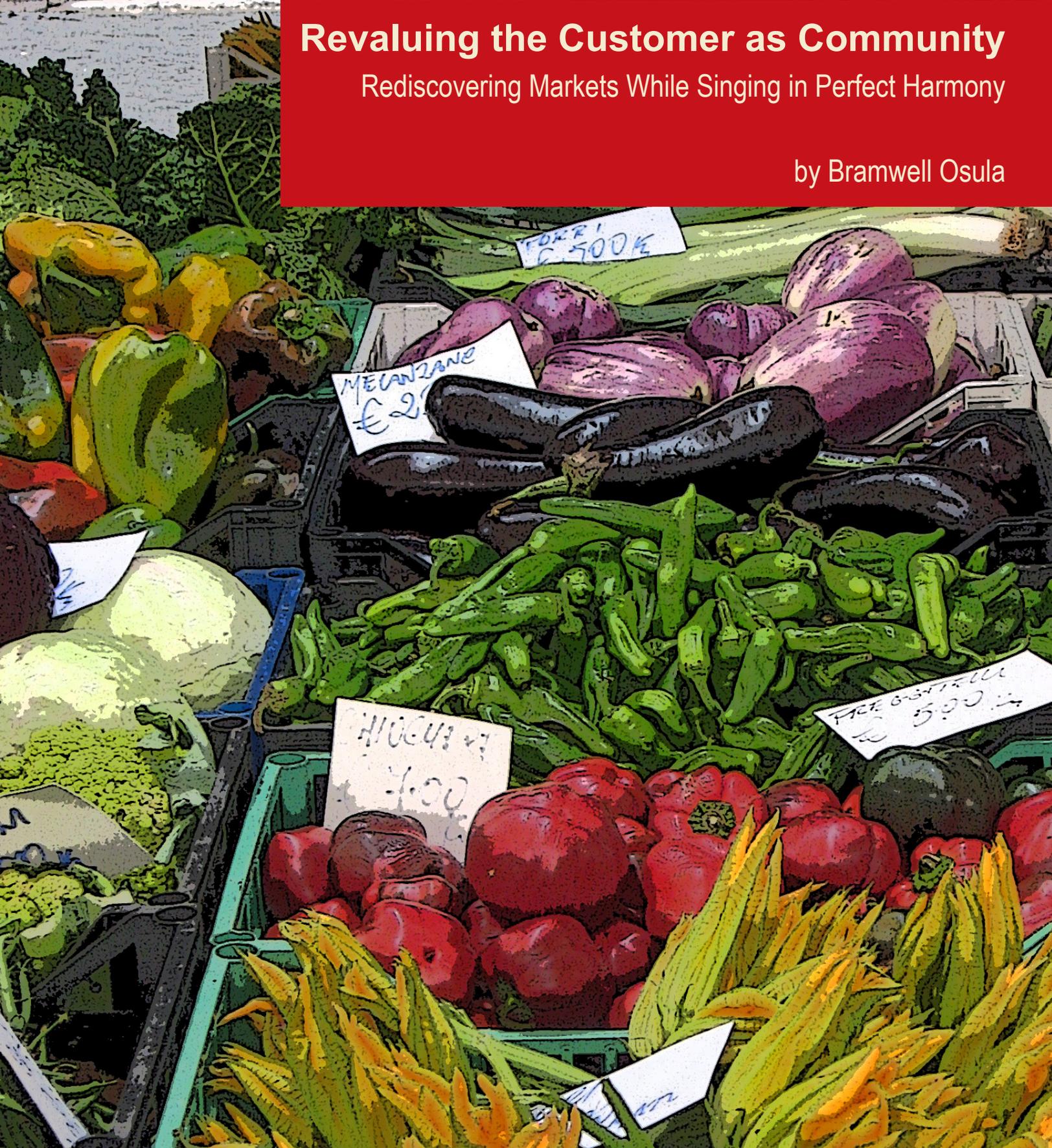




# Revaluing the Customer as Community

Rediscovering Markets While Singing in Perfect Harmony

by Bramwell Osula



**D**uring the early seventies while living in Lagos, Nigeria, one of my favorite pastimes was visiting a market located in one of the many suburbs of the sprawling city. The market was a large, bustling, place with dozens of small make-shift stalls constructed of cardboard, wood, and zinc roofing. Most of the stalls were owned and operated by women, who were the mainstay of the market, as they are in many other areas of West Africa. Wandering through the market's narrow aisles, I admired the overflowing trays of food stuffs, detergent, fresh produce, and other consumables. Occasionally, I frequented the row of small lean-to sheds that housed the cheap restaurants selling bean pottage and hunks of fresh bread (an early variety of fast food). However, what struck me most was the sound, or should I say, the sounds of the market.

The persistent drone of human traffic mingles with voices raised in mock argument, disputing the price of goods, children zigzagging in and out of the crowds, suppliers making their deliveries, and an assortment of shoppers— some of them with house girls or houseboys in tow— itinerant preachers, and the almost incessant cry of babies strapped to their mother's backs. If anyone had asked for my interpretation of market, this would have been it: this unique combination of sights and sounds. This was the energy or the pulse of the market (more about this later).

Like any other market, Sabo, as it was known, was a place of business. Stall owners conducted a brisk trade with shoppers who knew where to go for the best bargains. Marketing and advertising were as direct as you can imagine. Stall owners enticed or cajoled potential customers as best they could. Experience and a quick physical assessment of the customer were usually all it took to confirm which approach to take and, for the most part, it worked. However, the most consistent way of signaling presence and diverting shoppers to their stall was simply to call out "Customer, customer!" To this they would sometimes add a direct "Come buy!" As I navigated the narrow lanes of the market, I'd be greeted by one market stall owner after another, each appealing to me with cries of "Customer, customer!" Once

I had been reeled in they switched to making exaggerated remarks about my intelligence and good sense. The final strategy was to declare the ostensibly better value and superior quality of their wares.

Travelers to Kasbahs, markets and bazaars all over the world will have had their own market place experiences and have their own experiences that resemble, even if they do not exactly mirror mine in Lagos. If Sabo Market is an extension of these other "trading places" then "Customer, come buy!" possibly captures the essential purpose of markets everywhere. In time I learned to shut out the invasive background market noises and filter out the calls of market criers whose goods held no special interest for me. I share this story only because I believe that the concept of the customer, or the marketplace for that matter, is an expression of relationships. This offers a first hint at where elements of the Christian faith might fit into the marketing equation. Beyond this expression of a relationship, an appreciation and understanding of one's customers is rooted in an expression of caring concern and heartfelt commitment. Both of these expressions of the customer relationship are deeply founded on authenticity and anchored in community.

Let me pause here and reflect on the word customer. Avoiding the raft of dictionary definitions I close my eyes to see what words come to mind. Moving quickly past the fuzziness of an unorthodox challenge to my typical left-brain approach to thinking, the following are the first words that come to mind:

**Custom, Costume, Customize, Consume, Commune, Commute, Communitas**

With the possible exception of "costume" the first three words can be seen as cognates of customer. The dictionary would soon clarify that point. But staying with the left-brain experiment a moment longer, we arrive at the word "consume" that itself probably comes from my association of customer with shopping and consumers. All is well until get to "commune," "commute," and *communitas*. Exploring the meaning of each of these words would make for an interesting experiment in the association

of ideas to specific words and action. If we pushed hard enough we might even come up with a creative exegesis of customer relations or etymology of customer development. *Communitas*, which we can take as the expanded form of community and which invokes a spirit of cooperation and togetherness, nudges us in the direction of a broader interpretation of customer.

In one sense telecommunications are the contemporary motor of the marketplace and renew efforts to establish contact between individuals and their communities. In many developing countries it is possible to acquire a cell phone, by-passing the landline stage that was the traditional route in the West. Today all across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America the mobile

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phone is a growing phenomenon. In some places where running water and electricity are foreign concepts the tell-tale sign of personalized ringtones can be heard. This is Celtel's world, the company founded in 1998 by the Sudanese-born Mo Ibrahim. When Celtel introduced its "One Network" in 2006 it was billed as the world's first borderless network service. The Network allowed subscribers in East Africa to roam freely across borders without incurring roaming charges. Incoming calls were also free of charge. Since then Celtel has expanded its service to include other countries in Africa. Today it has an estimated 24 million subscribers in 14 African countries. As a measure of Celtel's reach, the company has more subscribers than Sprint (22.2m), T-Mobile (17.3m) or Nextel (15.3) in the United States. In Europe, only Germany and Russia exceed

its numbers. On the world stage Celtel's numbers are dwarfed by major players like China Mobile (158.6m subscribers), Vodafone (151.8 m subscribers) and T-Mobile 1 (65m subscribers). However, as we know, the market is not only about numbers. People matter too. In Africa fluid borders and trans-national identities reflect the legacy of colonial rule and the creation of artificial national boundaries. Celtel and other mobile operators are leading the charge in creating open marketplace where buyers and sellers "cross borders" freely. This is important in a world where there are still more cell phone than Internet users. The chances are that Celtel's opening of borders, coupled with its re-designation of cell phone users as mobile citizens, will encourage social activism and

how do we move from an in-group/out-group conceptualization of customer relations to one in which customers and businesses occupy the same social arena as partners or collaborators? Recasting customers as people seems an obvious solution. As a consultant I go to great lengths in an attempt to build firm relationships with my clients, although I seldom use the clinical word "client." But is it enough simply to see customers as people? In any case what does it mean to be seen as a person? The Christian response is as straightforward as the call of my Lagos market stall owners. Persons are created in the image of God. For this reason they are to be valued, nurtured, and encouraged. Throughout the Bible witness emphasis is placed on people. Whether expressed in God's dealings

people. While many of these efforts have stopped just short of the *communitas* suggested in this paper, it may if nothing else suggests possibilities.

In 1971 Coca Cola ran its tremendously successful "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony" commercials. These were recorded by the popular UK group the New Seekers and inspired by Bill Backer, the creative director for McCann-Erickson who had the important Coca-Cola account. The story is that McCann saw Coca Cola as much more than just a bottle of soda. To him it was a way of communicating, sharing, and keeping company with others. TV ads featuring young, fresh-faced men and women and representing every continent on the globe presented an image of vitality, togetherness, and community.



African regional development. In an interesting re-branding postscript, Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC), the parent company of Celtel, changed its name in September 2007 to Zain, which is Arabic for 'beautiful, good and wonderful.'

In a world driven by bottom-line imperatives and supposedly savvy consumers who are quick to smell a rat in every new product or service, "beautiful, good, and wonderful" aren't adjectives in the average customer's lexicon. In a world where oil prices are rising and everyone could use a break, bringing people back into the marketing equation as Celtel is doing may seem almost too simple a solution. "The customer is king" mantra remains a foreign concept and in any case was never really applicable to women, who comprise just over half of the consumer population globally. The immediate problem seems to be

with a recalcitrant Israel, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or Paul's letters to the fledgling Churches, the message is the same. As summarized in the Golden Commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22: 37-39). Even if it isn't conceived in these terms, the Sabo market sellers call of "Customer, come buy!" fits very well into this theology. Christians are encouraged, nay, exhorted to build community with God and one's neighbors. Customers and marketing are in many ways therefore not so far removed from a core tenet of Christian values; emphasizing relationships through the building of community. In the world of advertising there is a long history of attempting to build bridges that connect products to

In a similar vein the Italian clothing retailer Benetton's edgy "United Colors of Benetton," AT& T's (1979) "Reach out and touch someone" or Ronald Reagan's 1984 "It's morning again in America" political commercial somehow capture the imagination of the customer as community.

These ad campaigns (to which we could add Wendy's popular 1984, "Where's the beef?" or Quaker Life cereal's 1972 "Hey, Mikey" commercial) suggest that people and communities, even if they are not always fully embraced, remain part of an American and possibly global advertising zeitgeist. But zeitgeist and reality are not the same thing. The themes suggested by each of the commercials listed above resonate with the honest, thinking, feeling individual. Moving beyond the 70s and 80's Geico's popular caveman campaign seems to raise darker questions

about everything from humanity and intelligence to political correctness and negotiated meanings. One of the top Super Bowl commercials is Frito-Lays Doritos ad in which two Doritos lovers converge on the street. The chance encounter of two individuals who discover that they share something in common could be a powerful motif for community in the 21st century. Interestingly, this commercial wasn't a product of Madison Avenue and was created on a shoestring budget of around \$12 by an amateur who submitted the ad in response to Frito-Lays, "make your own Doritos Super Bowl ad." Whether this will signal a rush to ads produced by so-called ordinary people is doubtful. However, the Doritos commercial, which aired before the Super Bowl audience in February and helped to boost sales of chips in a novel way, reintroduces the concept of the customer as ordinary; an ordinary individual with basic instincts. In this case the street is the marketplace. Perhaps the real truth is that ordinary is everywhere and located somewhere in each of us. The availability of cheap digital cameras, the capabilities for uploading and downloading material, added to the presence of sites like YouTube increases the potential for people advertising. So far few companies have shown a willingness to venture into this innovative space in terms of revising their market strategies. The Doritos Super Bowl 2007 ad may yet help to set a new advertising standard. Traditionally though, behind the scenes we continue to imagine how many focus group sessions and consumer research dollars are spent on the average ad. With all this focus on the human side of the equation and the popularity of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology that supposedly improves customer alignment, why does the language of marketing still seem somewhat sterile with customers represented as one or at best two-dimensional cut-out characters?

Investing consumers with names, heart, and ultimately with meaning, is an experiment that seems to have largely failed. Most of us see through the slick advertising, whether on television, radio, newsprint, billboards, junk mail, or, increasingly these days, the Internet.

Yet, because we are consumer driven or, believe the programmed hype, we play along, resisting our more rational sides that say "Don't!" This is part of the presumed freedom of the marketplace. Customers remain captive if not captivated. Of course corporations, small businesses and consulting agencies are to varying degrees attentive to the needs of their customers. This remains one of the laws of good business: Take care of your customers and they'll take care of you. So customers are taken care of, lavished with surveys that aim to discover what they really want and jumbo-sized products of such and such are repackaged in containers that actually hold less than they did before they went jumbo (if that makes any sense). Elsewhere, prices are slashed and organic, sugar-free, natural, low-fat, 0 grams trans fat, is emblazoned on everything. Information awareness gives way to misinformation overkill leaving the hapless consumer with a king-size headache known as the surfeit of choice.

These are the joys of the customer, the consumer-sated customer. How else do we characterize the relationship between purveyors and purchasers of goods and services? While the marketplace and the bargaining (even the haggling) table remain popular (take a look at the trading floors of stock exchanges all around the globe), the language of marketing has been refined, spruced up, and made more "professional." What better than a return to the physical reality of the market place? Like our farmer's and flea markets, even our garage sale "markets," the market is defined by more than the goods and services available there. It is people who make the difference. The great markets of antiquity, whether located in Asia Minor and Medieval Europe or along African trade routes, spawned tremendous political, social, and economic opportunities. Augmented by traveling fairs and specialist bazaars these markets were the "happening places" within local communities. In a few special cases the intersection of community and geography was the springboard for the birth of great cities and civilizations.

A return to the market and to the people one meets there is a promising journey. Along the way we rediscover the very communities that gave us the

concept of the customer and bump head-on into the link between faith and marketing, relationships and community. Interesting things happen when customers re-discover community. Big words like "humanization," heart, emotion, and transformation creep back into the equation. Here right and left-brain thinking is permitted to play an active role in redefining the terms of discourse. Values, innovation, caring, and concern are invested with real meaning. In-group/out-group boundaries dissolve or become more fluid. Even in a global market community becomes an achievable reality as communities of like-minded individuals, interest and people groups band together to achieve shared purposes. The result of all this is a basic realization that people and communities are the driving force of business and society. The ultimate benefit of recasting customers as community is the introduction of values into the marketing equation. Questions about community inevitably invite questions about ones neighbors. Who is my neighbor? Christians respond to the question in inclusive terms. Yesterday's customer becomes today's neighbor, part of my community.

Finally, if like Celtel, Singapore Airlines, Aunt Annie pretzels, or even Disney Corporation, we allow ourselves to think in terms of community and imagine people rather than clients, then a revolution or transformation of ideas is possible. Rather than talking about building ones customer base we can, instead, speak of developing a community base. From here it becomes possible to reduce the deeper purpose of marketing, customer relations and the Christian faith journey to a simple question: Do you know your community?

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