



In Focus: Faculty and Research March 2, 2009

Scholar Studies Loyalty as a Key to Happiness

By Gina Vergel

Lerzan Aksoy, Ph.D., associate professor of marketing, has always been interested in loyalty.

Throughout her academic career, several of her papers dealing with loyalty as it relates to brand-customer connection and customer satisfaction and retention have won awards. Her doctoral dissertation dealt with loyalty in the online environment.

Aksoy's latest project, the book *Why Loyalty Matters* (Benbella Publishers, 2009), explores the topic as it relates to happiness. She co-authored it with Timothy L. Keiningham, global chief strategy officer and executive vice president of Ipsos Loyalty, a customer research firm.

"[The book] looks at the role loyalty has in our lives," Aksoy said. "We define what loyalty means in terms of family and friends, the workplace, if you are a customer, and to society and community. Then we link loyalty to happiness."

Aksoy defines loyalty as having a commitment to something.

"It's changing the 'I' to 'we' and seeing things as 'mine,'" she said. "Whether it's my dry cleaner, my Pepsi or my company, an aspect of loyalty is being committed and doing everything necessary to deliver on that commitment. Sometimes that requires making sacrifices, which means thinking about someone or something else more than you think about yourself."

Therein lies the tale of our true level of loyalty, Aksoy said.

She gleaned some insight into how people view loyalty by asking 3,000 people in the United States and the United Kingdom to complete a detailed survey on loyalties, with a shorter poll given to subjects in 18 additional countries.

In one question, respondents were asked to what extent they are loyal to friends and family and, also, to what extent family and friends are loyal to them.

"People think that they are always more loyal to family and friends than family and friends are to them," Aksoy said. "This is universal. Results were similar across all the countries we surveyed. That's amazing."

And telling, she explained.

"If you think you are more loyal to others than they are to you, then you are less likely to give more of yourself to others because you think you are already giving more than they deserve," she said.

Aksoy added that people are unaware that they harbor such a skewed impression.



**Lerzan Aksoy, Ph.D.,
associate professor of
marketing**
Photo by Benbella Publishers

"If you don't see a problem, then you're not going to fix it," she said. "In this case, people don't observe that there's a problem so there's really no need to do anything about it."

When asked to rate how loyal they are to their employers and how loyal they think their employers are to them, results were similar. Respondents rated their loyalty higher than their employers' loyalty.

"This is important, not just in how we view our loyalties to our employers, but also what we think in regard to 'how much my employee gives to me,'" Aksoy said. "Recently, Microsoft laid off 5,000 people. It's not really the laying off that would lead someone to be less loyal to his or her employer. It's the attitude toward people and how they view their employees that's startling. It really demoralizes those who are left behind. They think the company has an expendable view of employees."

Loyalty and happiness are intrinsically linked, Askoy said. When asking U.S. and U.K. respondents about the percentage of their workday they spent unhappy, she found that the more time people spent unhappy at work, the less satisfied they were with their employment.

Which is why it's not surprising that when asked about total life satisfaction, only 5 to 6 percent of respondents reported feeling totally satisfied with their lives.

"Even with our study of 3,000 people, we found that people focus on the wrong things—materialism and the individual," Aksoy said. "The fact that we give a lot of importance to materialism and money in our lives is detrimental. Humans are really bad at predicting what makes us happy. We tend to believe things like money or a flat-screen TV are going to make us happy."

Aksoy is careful to state that she's not saying money doesn't make life easier, but rather that the lack of money can make us unhappy.

"If you're poor, then yes, you become unhappy. But after achieving a certain level of wealth, getting even more money and belongings doesn't really have that much of an effect on increasing your happiness," she said. "It seems like a cliché, but it's really true. Money brings happiness to the extent that you aren't poor, but it doesn't bring you happiness."

So what does make people happy?

"Our relationship to others," Aksoy said. "Our connection to others, specifically family and friends, but also our connection to others in general, makes us happy."

A self-test in Aksoy's forthcoming book can be used as a guide to find your relationship style, your view on loyalties and, ultimately, how you can improve both.

"That's one of my greater missions with this work—to have an impact on people's lives in terms of making them better," Aksoy said. "Also, to change the way companies think about their employees."

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