Blessings and the spiritual life of consumers

Robert M. Schindler *

School of Business, Rutgers University — Camden, 227 Penn Street, Camden, NJ 08102, United States

Abstract

The growing social phenomenon of ritually blessed animal companions suggests that the concept of the blessing should receive more attention in the field of consumer behavior. By documenting the importance of perceived sacred power and by capturing the words, gestures, and artifacts of the animal-blessing ritual, Holak highlights the role that these factors can play in the efforts of individuals and businesses to express, to those they care about, the wish that good should follow.

© 2007 Published by Elsevier Inc.

Keywords: Animal-blessing ritual; Spirituality; Consumer behavior

In her sensitive and enlightening paper on a growing social phenomenon regarding animal companions, Holak (2008-this issue) highlights the concept of the blessing and evokes its potential importance in consumer behavior. Holak notes a generally increasing interest in animals and spirituality, and this rise seems most apparent in one particular ritual relating to animal spirituality. Pets considered to have a spiritual presence are sometimes given birthday parties, weddings, and funerals. But, beyond that, the performance of ritual blessings of animal companions appears to have seen the most growth. This trend may reflect the relative simplicity of a blessing — which could be a spiritual ritual that companion animals are particularly likely to understand. Such a special status of the blessing leads a reader to wonder about its nature and effects.

Holak cites a paper by Moore (2000) that provides a good starting point for thinking about the nature of a blessing. Although the word “blessing” has many potential meanings, Moore focuses on its sense as “the utterance of a wish, request, or direction that good should follow” — as opposed to a curse intended “to call evil or injury down on someone” (p. 2). Moore sees three elements in a blessing, each of which is supported by Holak’s research.

1. A relationship with God, so that goodness can be requested. Holak observes that the administration of the animal blessings is conducted by people considered to be invested with sacred powers, such as clergy of Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches; a practicing Buddhist; and a woman trained by the shaman of a Mexican Indian tribe.

2. The ritual of the transfer of goodness. Holak’s observations document the use of prayers and of ritual artifacts such as bells, herbs, smoke, and a feather to help accomplish the blessing. She also observes that the person giving the blessing may touch the animal recipient and may use gestures, such as speaking skyward, to demonstrate the invocation of a sacred power.

3. The enhancement of the receiver. Several of Holak’s informants noted that not just the people, but also the animals, responded to ritual calls for silence, suggesting that animals too were feeling calmed and connected with others. Other informants reported that the ritual blessings appeared to provide animals with some relief from physical disorders.

If we consider a blessing to be a calling forth of goodness, we must recognize that blessings occur in many areas of everyday life not ordinarily considered religious. For instance the common rituals of wishing a friend, “Good luck!” before a job interview or saying, “Sleep well,” to a family member at bedtime qualify as everyday attempts to bring goodness to those people we care about. In commercial interactions, businesses may show caring about customers by requiring customer-contact employees to say to each customer, “Have a nice day!” If these everyday blessing activities seem weak in their impact, we may seek explanations in Moore’s elements, as supported by Holak’s research. A blessing may have little effect because the giver of the blessing is perceived...
to lack investment in sacred power. Or a weak transfer ritual may sap impact from an intended blessing.

This broader conception of a blessing could carry implications for all who seek to provide goodness to people. For example, businesses that care about satisfying customers might pay attention to developing the power to offer effective blessings. Given modern society’s sacralization of science and art (Belk et al., 1989), a religious connection is not necessary. Rather, if an organization of credentialed professionals acknowledges a company’s toothpaste as “an effective decay-preventive dentifrice,” bringing this blessing to public consciousness makes sense. Or, promoting an association with the award-winning chef on a restaurant’s staff could strengthen a server’s blessing to the diner, “An excellent choice, you’ll enjoy it.” Further, customer-contact personnel could receive training in the means of presenting a blessing. For example, the use of wording that avoids triteness might matter, along with factors such as eye contact, posture, and even physical contact via a light touch on the arm or shoulder (Hornik, 1992). Employees could be encouraged, rather than required, to bless customer choices so as to help their words be a sincere expression of their interest in customer satisfaction.

Just as Holak’s study of the practice of blessing animal companions sheds light on the character of the human-animal relationship, considering the broader role of blessings in consumer behavior might also lead to new understandings. For example, the finding that a salesperson’s blessing (i.e., reassurance that the decision was wise) reduces a consumer’s likelihood of backing out on a new car purchase (Donnelly and Ivancevich, 1970) might contribute to our understanding of high-involvement decisions. Could a strong blessing be just the thing to help dispel a bout of postpurchase dissonance? In a similar vein, better appreciation of how words can transfer goodness might provide clues to the enormous power of word-of-mouth communication. Are shoppers inordinately desirous of and affected by blessings of their purchases from important people in their lives? What other new understandings might be uncovered from looking further at this simple, but important activity in the spiritual life of consumers?

References