they usually open up and talk about themselves. So that's the first thing; we create a rapport before we start talking about the company and the business (Male B, 8 years).

Still another informant (Male, 9 years) asserted, "Generally, social chat for five or ten minutes is well worth doing." To be sure, most experienced salespeople recognize the value of informal interaction before the sales presentation begins. However, in this study, informants who take a business orientation to network marketing did not mention the importance of social interaction, either before or after the presentation. While it may occur, they did not view it as an important element of their sales strategy.

While business-oriented distributors will give formal procedural signals about the presentation's beginning and end, home-oriented distributors sometimes seek the opposite extreme. They instead emphasize the relaxed and friendly nature of the business by not making a formal business presentation at all. Instead of arresting the informal interaction in order to make a presentation, they instead integrate the product into the social situation. For consum-

able products, this is relatively easy: Distributors will serve protein shakes, filtered water, or weight-loss drinks when guests arrive. This often prompts prospects to ask about the products, just as they might ask about a host's recipe for an interesting meal. Those selling non-consumable products will place their wares around the room like books on a coffee table, knowing that this will capture the interest of prospects. One distributor described a similar approach as follows:

> I just simply welcome the people in. Tell them, "There's a full catalog." Tell them, "There's the product; if you've got any questions, ask me." To keep the whole thing relaxed. Um, rather than this, you get everybody 'round, then you say, "We're going to start the presentation now" (Male B, 4 years).

The Challenges of Fostering a Home-Oriented Consensus

As with fostering a business-oriented consensus, those fostering a home-oriented consensus face the biggest difficulties when presenting in a prospect's home, rather than in their own. At first, it seems counterintuitive that presenting in someone else's home would present difficulties for the home-oriented distributor. Prospects should feel perfectly at home in their *own* household, and should therefore welcome a more informal and casual approach to network marketing. However, a distributor visiting a prospect's home is not generally seen as a friendly neighbor visiting for dinner, but as an economic interloper entering the prospect's personal territory. Thus, as many distributors discover when they arrive at a prospect's home, the hosts have already defined the encounter as a business visit, regardless of the fact that it is occurring in their own home. One informant explained that this is one of the reasons she moved from a home orientation to a business orientation for her presentations:

> Everything you said, you'd get a negative result from people like, "Yes, but you're here to sell us." And I'd say, "Well, but you did invite me." . . . They have a preformed idea that you are there to sell, or there to get them involved into something

> which they don't really think they want to become involved in (Female, 6 years).

Rather than allow prospects to fully define the social consensus, some distributors take an active role themselves. They feel that they must do this so that they can renegotiate the social consensus more in the direction of a casual visit than that of a business meeting. One distributor had the following advice:

> You must take control of the situation in the nicest possible way. You know, don't let them ask too many questions [about the business]. What you have to do is, you know, make yourself at home in that sense. You know: "Hi. How are you? Thanks for inviting me to your house" (Male A, 3 years).

Just as a restaurant maître d' must sometimes—in the nicest possible way—actively indicate to male patrons that a suit coat is required, a network marketing distributor must sometimes indicate to prospects that a casual and informal social consensus is preferred.

Fostering a Combined Consensus with Physical and Procedural Cues

While most of the strategies described by informants fit neatly into the business-oriented category or the home-oriented category, a few comments were not easily categorized. While these data are not as rich as for the preceding categories, as a group they hint at a third option for distributors. Rather than emphasize either the home orientation or the business orientation, some distributors challenge the Victorian distinction altogether. These distributors foster a consensus that network marketing is neither fish nor fowl, that the rules for running a business and the rules for running a household can work in concert. Just as the child at the indoor playland helped his friends by saying that it was "like a playground, only puffier," these distributors help prospects by saying that network marketing is like a business, only homier.

To accomplish this, distributors invite prospects to their home, where they can see firsthand how a business can integrate into the home environment. One informant (Male C, 8 years) invites prospects to his home by saying, "Look, you can see how I run my business from my back bedroom. And I'm running a multi-million-pound business from home with no overhead." Another informant (Female, 5 years) makes her presentations in the middle of her kitchen, telling prospects that this is where she started her successful business. By locating the presentation in the middle of the home's most active room, she indicates that her business is part of her home life. By making her presentation at a table, she avoids the casual atmosphere that is fostered by those presenting in a living room.

Procedurally, distributors balance a business consensus and a home consensus by simultaneously engaging in activities from both realms. Business-oriented distributors will avoid the casual cues of a home environment, and home-oriented distributors will avoid the formal cues of a business environment, but these distributors will welcome both:

> They see everything going on—the phone ringing, my daughter needs dinner (Female, 5 years).

> We try and have some activity going on. Maybe the wife comes on, gets involved (Male B, 8 years).

> If people see that . . . we can work from home, quite relaxed—you know, I've got the dishwasher on and the phones ring and there's stuff happening all the time—people actually get the idea that it is something that they can do from their home (Female, 7 years).

Conclusions

This chapter highlights a number of issues regarding the role of servicescapes in guiding the behavior of consumers and marketers. First, it has isolated the importance of not only physical cues such as the arrangement of chairs in a room, but also procedural cues

such as beginning a sales situation with social conversation. In this chapter, the two types of cues have been discussed separately because procedural cues are often more explicit than physical cues in establishing rules for behavior. However, in terms of fostering a more general social consensus, they both often serve the same function. Putting a desk at the door of a hotel meeting room (a physical cue) serves much the same function as having prospects sign in at that desk (a procedural cue); they both suggest that the rules to be followed in this situation will be businesslike. Marketers should therefore note that the required procedures for interacting in a servicescape can have an impact above and beyond the procedures in question. Having to ring a bell before entering a jewelry store, put on a name tag before getting on a cruise ship, or be chosen by a doorman to enter a nightclub are all procedures that help to foster a social consensus for the entire service experience.

In terms of the specific cues mentioned by informants in this study, it was certainly not surprising to learn that presenting in a living room encourages a more casual approach than presenting in a hotel function room, or that business suits foster a more businesslike environment than casual clothing. The appropriateness of these sales strategies is obvious, but the fact that they are self-evident underscores one of the key lessons about servicescapes: When customers enter a store, a restaurant, or a hotel, they bring with them a well-developed ability to "read" the environment and therefore to understand the implied instructions for behavior in the social situation. Because we all have this servicescape literacy, many servicescape strategies seem obvious, and this is perhaps why informants for this study found it so easy to discuss their servicescape strategies. Yet, if they were *not* obvious, this would undermine the main purpose of environmental cues: to present interactants with signals that they can rely upon for guidance regarding the expected consensus.

A corollary is that inappropriate cues will offer the wrong guidance to consumers and may negatively affect their evaluation of the marketing experience. This is important to recognize because, like network marketers, many other marketers embark upon new businesses with certain situational factors already in place. For exam-

ple, a hotel investment company may take over an older hotel property, a doctor may set up practice in a skyscraper, or a fast-food restaurant may set up a joint venture with a gas station. In cases like these, management will always wonder what level of investment should be made in servicescape alterations or refurbishment. This research suggests that managers must not underestimate the impact that existing servicescape cues will have on the social consensus. Recall the frustrations of the business-oriented distributors who found that selling in a living room with beverages resulted in a social situation where the consensus was too informal. The impact of the casual living room environment was too difficult for these distributors to completely overcome. The hotel company, the doctor, and the fast-food restaurant mentioned likewise must pay careful attention to the impact of their existing servicescapes, and must make careful investments to counteract—or capitalize on—the consensus that they foster.

What is additionally notable about network marketing is the way in which marketers can use the *established* cues to clarify what is otherwise an *ambiguous* exchange proposition for the consumer—ambiguous because it breaks with the generalized consensus that business and personal spheres are distinct. As I indicated at the outset, agreements about rules of conduct for marketing result from a negotiation among three forces: (1) what the marketer wants, (2) what the consumer wants, and (3) what the broader social world will allow. Undoubtedly, the network marketer would prefer that consumers and the broader social world simply accept network marketing at face value. However, because the broader social world has drawn clear distinctions between public and private spheres and because the consumer generally subscribes to this consensus, some explicit negotiation must occur. When negotiating, the network marketer has two general options: to work within the existing consensus or to try to foster a new one. The data collected for this chapter indicate that network marketers find it easier to adapt their approach to network marketing to the existing consensus than to attempt to get the existing consensus to adapt to them. What is particularly illustrative about the network marketing example is that distributors go to such different extremes to define exactly the same

business. This emphasizes the ambiguity of the exchange proposition and highlights the ability of servicescape cues to help resolve this ambiguity.

Lastly, given the apparent influence of servicescapes and the existing social consensus about the home, one wonders how any distributor can find success by taking the middle ground, where home and business are shown to be intermingled. For marketers, the cost of violating an established social consensus—e.g., allowing a patron to smoke in a no-smoking area—can be significant, so why do some network marketers risk this?

There are two potential answers to this question. The first is that a broad social consensus is flexible enough to allow divergent private agreements within it, especially if those agreements are insulated from the broader social world (Deighton and Grayson 1995; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Despite the international success of several network marketing companies, the industry itself is still thought to be on the fringe of conventional business activity, and some marketers may therefore be able to develop their own subcultures of consumption.

The second possible explanation is that, even though it is difficult for individuals to influence a broad social consensus (Berger and Luckmann 1966), such a consensus is not immutable. Just ten years ago, the idea of a completely smoke-free airport would have seemed as ludicrous to Americans as it did to my European friend. In terms of the social consensus about the home, the past two or three decades have witnessed a technological transformation that may rival the Industrial Revolution in its influence. Greater penetration of computers and modems in the household has made shopping from the home much easier for customers (Baig 1995, Strnad 1994). These same technologies have encouraged more and more workers to telecommute—to work at home instead of traveling to the office (Ford and McLaughlin 1995; McQuarrie 1994). A similar trend is the growing prevalence of SOHOs (small office/home offices), indicating that many people feel comfortable managing and patronizing businesses based in the home (Donath 1995). This trend may be pushing the generalized consensus about personal and commercial domains back toward a relationship like that pictured in

Figure 14.1, and thus facilitating some new opportunities for home selling in general and network marketing in particular.

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