



UNION
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The Companies We Keep: Exploring Consumer-Business Relationships

A Union+Webster research report, commissioned by Zendesk

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Executive Summary

What do you look for in a friend? Someone who shares your values, who sees things from a similar perspective? Maybe it's someone very different from you, the yin to your yang. No matter what, a healthy friendship is a reciprocal relationship based on empathy and trust: You give something — attention, encouragement, time — and you expect something just as valuable back. It's not unlike a business exchange.

Of course, people aren't businesses. But as the bonds between consumers and businesses continue to grow, so too do their parallels with interpersonal relationships. What distinguishes the two, and how are they similar? Are there any business benefits of close consumer ties? If so, how might businesses best build them?

As part of our [research](#) into business-consumer connections, Union+Webster used a survey to evaluate the similarities and differences between consumers' ties to friends and their ties to businesses.

Examining consumers through a couple of different lenses, the survey made two discoveries. First, taking all respondents together, it found that consumers see their ties to businesses as substantially similar to their ties to friends.

Then, respondents were sorted according to their online behaviors. One group comprised half of consumers overall — the Social Activators, known for leaving positive, influential business reviews on key sites (like Facebook and Amazon). A closer look here led to the second survey finding: Social Activators feel much closer to businesses than other consumers do.

Findings

This analysis is based on a multinational survey of 7,010 individuals, with an average of 1,000 consumer respondents in each of the following geographic regions: Australia (1,009), Brazil (997), France (995), Germany (1,006), Mexico (1,004), the U.K. (997), and the U.S./Canada (1,002).



Multinational Survey



In the survey, half the respondents were asked about their bonds with the businesses they patronize. The other half were asked the same questions, but about their friends. The questions focused on the attributes of these relationships, as well as the roles businesses or friends play in consumers' lives.

Attributes versus roles: What's the difference? Attributes were defined to be based on consumers' histories of direct experiences with businesses or friends. Consumers assessed the proportion of businesses or friends in their lives that could be described as interacting with them in ways that exemplify certain attributes, like honesty and reliability.

On the other hand, roles were defined as patterns of observed behaviors that may go beyond consumers' direct experience. Roles describe how businesses or friends are seen to generally conduct themselves, which may not necessarily be associated with their attributes. In the survey, consumers evaluated the proportion of their businesses or friends that could be described as embodying certain roles — for example, that of the caregiver, or mentor, or confidant.

The survey discovered that consumers find substantial similarities between the attributes they associate with friends and businesses (Figure 1). Likewise, consumers say there are substantial similarities between the roles the two play (Figure 2).

FRIEND/BUSINESS ATTRIBUTES

Attributes are based on histories of direct experiences between consumers and businesses or friends. Attributes refer to the ways in which the two parties talk to and act toward each other.

FRIEND/BUSINESS ROLES

Roles are patterns of observed behaviors that may go beyond direct experience — how businesses or friends are seen to conduct themselves. Roles are not necessarily associated with attributes.





Figure 1: Friend/Business Attributes
 Consumers see many substantial similarities between the attributes they associate with friends and businesses.

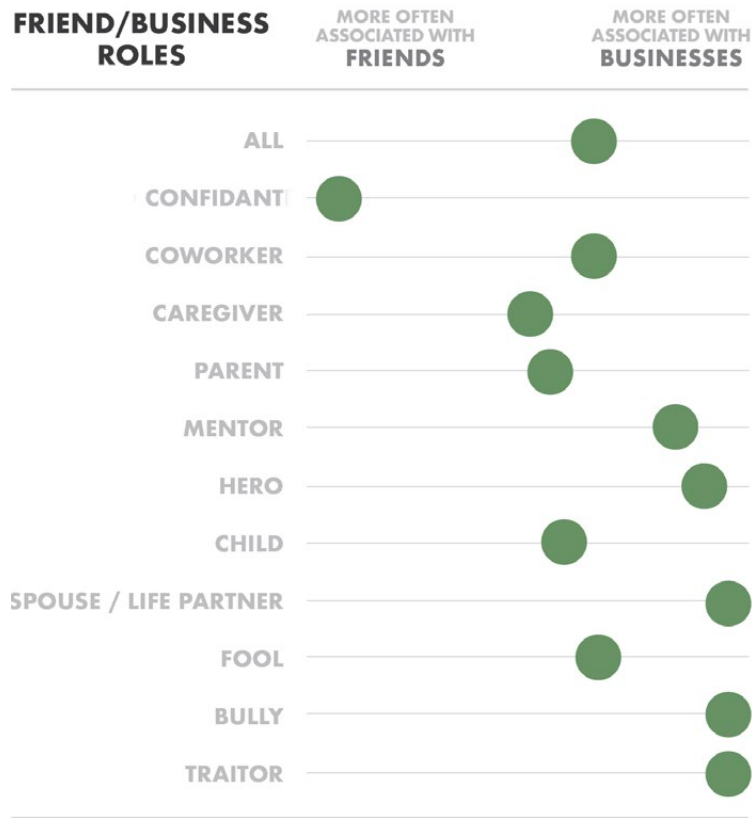


Figure 2: Friend/Business Roles
 Consumers say friends and businesses assume many substantially similar roles.

But there were some exceptions to this finding. When it comes to attributes, for example, respondents more closely connect value-sharing and pride of association with friends — and approachability, reliability, and availability with businesses.

As for roles? The survey found that consumers are more likely to see the roles of the hero, spouse, bully, and traitor as characteristic of businesses; the caregiver, of friends. And on the extreme end of the scale, there was the intriguing case of the confidant — which is much more closely associated with respondents’ friends.

Interestingly, these bonds with friends and businesses extend into the digital world — because when consumers aren’t chatting online with friends, many are talking business. In fact, half of consumers overall, the Social Activators, leave positive business reviews on several key sites (including Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon) — reviews they want others to act on. And what’s more, most Social Activators leave these recommendations frequently. Their counterparts, the Non Activators, use these sites but do not leave positive reviews.

As in the preceding findings, both Social Activators and Non Activators see the attributes they associate with both friends and businesses as substantially similar to each other. And as with attributes, so with roles: Social Activators and Non Activators see many businesses' roles as substantially similar to their friends' roles.

SOCIAL ACTIVATORS

Social Activators leave business recommendations on key websites. Half of all consumers are Social Activators.

But considering that Social Activators take the extra step to show their support for businesses online, it should come as no surprise they view their bonds with friends as much more similar to those with businesses than Non Activators do (Figure 3).

Simply put, Social Activators are closer to businesses than Non Activators are. They trust them more, feel for them more — and they want to share this enthusiasm with other consumers.

SOCIAL ACTIVATOR/NON ACTIVATOR PERCEPTION OF FRIEND/BUSINESS ATTRIBUTES

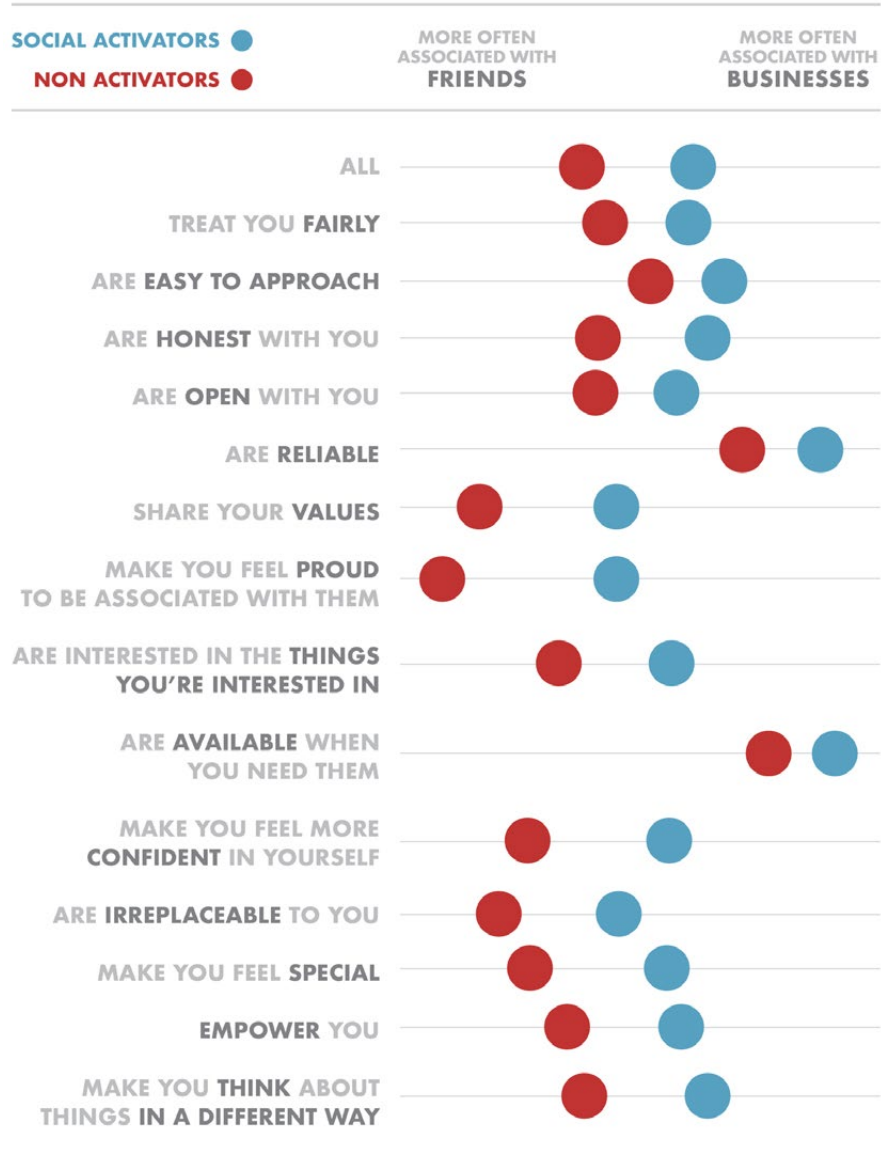


Figure 3: Social Activators/Non Activators on Friend/Business Relationships
Compared to Non Activators, Social Activators see many substantial similarities between the attributes they associate with friends and businesses.

To be clear, Social Activators do see differences between businesses and friends — particularly in their impressions of the two as confidants. Businesses are seen to behave much less like confidants than friends are. It's a noticeable perception gap, but a gap smaller than is found between Non Activators' perceptions of the two (Figure 4).

SOCIAL ACTIVATOR/NON ACTIVATOR PERCEPTION OF FRIEND/BUSINESS ROLES

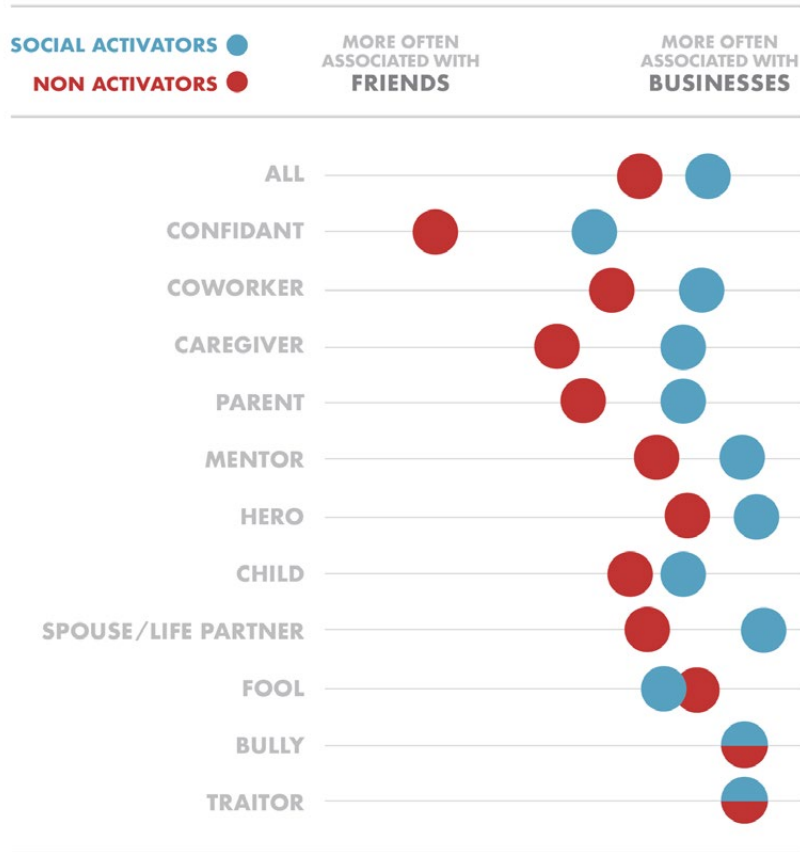


Figure 4: Social Activators/Non Activators on Friend/Business Roles
Compared to Non Activators, Social Activators say friends and businesses assume many substantially similar roles.

To further strengthen these consumer relationships (and the foundation of trust and empathy supporting them), businesses might consider improving their standing as confidants in the eyes of the influential Social Activators. Their support secured, the Social Activators can take the businesses to the people, posting praises online to win over other consumers. The more, the merrier — isn't it great to have friends?

For a closer investigation into the effects of business trust on consumer decision-making, stay tuned for the next Union+Webster study.

For more information, contact research@unionandwebster.com.