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The Role of Customer Gratitude in Relationship Marketing

Most theories of relationship marketing emphasize the role of trust and commitment in affecting performance outcomes; however, a recent meta-analysis indicates that other mediating mechanisms are at work. Data from two studies—a laboratory experiment and a dyadic longitudinal field survey—demonstrate that gratitude also mediates the influence of a seller's relationship marketing investments on performance outcomes. Specifically, relationship marketing investments generate short-term feelings of gratitude that drive long-lasting performance benefits based on gratitude-related reciprocal behaviors. The authors identify a set of managerially relevant factors and test their power to alter customer perceptions of relationship marketing investments to increase customer gratitude, which can make relationship marketing programs more effective. Overall, the research empirically demonstrates that gratitude plays an important role in understanding how relationship marketing investments increase purchase intentions, sales growth, and share of wallet.

Keywords: gratitude, reciprocity, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, loyalty programs

> The sentiment which most immediately and directly prompts us to reward, is gratitude.
>
> —Adam Smith

Many researchers and managers maintain that one of the key goals of marketing is to build and sustain strong customer relationships (Bagozzi 1995; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; McKenna 1991). A large body of research in both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) markets establishes empirically that relationship marketing (RM) investments enhance both customer trust and commitment, and in turn these relational mediators influence customer behaviors, leading to superior seller performance (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002). This well-supported commitment–trust theory of RM has served as the default model for most relationship research in the past decade, such that RM encompasses all activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

However, a meta-analysis based on more than 38,000 relationships that tests the commitment–trust-mediated model of RM reveals a surprising finding; namely, RM investments have a direct effect on seller objective performance outcomes that is actually greater than the effect mediated by trust and commitment (Palmatier et al. 2006). Although the meta-analysis confirms prior research by providing support for the roles of trust and commitment, its finding also suggests that the extant RM model is missing one or more important mediating mechanisms that researchers need to understand to appreciate the impact of RM on performance. Similarly, a recent longitudinal study of interorganizational relationship performance reveals that seller relationship investments have a direct effect on seller sales performance, unmediated by customer trust, commitment, or relational norms, and it suggests that researchers should investigate "other possible mediating mechanisms (e.g., reciprocity, exchange effectiveness, gratitude)" (Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007, p. 186). Therefore, the primary focus of this research is to advance RM theory by identifying and testing an additional mechanism to explain how RM investments lead to improved performance beyond the known roles of trust and commitment. This study addresses a key question: What other mechanisms make RM effective at improving seller performance?

We propose that gratitude, the emotional appreciation for benefits received, accompanied by a desire to reciprocate is an important construct for understanding RM effectiveness (Emmons and McCullough 2004; Morales 2005). Relationship marketing investments (e.g., when a seller provides extra effort; adapts policies; and provides small favors or considerations, such as meals, gifts, or personalized notes) generate customer feelings of gratitude, which lead to gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors, resulting in enhanced seller performance. Thus, from an RM perspective, both affective (feelings of gratitude) and behavioral (gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors) aspects of gratitude

play roles in understanding RM effectiveness. Although marketing research on gratitude is noticeably absent (Morales 2005), many researchers note the importance of the principle of reciprocity for RM (Bagozzi 1995; Houston and Gassenheimer 1987). However, extant conceptualizations either begin with the reciprocity principle as a starting point or suggest that reciprocity norms develop over time to drive behaviors (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Wiener and Doescher 1994). Neither of these approaches offers insight into the potentially important underlying causal element of gratitude, which may be responsible, at least in part, for observed reciprocating behaviors. This argument is consistent with researchers' contention that gratitude represents reciprocity's "emotional core" (Emmons 2004, p. 12).

Researchers across many disciplines have recognized that after receiving a benefit (e.g., RM investments), people feel an ingrained psychological pressure to reciprocate, such that the act of reciprocating can generate pleasure, whereas the failure to repay obligations can lead to guilt (Becker 1986; Buck 2004; Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2005). Therefore, people seem to be "hardwired" to repay others who provide them some benefit through emotional reward systems. The ubiquitous role of gratitude in how people perceive, feel about, and repay benefits gained in the exchange process makes gratitude a prime candidate for explaining how RM affects performance, beyond the influence of trust and commitment. For example, Komter (2004, p. 195) argues that gratitude is "an imperative force, a force that compels us to return the benefit we have received … [and] part of the chain of reciprocity." The most effective RM programs probably tap into this force, resulting in customer "repayment," but surprisingly this "imperative force" is not captured in extant theories or models of RM.

Overall, this research makes three key contributions. First, we propose and empirically demonstrate that gratitude is an important missing mediator in the extant RM model (Morgan and Hunt 1994), one that influences performance outcomes beyond the contributions of trust and commitment. Indeed, the results demonstrate that only when we include gratitude in the RM model, parallel to trust and commitment, is the influence of RM on performance outcomes fully mediated.

Second, we develop a theoretical framework that integrates gratitude into the nomological network of RM, and we empirically demonstrate its effect in two separate studies. A laboratory experiment focused on a B2C context demonstrates that RM investments generate feelings of gratitude (affective aspect), which have a strong influence on customers' short-term purchase intentions. A second study uses a dyadic sample from a B2B context to link customer reports of gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors (behavioral aspect) to seller-reported objective performance data (i.e., sales revenue) and longitudinal sales growth. Taken together, these two studies provide insight into the important role of both affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude in understanding how RM investments drive seller performance. The design of these studies also provides persuasive evidence of the internal validity of the proposed theoretical model, the external validity of the findings across different research and customer contexts, and the causal linkage between gratitude and future performance outcomes.

Third, we identify and empirically test both customer and seller factors that leverage the impact of RM investments on gratitude and, ultimately, on seller outcomes, while showing that these same factors do not have equivalent effects on trust or commitment. Researchers have suggested that the level of felt gratitude depends on many factors related to how the recipient perceives the disposition of the benefit (Morales 2005; Tsang 2006). For example, if the customer perceives the benefit as being provided at the discretion of the seller, with a benevolent motive, or with some risk to the seller, he or she should feel more grateful and be more likely to reciprocate. By demonstrating that specific factors leverage RM investments only through gratitude, we highlight the need to integrate gratitude into models of RM and provide managers with guidelines for delivering RM programs in ways that enhance performance. In a trust–commitment model that does not incorporate gratitude, these moderating factors would be judged as irrelevant to RM effectiveness (at least empirically).

Conceptual Background of Gratitude

Gratitude is a fundamental social component of human interactions that provides an emotional foundation for reciprocal behaviors. Gratitude also has been conceptualized as a force that helps people maintain their reciprocal obligations (Gouldner 1960), a sort of inertia that causes relationships to maintain their prosocial orientation (Schwartz 1967), and an important link that supports the chain of reciprocity (Simmel 1950). Evolutionary psychologists even argue that feelings of gratitude, pleasure in reciprocating, and guilt for failing to reciprocate represent well-developed, genetic-based "systems" that support reciprocal and cooperative behaviors (Becker 1986; Trivers 1985). Through mutual giving, people become tied to what has been described as a "web of feelings of gratitude" (Komter 2004, p. 203). For centuries, gratitude has represented an essential ingredient to theories about social relationships and reciprocal behaviors across a variety of disciplines (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006), which makes gratitude's absence in RM theories especially notable.

Researchers have identified two key aspects of gratitude: affective and behavioral. The affective component refers to feelings of gratitude generated when people "perceive themselves to be the recipient of an intentionally rendered benefit" (Emmons 2004, p. 9), a relatively "short-term state" (Ben-Ze'ev 2000, p. 89). Feelings of gratitude generate an ingrained psychological pressure to return the favor. As Becker (1986, p. 73) states, "people everywhere do 'feel' such obligations…. The mere recognition of a benefit seems to generate a sense of obligation to repay." The ability to feel gratitude is so ubiquitous to society and cultures that its absence in an individual indicates a sociopath (Buck 2004).

The behavioral component pertains to the actions stemming from feelings of gratitude. Thus, it represents the act

of giving in return, which helps create a cycle of reciprocity between giving and countergiving and contributes to the ongoing construction of a relationship (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Emmons and McCullough 2004). Schwartz (1967, p. 8) argues that the close link between feelings of gratitude and reciprocal behaviors is responsible for the relational strengthening cycle, referring to it as a "continuing balance of debt—now in the favor of one member, now in the favor of another—[that] insures that the relationship between the two continue, for gratitude will always constitute a part of the bond linking them." Becker (1986) also suggests that reciprocal transactions are a source of pleasure in and of themselves, independent of how highly the participants prize the exchange items, which supports the ingrained motivating force of feelings of gratitude and gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors.

Consideration of both affective and behavioral aspects is important to understand gratitude's role in RM. Thus, we define the affective aspect of gratitude, or feelings of gratitude, as feelings of gratefulness, thankfulness, or appreciation for a benefit received. We define the behavioral aspect, or gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors, as actions to repay or reciprocate benefits received in response to feelings of gratefulness (Emmons and McCullough 2003; Morales 2005).

Few marketing studies have investigated the role of feelings of gratitude on customer behavior. Morales (2005) finds that such feelings motivate consumers to reward firms for their extra effort and mediate the effects of perceptions of seller effort on consumer behavior. Similarly, Dawson (1988) indicates that benefits received and the resultant feelings of indebtedness (i.e., gratitude) provide a significant motive for charitable giving. Gratitude is essential for theories from various disciplines regarding how social relationships may be built and preserved (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006), though the field of marketing is not alone in its neglect of the construct in empirical tests. McCullough and colleagues (2001) note that psychology research either ignores gratitude or confounds it with other constructs. When included in studies, the measure of gratitude typically revolves around a vocabulary of "thankfulness," "gratefulness," or "appreciation" (Storm and Storm 1987). Emotional feelings of gratitude in response to a favor or benevolence received are different from the norm of reciprocity, an internalized social norm that consists of the belief that if someone helps you, you must help them in return, and vice versa (Perugini et al. 2003). Thus, it is important to distinguish between (1) a person's behavior in response to normative pressure, which results from being socialized to expect certain behaviors over relatively long periods of time, and (2) a person's gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors in response to his or her emotions and feelings of gratitude.

In addition to the limited use of emotional gratitude in marketing, to our knowledge, no marketing studies have considered the role of gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors on seller performance, though many researchers have discussed the role of "reciprocal behaviors" on the basis of a norm of reciprocity or from a principle of reciprocity perspective. For example, Bagozzi (1995, p. 275) puts reciprocity at "the core of marketing relationships," Houston and Gassenheimer (1987) note that reciprocity turns transactions into exchange relationships, and Nevin (1995) places reciprocity at the core of the relationship formation process. However, this research typically begins the conceptual argument with reciprocity, which prevents an understanding of the theoretical role of gratitude in producing the observed reciprocating behaviors (Bagozzi 1995; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Houston and Gassenheimer 1987).

Thus, we propose that viewing feelings of gratitude as reciprocity's "emotional core" (Emmons 2004, p. 12) offers a theoretical richness that gets lost if we only measure the customer's behavioral outcome without consideration of the psychological process involved. For example, arguing that customer behaviors are due to a reciprocity principle or norm, while ignoring the underlying role of gratitude, prevents an investigation of (1) the factors that may leverage a customer's feelings of gratitude and thus increase the effectiveness of RM; (2) the temporal differences between emotions and norms, which might lead to "windows of opportunity" for higher rates of reciprocation at certain times in the exchange process; or (3) the underlying mediating mechanisms.

However, if feelings of gratitude resulting from a seller's RM are relatively short-term emotions that decay, how do these feelings lead to improved long-term performance? To answer this key question, we investigate RM episodes or cycles. For example, a customer perceives a benefit from a seller's RM effort, which generates feelings of gratitude toward the seller (conscious or unconscious), and in response, the customer takes action (gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors) to repay the seller. This cycle could "pay off" for the seller in a single episode, but in ongoing relationships (e.g., typical B2B exchanges), multiple episodes of RM → feelings of gratitude → gratitude-based behaviors accumulate and lead to a lasting improvement in the seller's performance.

In Table 1, we summarize illustrative articles from our review of marketing literature on gratitude and reciprocity, which reveals some important points. First, few studies link feelings of gratitude to a customer's motives to reciprocate or test factors that may leverage these links. Second, many conceptual and empirical articles refer to reciprocity or reciprocal behaviors as the theoretical basis for RM without delving into the psychological mechanisms that may underlie reciprocity-based behaviors. Third, only a few marketing studies explicitly define, measure, or empirically test the role of gratitude or reciprocity. Fourth, no studies theoretically or empirically integrate the affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude into a nomological model of RM.

In summary, this review suggests that gratitude represents a likely candidate for the "missing mediator" uncovered in a recent meta-analysis (Palmatier et al. 2006). In addition, gratitude may provide an explanation of the direct effect of relationship investments on seller performance in the extant commitment–trust RM model.

TABLE 1
Marketing Research on Gratitude and Reciprocity

| Reference	Context	Measurement	Theoretical Positioning of Constructs
Bagozzi (1995)	Conceptual	Not measured	Reciprocity is an essential feature of RM: "I feel it is at the core of marketing relationships" (p. 275).
Cialdini and Rhoads (2001)	Conceptual	Not measured	Reciprocity is one of the six basic psychological principles that underlie successful influence tactics.
Dawson (1988)	Consumer charitable giving	Reciprocity measured as past benefits received and feelings of indebtedness	Past benefits received and feeling of indebtedness (i.e., gratitude) provide motives for charitable giving.
De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001)	Retail	Not measured	Uses reciprocity principle as the underlying "theory" to support empirical test of the impact of consumers' perceptions of relationship investments on relationship quality (i.e., trust and commitment).
Houston and Gassenheimer (1987)	Conceptual	Not measured	Reciprocity is a process that transforms exchange events into exchange relationships. Reciprocity takes different forms depending on the social distance between exchange partners (generalized, balanced, or negative reciprocity).
Johnson and Sohi (2001)	B2B	Reciprocity measured as willingness to do a favor, expectation that partner will do a favor, and feelings of obligation	Treats reciprocity as an outcome of connectedness between interfirm boundary spanners.
Morales (2005)	Consumer	Measures gratitude using average of "grateful" and "appreciative" feelings	Support for premise that feelings of gratitude motivate consumers to reward firms for extra effort (i.e., gratitude mediates effects of sellers effort on consumers' behavior). Consumers' perceptions of seller's motive moderate feeling of gratitude.
Nevin (1995)	Conceptual	Not measured	Proposes that interorganizational "relationship formation is based on reciprocity" and states that "the reciprocity model for relationship formation fits well with the concepts of relational exchange and [RM]" (p. 331).
Rao and Perry (2002)	Conceptual	Not measured	From a content analysis of RM literature, they suggest that reciprocity's "importance is becoming more recognized recently" (p. 601), in addition to the role of trust and commitment, in understanding the effectiveness of RM.
Wiener and Doescher (1994)	Electric utility customers	Not measured	Uses norms of reciprocity as the theoretical rationale for why consumers are motivated to cooperate by the knowledge that others intend to cooperate.

Hypotheses

Our conceptual model replicates a traditional RM model in which trust, or confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity, and commitment, or an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship, mediate the effects of RM investments—that is, activities to build and maintain strong customer relationships—on seller performance outcomes (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006). We do not formally hypothesize these paths, though we test them empirically as a replication. However, we hypothesize and test the role of

gratitude (both affective and behavioral aspects) as a missing mediator for the effects of RM on performance outcomes, parallel to trust and commitment (see Figure 1).

Feeling gratitude is a typical affective response when a person receives "benevolence" from another, which then motivates the recipient to reward the giver and increases compliance with any subsequent requests (Goei and Boster 2005; McCullough et al. 2001). Inherent in the concept of gratitude is the idea that benevolence is given with intention, whereas gratitude has been described as an "emotion with an attribution" (McAdams and Bauer 2004, p. 88). Literature on early childhood development has suggested that

FIGURE 1
Role of Customer Gratitude in RM
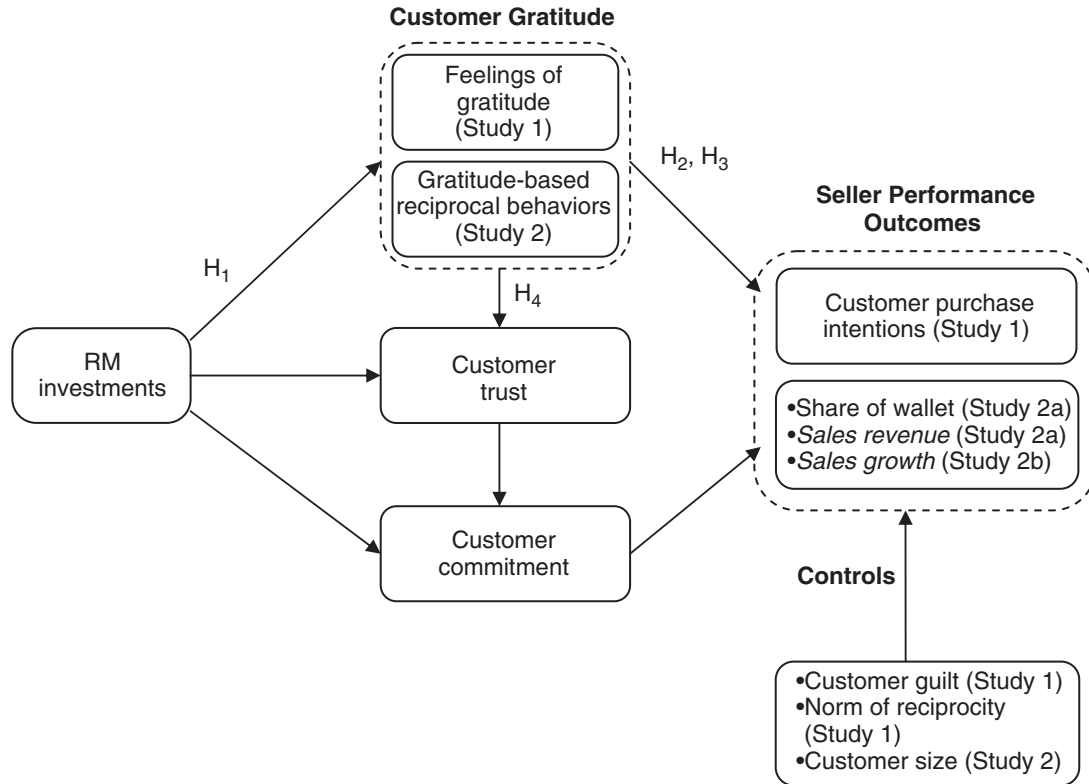
Notes: All constructs are included in Studies 1 and 2 unless otherwise noted. In Study 2, all constructs are reported by customer except sales revenue (Study 2a) and sales growth (Study 2b), which were provided by seller (marked in italics).

a prerequisite for the experience of gratitude is a theory of mind that allows a person to understand that other people are intentional beings whose actions are motivated by desire and belief (McAdams and Bauer 2004). If an action is unintentional, it generates little gratitude (Bonnie and De Waal 2004). To experience feelings of gratitude, the recipient must recognize that benevolence is intentional and, moreover, attribute good intentions to the giver (Gouldner 1960). Therefore, a customer's recognition of a seller's intentional RM activities will generate attributions regarding the motives of the giver, engaging the customer's emotional systems, leading to feelings of gratitude on the part of the customer, and increasing intentions to repay the seller. Customers act on their desires to repay the sellers by engaging in gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors. Prior research has shown that consumers satisfy their sense of obligation and feelings of gratitude by changing their purchase behavior (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2005; Morales 2005).

In an exchange context, as a customer becomes aware of receiving some RM benefit (e.g., extra effort, small courtesy, gift), he or she should feel grateful and be more likely to buy from the seller during this encounter, recognizing that this feeling will decay over time (Kolyesnikova and Dodd 2008; McCullough, Tsang, and Emmons 2004). In long-term exchange relationships based on a series of RM activities across many transactions, customer feelings of gratitude may ebb and flow but should result in various

gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors that positively affect sellers' performance outcomes. Different exchange contexts may provide a range of opportunities for customers to engage in gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors, such as buying other products/services from the seller (higher share of wallet), reducing pressure on the seller to lower prices, or giving sellers opportunities to respond to competitive offers. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H_1: Relationship marketing investments positively affect customers' (a) feelings of gratitude and (b) gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors.

H_2: Customers' feelings of gratitude positively affect customers' purchase intentions.

H_3: Customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors positively affect seller performance outcomes.

We also propose that gratitude does not act independently of trust and commitment; it is not completely disconnected from these more cognitively focused constructs. Emotion and cognition are tightly intertwined, and decision making is often less rational than might be expected (Fitzsimons et al. 2002). Emotions are central in effective human functioning (Tomkins 1970) and play important roles in facilitating cognitive functions in relationship development (Young 2006). A large body of empirical research repeatedly shows that integral emotional responses (i.e., elicited by perceived features of the target object, not mood states)

play a major role in people's evaluations of, decisions about, and behavior toward objects, even if the attributes of the objects remain constant (for reviews, see Forgas and George 2001; Pham 2007). Thus, affect—defined as both moods and integral emotional responses—is an essential element of experience; furthermore, thinking and behavior do not take place in an affective void but rather are intimately connected to how a person feels. Emotions influence the content of cognition, including the information that people recall, attend to, select, learn from, and interpret (Forgas and George 2001). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the process by which emotions, such as gratitude, influence judgments, such as trust, we can draw from prior research to provide explanations for why there might be an effect of gratitude on trust.

Because feelings affect judgments, people often decide whether they can initially trust someone by examining the feelings they have toward that person (Jones and George 1998). Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) find that gratitude for benefits received increases a receiver's perceptions of the giver, including emotional responses (e.g., liking, closeness, how well the giver "understands" the recipient). Thus, if gratitude increases positive emotional responses, it also should improve perceptions of that person's trustworthiness. Altruistic behavior provides an attributional basis for affect-based trust, because trust is founded on emotional bonds, including when people express genuine care and concern for the welfare of others (McAllister 1995), such as through the delivery of a valuable benefit (e.g., RM). Evaluations of trustworthiness also depend on expectations about the target's future behavior (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). According to recent research, gratitude has a significant, positive effect on one person's evaluation of another's trustworthiness, which results in higher levels of trust (Dunn and Schweitzer 2005). Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) further argue that trusters must rely on their perceptions of the trustee's characteristics (e.g., ability, integrity, benevolence) to develop expectations about the trustee's future behavior, and positive emotions, such as gratitude, significantly influence these perceptions and thus increase trust.

In addition, Young (2006) argues that gratitude is a relationship-sustaining emotion, with an important impact on maintaining trust in a relationship. Because customers and sellers participate in many cycles of reciprocation, customers receive important evidence of seller behaviors, which increases their confidence in the seller's future actions (Doney and Cannon 1997). Thus, customers in exchange relationships with higher levels of gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors should have higher levels of trust. In turn, we hypothesize the following:

> H_4: Customers' (a) feelings of gratitude and (b) gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors positively affect customer trust.

We next address a set of conditions that might increase the effects of RM investments on a customer's feelings of gratitude. Existing literature suggests several perceptions about RM investments that can leverage their effects on gratitude and thus improve performance outcomes. Specifi-

cally, we propose four potential moderating factors: customer perceptions of (1) the amount of free will the seller has in making the investment, (2) the seller's motives in making the investment, and (3) the amount of risk the seller takes in making the investment, as well as (4) the customer's need for the benefits received. The effects of these four moderating factors should be especially important to managers because the overall return on an RM investment depends somewhat on customers' perceptions of these factors. In some cases, the customer's level of gratitude may be determined largely by the way the program is delivered, framed, and timed rather than by the actual cost of the RM program. Thus, the return on RM investments may be highly sensitive to customers' attributions of free will, motive, and risk in providing the RM benefit, as well as to the seller's timing of the RM program. Because the seller has control over the delivery and timing of the RM programs and these factors offer "free" ways to leverage the seller's RM investments, they should be especially relevant to managers.

First, when people do something of their own accord, they act on their own free will. Examples of free will (versus contractual behavior) might include giving an unexpected gift or performing a random act of kindness. An RM investment should generate higher levels of gratitude if it is made noncontractually. For example, if an employee's salary is set to increase next year, as specified by a labor contract, the employee may be less inclined to thank his or her boss for receiving the increase. However, if the boss offers a raise just because he or she believes that the employee is doing a great job, the employee likely feels more grateful because the boss was not contractually obligated to give it. Recipients of discretionary investments tend to feel more grateful; in contrast, contractual, role-based, or persuasion-based investments decrease feelings of gratitude (Morales 2005; Tsang 2006; Wood et al. 2008). People feel most grateful to benefactors when they perceive the positive behaviors as falling within the benefactors' volitional control (Weiner 1985). Thus, when customers perceive RM investments as an act of free will, they feel more grateful than when they perceive the actions as duty-based obligations or contractual requirements (Gouldner 1960; Malhotra and Murnighan 2002; Roberts 2004).

The second factor pertains to the customer's perception of the seller's motive. A motive represents a desire or need that incites action, and people often ponder others' motives for action. For example, when a child comes home and randomly complements his mother on her beauty, the mother probably responds by asking, "How much do you need?" or "What did you do?" Customers' inferences about motives play key roles in their perceptions of marketers' actions (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), such that they may experience gratitude when they perceive favors as coming from sellers with benevolent intentions rather than underlying ulterior motives (Gouldner 1960; Tsang 2006; Weiner, Russell, and Lerman 1978). Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver (1968) demonstrate in laboratory scenarios that perceptions of benevolent versus self-serving motives significantly affect the amount of gratitude a recipient of a favor or gift feels, and Tsang (2006) uses survey data to demonstrate that

gratitude for favors given with ulterior motives is half that felt for favors given with benevolent motives. Thus, the customer's view of the seller's motive for an investment likely affects the gratitude he or she feels and, in turn, affects future behavior. Behaviors based on ulterior (versus benevolent) motives are less appreciated and less likely to strengthen gratitude.

The third factor is the perception of the amount of risk the seller undertakes in providing the relationship investment. Relationship building often begins with an investment (e.g., time, effort), and in a noncontractual context, the person who initiates the investment often does so at a cost. Along with this cost, the person experiences risk in the form of the subjective possibility that the investment will not lead to reciprocated behavior (Chiles and McMackin 1996). Typically, buyer–seller relational exchanges begin with an investment that is costly and carries some risk to the seller (e.g., costs will not be recouped). As the customer perceives higher levels of seller risk in making the RM investment, he or she should feel more obligated and grateful toward the seller, in recognition of the seller's vulnerability in making the investment (Ostrom and Walker 2003; Wood et al. 2008).

Consider the situation in which a job candidate from out of town asks a real estate agent to provide a day-long tour of homes in the area, under the assumption that the job candidate will buy a home there if he or she takes the job. The agent is taking a risk in investing time in that potential buyer because the buyer may not get or take the job offer and thus will never move to that city. The prospective buyer should recognize the risk the relationship investment demands of the real estate agent and thus feel grateful. In turn, if the prospective buyer accepts a job in the area, he or she is more likely to use that agent's assistance in purchasing a home or, perhaps, to recommend the agent to others who might be moving there.

Fourth, the customer's perceived need for the received benefit should affect his or her gratitude. Appreciating something (e.g., event, person, behavior, object) involves noticing and acknowledging its value or meaning and feeling a positive emotional connection to it (Adler and Fagley 2005). Most people are grateful for a gift, especially when that gift contains value, though the perceived value of and gratitude for a gift increase when the gift represents a needed item. Need refers to the condition in which a person requires or desires something, such that when a need exists (versus when there is no need), the pertinent item or situation entails greater value. When a recipient obtains an item with such value, his or her gratitude increases (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008; Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver 1968; Tsang 2006; Wood et al. 2008). As Gouldner (1960, p. 171) states, "The value of the benefit and hence the debt is in proportion to and varies with—among other things—the intensity of the recipient's need at the time the benefit was bestowed." Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H_5: Gratitude for an RM investment increases as the customer's perception of (a) the seller's free will, (b) the benevolence of the seller's motives for the investment, and (c) the risk to the seller in making the investment increases and (d) as the customer's need for the benefit received increases.

Study 1: Experimental Design

Overview

We conduct two studies to test the proposed hypotheses, both of which evaluate the mediating role of gratitude (the affective component in Study 1 and the behavioral component in Study 2) for the effects of RM investments on seller performance outcomes, in parallel with trust and commitment. The first study uses a laboratory experiment in a B2C context to isolate the effects of feelings of gratitude on customer purchase intentions, an emotion that should operate within a relatively short time horizon. Moreover, we evaluate the four factors posited to heighten levels of gratitude in Study 1. To analyze the results of Study 1, we employ both structural equation modeling (SEM) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to take advantage of the strength and flexibility of a mixed analysis methodology. First, to evaluate the nomological net among the set of five latent variables, we use SEM to examine the series of simultaneous relationships among the key constructs. Second, we exploit the power of the experimental design to test the four managerially relevant factors that should increase felt gratitude using a series of ANOVAs. This mixed methodology provides the best of both worlds, in that it enables us to consider both the broader nomological net and the experimentally manipulated effects, while the laboratory setting provides the necessary control to establish internal validity. However, because of the laboratory setting, we capture only purchase intentions as the dependent variable. To enhance external validity and causal effects, we must determine whether gratitude-based behaviors lead to greater actual performance measures; we investigate this in a second study.

Studies 2a and 2b attempt to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a field setting using dyadic data from customers and sellers in ongoing exchange relationships. The addition of the field study data provides evidence of the external validity and causality of the conceptual model, generalizes the results from a B2C to a B2B context, and, most important, extends the hypotheses to real-life relationships using actual firm performance outcomes. In Study 2a, sales revenue ($) and share of wallet (%) serve as dependent variables, and Study 2b, which is based on a subsample of customers from Study 2a, tests the longitudinal effect of gratitude on future sales growth (%). The analyses in both studies use SEM. Because long-term relationships involve multiple and ongoing RM investments, we expect feelings of gratitude to rise and fall as customers and sellers interact; thus, we evaluate the mediating role of gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors. Overall, this mixed method supports our investigation of both affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude, while recognizing the temporal differences between emotional and behavioral effects.

Procedure for Study 1

In this study, 155 business undergraduate students at a midwestern U.S. university participated in a laboratory experiment for course credit. We assigned participants randomly to one of eight between-subjects treatment conditions, in which they read a short scenario about an experience shopping at a clothing store in which a retail service employee ("Alex," whose gender deliberately remains neutral in the scenarios) assisted them in selecting an outfit and, in doing so, made a time and effort investment to provide a favor to the customer within the scope of building a customer relationship.

The scenario conditions manipulated participants' perceptions of the four factors we hypothesize to influence the effect of RM investments on customer gratitude while holding the RM activity constant: (1) the free will customer service personnel have in their jobs with regard to providing relationship-building favors (high versus low free will), (2) the customer service personnel's motives in helping customers (benevolent versus self-serving motive), (3) the level of risk customer service personnel take in providing relationship-building favors (high versus low risk), and (4) the level of need customers have to complete the transaction satisfactorily (high versus low need). More specifically, for each pair of scenarios, the level of RM investment is the same (e.g., cup of coffee, extra help, valuable information), but the factor that might increase the effectiveness of RM in influencing customer gratitude varies (see Appendix A).

Measurement in Study 1

Participants responded to a series of multi-item Likert measures on a seven-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), to capture the constructs studied: RM investments, feelings of gratitude, commitment, trust, and purchase intentions. In addition, we included manipulation checks of participants' perceptions of the free will, motive, risk, and need variables. The results of the manipulation checks for each condition confirmed that the conditions demonstrated significant mean differences ($p < .01$) in the correct directions (measures, scale sources, and item loadings appear in Appendix B). We used single items measuring respondents' feelings of guilt and norms of reciprocity as control variables to account for any additional effects created by either construct and to ensure that we could differentiate the effects of gratitude from these alternative explanations. We measured guilt, or a person's unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intentions (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994; Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2005), with the item "I feel very guilty toward [target]." We measured the norm of reciprocity with the item "I feel that there is a norm of reciprocity guiding our behaviors" (Ostrom and Walker 2003; Perugini et al. 2003).

We evaluated the psychometric properties of the constructs by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The fit of the CFA for Study 1 is acceptable, with $\chi^2_{(80)} = 133.68$ ($p < .01$), comparative fit index (CFI) = .97, incremental fit index (IFI) = .97, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .96, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07. All factor loadings also are significant ($p < .01$), in support of convergent validity. Cronbach's alphas are .81 or above, which demonstrates good reliability. In addition, we confirm discriminant validity because the average variance extracted exceeded the square of correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). We list the descriptive statistics and correlations in Table 2.

Results of Study 1

The fit of Study 1's structural model is acceptable, with $\chi^2_{(112)} = 181.04$ ($p < .01$), CFI = .96, IFI = .96, TLI = .96, and RMSEA = .06. The structural path model's estimates appear in Table 3. Our model replicates extant RM models, with positive and significant paths from RM investments to commitment and a positive and significant path from commitment to purchase behaviors ($p < .01$). However, the direct effect of RM investments on customer trust is not significant; investments affect trust only indirectly through customers' feelings of gratitude. We provide the results of the hypothesis tests for both Studies 1 and 2 in Table 3.

In H_{1a}, we posit that RM investments positively affect customer feelings of gratitude; this path is significant ($\beta_{1a} = .58$, $p < .01$). We also find support for H_2 because customer feelings of gratitude have a positive effect on purchase intentions ($\beta_2 = .47$, $p < .01$). Finally, H_{4a} receives support because customer feelings of gratitude positively affect trust ($\beta_{4a} = .63$, $p < .01$). Of the two control variables, only customer guilt is significantly related to purchase intentions ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$).

To evaluate whether the impact of RM investments on purchase intentions is fully mediated by gratitude, trust, and commitment, we add a path from RM investments to purchase intentions and evaluate the chi-square difference between this model and the hypothesized model. The results ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.81$, not significant [n.s.]) demonstrate that the hypothesized model fully mediates the relationship between RM investments and purchase intentions. Existing literature offers mixed results regarding whether trust has a direct effect on outcomes or whether its effect is fully mediated by commitment. A post hoc test comparing the hypothesized model with a nested model with an additional path from trust to purchase intentions reveals that for this sample, trust does not have a significant direct effect on purchase intentions.

Because the measures for both the independent and the dependent variables come from the same source, we acknowledge that common method variance may have inflated the strength of the observed relationships between the constructs. To assess the potential impact of this form of bias in Study 1, we reestimate the structural model with a "same-source" first-order factor, which we add to the indicators of all the latent constructs in the model, as Podsakoff and colleagues (2003) advocate. This procedure controls for that portion of the variance in the indicators that results from measuring items from the same source. The overall pattern of significant relationships does not change, and all the paths that are significant when we do not control for common method variance remain significant when we do

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Constructs	Study 1			Study 2a/Study 2b			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	M	SD	AVE	M	SD	AVE											
1. RM investments	5.23	1.42	.73	4.66	1.38	.73	.89/.89	.43**	.55**	.50**	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.20**	.10*	.15	.02
2. Customer gratitude (feelings: Study 1; behaviors: Study 2)	5.22	1.31	.85	3.75	1.35	.55	.51**	.94/.78	.40**	.31**	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.26**	.17**	.18*	.06
3. Customer commitment	3.81	1.35	.60	5.42	1.13	.63	.61**	.54**	.81/.85	.77**	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.28**	.16**	.23*	−.02
4. Customer trust	4.18	1.38	.79	5.70	1.08	.67	.35**	.63**	.58**	.90/.84	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.17**	.11**	.11	−.06
5. Customer purchase intentions	4.93	1.13	.69	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.55**	.63**	.53**	.48**	.84/N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
6. Customer guilt	2.38	1.17	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	−.11	−.02	.04	.02	−.14	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
7. Customer norm of reciprocity	3.92	1.35	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.09	.13	.20*	.25**	.04	.27**	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
8. Share of wallet	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	37.36	27.42	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	−.00	N.A.	−.03
9. Sales revenue ($1,000) used in Study 2a[a]	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	296.38	772.26	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	.20**
10. Sales growth (%) used in Study 2b[a]	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	16.94	182.47	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	−.16
11. Customer size	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	3.26	2.08	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
[a]N = 446 for Study 2a, and N = 126 for Study 2b.
Notes: AVE = average variance extracted. Study 1 (Study 2) correlations are reported below (above) the diagonal; Cronbach's alphas are reported on the diagonal (Study 1/Study 2). N.A. = not applicable.

TABLE 3
Results: Structural Model Estimates

Hypothesized Path	Hypothesis	Study 1		Study 2a		Study 2b	
		β	t-Value	β	t-Value	β	t-Value
RM investments → customers' feelings of gratitude	H_{1a}	.58	6.90**				
RM investments → customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors	H_{1b}			.50	8.36**	.45	3.74**
Customers' feelings of gratitude → customer purchase intentions	H_2	.47	4.78**				
Customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors → share of wallet	H_{3a}			.20	3.62**		
Customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors → sales revenue (2a)/growth (2b)[a]	H_{3b}			.13	2.20*	.18	1.88*
Customers' feelings of gratitude → customer trust	H_{4a}	.63	6.12**				
Customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors → customer trust	H_{4b}			.16	2.65**	−.07	−.62
RM investments → customer trust	Replication	−.04	−.45	.50	8.40**	.50	4.32**
RM investments → customer commitment	Replication	.64	7.70**	.16	3.64**	.21	2.52**
Customer trust → customer commitment	Replication	.35	4.96**	.83	15.26**	.81	7.55**
Customer commitment → purchase intentions	Replication	.37	3.83**				
Customer commitment → share of wallet	Replication			.18	3.30**		
Customer commitment → sales revenue (2a)/growth (2b)[a]	Replication			.09	1.65*	.16	1.72*
Customer guilt → purchase intentions	Control	−.15	−2.44*				
Customer norm of reciprocity → purchase intentions	Control	−.09	−1.35				
Customer size → share of wallet	Control			−.04	−.79		
Customer size → sales revenue (2a)/growth (2b)[a]	Control			.19	4.16**	−.16	−1.84**
R^2 for customers' feelings of gratitude		.33					
R^2 for customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors				.25		.20	
R^2 for customer trust		.37		.35		.23	
R^2 for customer commitment		.68		.87		.87	
R^2 for customer purchase intentions		.59					
R^2 for share of wallet				.11			
R^2 for sales revenue (2a)/growth (2b)[a]				.07		.10	

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
[a]The dependent variable is sales revenue ($1,000) in Study 2a and sales growth (%) for the year immediately following the measurement of all other constructs in Study 2b.
Notes: β represents standardized path coefficient.

so. Thus, same-source bias appears to have no significant effect on the results of Study 1.

Next, we conduct a series of one-way ANOVAs to investigate factors that marketers might use to leverage the impact of RM investments on gratitude and, ultimately, purchase behaviors. In H_{5a}, we suggest that customer perceptions of the seller's free will increase customer gratitude, and we find support for this hypothesis, in that the high-free-will condition results in $M_{gratitude} = 6.13$, whereas the low-free-will condition leads to $M_{gratitude} = 5.30$ ($F_{1, 39} = 12.73$, $p < .01$). We also state in H_{5b} that benevolent seller motives should increase customer gratitude and again find support for this hypothesis (high-motive $M_{gratitude} = 4.57$, low-motive $M_{gratitude} = 3.79$; $F_{1, 39} = 4.18$, $p = .05$). In H_{5c}, we expect that perceptions of higher seller risk increase customer gratitude, but though the result displays the correct direction, this hypothesis does not receive support (high-risk $M_{gratitude} = 6.08$, low-risk $M_{gratitude} = 5.60$; $F_{1, 39} = 2.47$, $p = .12$). Finally, we find support for H_{5d} because increased customer need for the RM investment increases customer gratitude (high-need $M_{gratitude} = 5.81$, low-need $M_{gratitude} = 4.56$; $F_{1, 34} = 7.86$, $p < .01$).

To increase confidence in our theoretically driven hypotheses, we conduct a post hoc test to determine whether these four factors also increase customers' perceptions of trust and commitment. Only one of the eight tests is significant; that is, customer need increases the effect of RM investment on commitment (high-need $M_{commitment} = 4.35$, low-need $M_{commitment} = 2.82$; $F_{1, 34} = 15.10$, $p < .01$). These results, as well as the significance of three of the four factors proposed to increase the impact of investments on gratitude, support the nomological validity of our proposed conceptual model.

Discussion of Study 1

This study replicates prior work that shows the positive impact of RM investments on commitment and commitment's positive impact on purchase intentions. However, our research does not support a direct effect of RM investments on customer trust; instead, it suggests that RM investments' effect on trust is mediated by feelings of gratitude. Thus, prior research that finds a positive effect of RM on trust may fail to capture the mediating role of gratitude. As we hypothesized, feelings of gratitude seem to be an important mediating mechanism that helps drive RM outcomes, in addition to trust and commitment. Furthermore, increased levels of gratitude boost judgments of trust, which implies an additional indirect effect of gratitude on purchase intentions through commitment. Post hoc tests reveal that only when we include all three relational mediators does RM investments' effect on purchase intentions become fully mediated.

This study also proposes and tests a set of factors that managers can use to leverage the impact of RM investments on feelings of gratitude and seller outcomes. Specifically, we find that increasing customer perceptions of seller free will and benevolent motives, as well as increasing customer need, significantly increases customer feelings of gratitude. However, the effect of perceptions of the amount of risk a seller faces in making RM investments does not achieve significance ($p = .12$). The perceptions also do not have equivalent effects on commitment and trust (except for customer need, which logically increases customers' desire to maintain the valued relationship). That is, the leveraging effects of these factors funnel almost completely through gratitude. If this construct does not appear in RM models, a significant predictor of outcomes and a major cause of variance in the effectiveness of various RM programs is being ignored.

Study 2: Field Survey

Procedure for Study 2

Study 2 is a field study involving a survey of customers of manufacturers' representative firms (rep firms) selling industrial products/services across a wide range of industries in North America, matched with sales data provided by each rep firm. The average rep firm is relatively small and sells multiple products for different suppliers on a commission basis.

Sales managers from 31 rep firms (sellers) provided contact data for 2554 customer firms by identifying the names of 100–200 randomly selected customers who are the most knowledgeable about the customer firm's relationship with the seller. Using a three-wave mailing (survey, follow-up postcard, and second survey), we received 527 responses from the customer firms, for a 20.6% response rate. The key informants within the customer firms responded to scales measuring their impressions of the seller's RM investments, their gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors toward the seller, their trust and commitment toward the seller, and the share of wallet (percentage of products they purchase from the seller of the total they could purchase), as well a control variable for customer size.

At the beginning of the subsequent calendar year, the sales managers of the seller firms also provided sales revenue for each customer for the previous year (i.e., the year we conducted the customer survey). Following this data collection, we retained 487 usable customer surveys that match the seller firms' archival customer performance data (sales revenue in $1,000). We further refined the sample by removing responses in which customer respondents reported low levels of "knowledge about the relationships that this rep firm has with people at my firm," which resulted in a final sample of 446 different customers for Study 2a.

We evaluated response bias in several ways. No significant differences exist in our comparisons of early and late customer responses (first 150 versus last 150) across key study variables ($p > .05$). Moreover, no significant differences in study variables result from comparisons of customer responses for cases included in the final data set with those excluded because of missing rep firm data ($p > .05$). Similarly, seller firm–provided performance data for customers included in the final data set compared with data for firms excluded because customers failed to respond indicate that sales revenue does not differ significantly across these

two groups ($p > .05$). We conclude on the basis of these analyses that response bias is not a major concern.

After one year, we contacted the sellers again and asked them to provide the sales revenue for each customer. Through this follow-up survey, we obtained sales growth data (for the year following the initial survey) for 126 customers, which we use for a longitudinal test of our model in which sales growth is the dependent variable for this subset of the sample (Study 2b). No significant differences in key study variables result from our comparisons of customer responses for those cases included in Study 2a and those excluded because of missing longitudinal sales data.

Measurement in Study 2

We evaluated the psychometric properties of the constructs in Study 2 by conducting a CFA. The fit of the CFA for Study 2a/Study 2b is acceptable, with $\chi^2_{(48/48)}$ = 134.96/ 72.04 ($p < .01/.05$), CFI = .97/.97, IFI = .97/.97, TLI = .96/ .95, and RMSEA = .06/.06, respectively. All factor loadings are significant ($p < .01$), in support of convergent validity. Cronbach's alphas are .78 or above, which demonstrates good reliability. In addition, we confirm discriminant validity because the average variance extracted exceeds the square of correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). We list the descriptive statistics and correlations in Table 2.

Results of Study 2

The fit of the structural models for Study 2a/Study 2b is acceptable, with $\chi^2_{(81/70)}$ = 181.51/89.06 ($p < .01/.10$), CFI = .97/.97, IFI = .97/.97, TLI = .96/.96, and RMSEA = .05/05, respectively. The structural path models' estimates appear in Table 3. Consistent with extant research, RM investments positively affect customer commitment and trust, and commitment positively affects share of wallet, sales revenue, and sales growth ($p < .05$).

The results for the field study are similar to the experimental results; specifically, we find support for H_{1b} in the positive relationship between RM investments and gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors (β_{1b} = .50/.45, $p < .01/ .01$). Customer gratitude–based reciprocal behaviors positively influence share of wallet (β_{3a} = .20, $p < .01$), sales revenue (β_{3b} = .13, $p < .05$), and sales growth (β_{3b} = .18, $p < .05$), in support of H_{3a} and H_{3b}. In Study 2a, customer gratitude–based behaviors have a positive impact on customer trust (β_{4b} = .16, $p < .01$), in support of H_{4b}, but this hypothesis does not receive support from Study 2b (β_{4b} = –.07, n.s.).

To evaluate whether the impact of RM investments on seller performance outcomes is fully mediated by gratitude-based behaviors, trust, and commitment, we again add a path from RM investments to share of wallet and sales revenue in Study 2a and to sales growth in Study 2b and evaluate the chi-square difference between these models and the hypothesized model. The results support the premise that the impact of RM investments on seller performance outcomes is fully mediated in Studies 2a and 2b. In parallel with Study 1, we use a post hoc test to compare the hypothesized model with a nested model, with an additional path from trust to seller performance outcomes. The results

reveal that trust does not directly affect seller outcomes. Moreover, the results are not affected by the addition of a common method factor to Study 2.

We include customer size as a control variable, and the results indicate that customer size plays no significant role in affecting share of wallet (β = –.04, n.s.). As we expected, in Study 2a, sales revenues are higher for larger customers (β = .19, $p < .01$), and Study 2b indicates that customer size is related negatively to sales growth (β = –.16, $p < .01$).

Discussion of Study 2

The field survey in Study 2 confirms the external validity of our laboratory findings by (1) generalizing the results to a B2B context, (2) generalizing the results to ongoing buyer–seller relationships, (3) testing the role of gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors, and (4) increasing confidence in actual effects by using multiple and longitudinal performance data as outcomes. The results of Study 2 also echo Study 1's findings. Specifically, we replicate the extant commitment–trust RM model in a field study and find significant, positive effects of RM investments on both trust and commitment, as well as a significant, positive effect of commitment on sales outcomes. A key difference between Study 1 and Studies 2a and 2b is that the path from RM investments to trust is nonsignificant in the laboratory experiment, such that the relationship's effects are fully mediated through gratitude, but the path from RM investments to trust is significant in the field setting. Perhaps the nonsignificant finding in Study 1 results from the scenario-based experimental design, in that participants may not have had time to develop sufficient evaluations of the seller's trustworthiness from the description of a single exchange episode.

In addition, Study 2 replicates the experimental results associated with the hypotheses for the proposed gratitude-mediated RM model by demonstrating parallel effects for both affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude. The field study shows that gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors drive company performance outcomes, specifically, sales revenue, share of wallet, and sales growth.

General Discussion and Implications

A meta-analysis of RM literature establishes that the extant commitment–trust model of RM may ignore important mediating mechanisms between RM investments and performance outcomes (Palmatier et al. 2006). The extant model of RM is based on the cognitively oriented social exchange theory (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Thibaut and Kelley 1959), focusing on the costs and benefits of RM, which may help explain why RM research has not investigated gratitude-based feelings and behaviors. Various marketing researchers have made conceptual arguments in support of the key role of the process of reciprocation or principle of reciprocity in RM (e.g., Bagozzi 1995; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Houston and Gassenheimer 1987), but research empirically integrating reciprocity into RM models or theoretically investigating the underpinnings of reciprocal behaviors remains limited.

This study proposes and empirically demonstrates that both the affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude are important mechanisms for understanding how and why RM influences seller performance. In addition, the support we find for three of the four hypothesized factors that leverage RM's effect on gratitude, which increases the effectiveness of RM efforts, highlights some important managerial implications. We align our discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of this research with our two focal objectives—namely, understanding the role of gratitude in RM and increasing RM's effectiveness by leveraging gratitude.

Understanding the Role of Gratitude in RM

Gratitude emerges as a key force that influences relationships, according to our review of literature across disciplines as diverse as economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology, in which gratitude represents the emotional core of reciprocity and a key motivating force in the development and maintenance of cooperative relational bonds (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Bonnie and De Waal 2004; Emmons 2004; Komter 2004). Our research conceptually and empirically supports the important role of gratitude in understanding RM effectiveness. Marketing research that neglects gratitude and focuses exclusively on trust and commitment may fail to capture the full effects of RM and may systematically underestimate the true return on investment of RM activities. The finding that the proposed model fully mediates the impact of RM on seller outcomes in both Studies 1 and 2 provides theoretical insight into previous research, which identifies the need to uncover other mechanisms at work to explain RM effectiveness (Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007; Palmatier et al. 2006). Across both methodologically different studies and four diverse seller outcome measures, the effect of gratitude on seller performance remains greater than the effect of commitment on these same outcomes (on average, 23% greater). This finding suggests that gratitude's role in RM effectiveness is comparable to, if not more important than, more typically measured constructs.

Extensive extant research arguing that people are "psychologically hardwired" with emotional systems (e.g., feelings of gratitude, pleasure in reciprocating, guilt for failing to reciprocate, anger toward free riders) makes the inclusion of gratitude into RM theory compelling, especially the claim that gratitude represents an "imperative force" that causes people to reciprocate the benefits they receive (Komter 2004; Meyer 2002). For example, in how many other marketing strategies is the effectiveness of the marketing program positively and negatively reinforced by multiple emotional systems? In many cases, marketing programs work by focusing on customers' decision heuristics, but RM seems to be supported by a holistic social psychological structure.

In addition to its mediating role, gratitude increases a customer's trust in the seller, both strengthening the quality of the relationship and positively affecting seller outcomes through trust's influence on performance-enhancing commitment. This finding is consistent with Young's (2006) argument that gratitude is a relationship-sustaining emotion

that increases relational trust. Thus, feelings of gratitude and a history of gratitude-based behavior appear to change customers' perceptions and evaluations of trust. Further research should investigate the linkages between affective and behavioral gratitude and trust and how these effects vary over time, because trust is critical across a range of exchange outcomes (e.g., cooperation, conflict resolution).

Feelings of gratitude and reciprocity are important for motivating customers to build trust with and behave equitably toward their business partners (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Kelin and Ellard 1999). Although the influences of feelings of gratitude and reciprocity are more robust in public settings, their influence appears even in private settings because most people internalize the importance of gratitude and reciprocity (Whatley et al. 1999). This internalization process suggests that the influence of feelings of gratitude and the resultant reciprocal behaviors and norms should be relatively long lasting.

Combining the findings from both Studies 1 and 2 provides greater insight into the dynamic characteristics of gratitude; immediately after RM investments, customers may feel high levels of gratitude that result in their propensity to reciprocate, though that propensity may decay over time. Managers should recognize the window of opportunity after an RM investment, during which they can "collect" on feelings of gratitude. In addition to the obvious advantage of gaining incremental sales during this period, giving customers the opportunity to reciprocate will generate a cycle of reciprocation and strengthen the overall relationship. Thus, gratitude serves as a catalyst or starting mechanism that promotes relationship development, which then influences prosocial behavior as long as the emotion lasts, but it also has long-term effects because it builds the relationship (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006). Therefore, some prior approaches appear to be overly simplistic, in that they adopted a rather static or cross-sectional view of the effects of RM, in which RM investments affect outcomes identically in both the short and the long run. Further research may need to offer different conceptual models or time-varying models to understand how RM affects performance according to the time elapsed since an RM investment. In summary, gratitude appears to enhance RM performance in three main ways:

1. Customers engage in positive gratitude-based behaviors to satisfy their feelings of obligation in response to RM-induced feelings of gratitude.
2. Increased levels of customer trust due to gratitude increase customer commitment and thus enhance relational performance.
3. Gratitude promotes the development of relationships by initiating cycles of reciprocation, which may have long-term positive effects on customer behaviors.

Increasing RM's Effectiveness by Leveraging Gratitude

This study also demonstrates that many factors surrounding the disposition of RM activities can influence a customer's feelings of gratitude and resultant behaviors, thus providing managers with tools they can use to leverage their RM investments. Specifically, gratitude can be increased by

increasing customers' perceptions of the seller's free will or benevolent motives or by matching the RM investment to customers' needs. The post hoc finding that these significant influences do not have the same effects on trust and commitment (except for customer need, which results in higher levels of customer commitment) supports our model's nomological validity and reveals that extant RM research fails to identify managerially relevant strategies for leveraging RM investments. More specifically, these results suggest three strategies for increasing RM effectiveness.

First, sellers should leverage RM investments by designing programs that increase customers' perceptions of the seller's free will and benevolence when providing the RM benefit. A customer's gratitude toward the seller in response to receiving an RM benefit depends on his or her perception of the deposition of that benefit. The RM benefits that everyone receives, that are in response to a customer's request, that are given to match a competitor's offer, or that are built into the overall product or service offering may generate little gratitude or need to reciprocate. Formalized "loyalty" programs with written rules or in which customers earn "points" toward a reward (e.g., airline loyalty points programs) are not likely to generate significant gratitude or reciprocation because they lack the perception of free will. In contrast, companies could increase gratitude by allowing boundary-spanning employees more discretion in providing RM investments (within reasonable financial boundaries), such as giving them the ability to customize policies or even "change the rules" when needed to solve a customer's problem, personalize otherwise standardized communications, or provide small favors unique to the customer. Ideally, all programs should retain some random or discretionary elements because very structured quid pro quo programs tend to be integrated into the overall value proposition and thus lose their ability to promote relationships (e.g., many loyalty programs), just as salesperson motivation based on a sales incentive drops after a salesperson comes to expect the incentive as part of his or her compensation package.

Likewise, letting the customer know that the salesperson is working on commission would undermine perceptions of the benevolence of the motive for the RM investment. The perceived intention behind the simple offer of a cup of coffee, for example, would change from a gratitude-inducing kindness to a self-serving grab for business in the customer's mind. The intention behind the gift is critical to the activation of gratitude and has been treated as a foundation for understanding what gratitude is in research on the topic across disciplines. Companies should avoid benefits that appear to provide personal gain for the salesperson. In contrast, companies can leverage motive deliberately, positioning themselves as caring more for the customer than for the profit the customer generates by providing RM investments that illustrate such benevolence, such as an insurance firm that offers to provide competitive rate comparisons that sometimes show that it is not the most desirable choice, a retailer that refers a customer to a competitor's store when it does not have the right product in stock, or an airline that offers to switch a passenger to a competitive airline at its own cost when technical problems prevent the passenger

from getting to the destination on time. Such efforts demonstrate that a firm's intention is to do whatever is best for the customer rather than serve only its own self-interests, and such efforts are much more likely to generate gratitude, reciprocation, and future purchase loyalty than efforts that seem to be designed only to increase sales or lock the customer in to dealing with a specific firm. Thus, sellers can generate higher returns from a given RM program by carefully structuring and designing the delivery of and communication about the program.

Second, a seller can leverage RM investments by providing a benefit when the customer's need is the highest and the benefit provides the most perceived value. Although the perceived cost of the program to the seller should increase customer gratitude, so will the value provided by the benefit; thus, boundary spanners should receive some discretion and guidelines regarding when they can immediately solve a customer's problem or provide some RM benefit. The previous two strategies can be integrated in an example: Consider the level of gratitude and likelihood of future reciprocation felt by a business traveler who has accumulated miles by following the program rules and therefore can upgrade the entire family to first class on an international flight. Compare those levels to a family who receives a spontaneous upgrade on the same flight in appreciation for patronage in the past. The airline could target this latter program toward high-value customers who often pay full-fare business rates or fly highly competitive routes, which increases the likelihood that the customer will have opportunities to reciprocate.

Third, designing programs to generate high levels of gratitude is important, but returns will appear only if customers act on these feelings. Thus, sellers should give customers opportunities to reciprocate soon after providing them with an RM benefit, which takes advantage of high levels of gratitude, prevents guilt rationalization, and leads to cycles of reciprocation. A customer's feeling of gratefulness toward a seller will ultimately decay and, in the worst case scenario, will generate feelings of guilt, which customers may try to relieve by rationalizing why they did not reciprocate (e.g., assigning a negative motive to the seller). In the airline example, the airline could contact the frequent flier with an offer promising that if he or she books multiple flights over the next six months, the airline will provide a small incentive. This offer would provide the flier an opportunity to act on any feelings of gratitude and lead to gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors with the airline. However, the airline should not refer to the previous RM benefit or structure the request as a means for the customer to pay for benefits received, because people often reciprocate far in excess of the value received and continue to feel grateful (Cialdini and Rhoads 2001).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The mixed research method used here, in which we employ both an experimental design and survey-based field data collection, enables us to take advantage of the strengths of both techniques to demonstrate the effects of both short-term feelings of gratitude and long-term gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors on seller outcomes. Yet a limitation of

this approach is the lack of longitudinal and causal linkages between the feeling and resultant behavior of gratitude and trust. Additional research should use a longitudinal approach to investigate how feelings of gratitude decay over time and whether the effects of moderating factors change dynamically. Some specific questions addressed by this approach might include the following: How quickly do feelings of gratitude decay? Do feelings of gratitude remain after a customer reciprocates, or do sellers get "one dip in the well" of gratitude? What is the impact of a cycle of reciprocation on relationship quality? Does gratitude operate differently between partners who have reciprocated in the past? These findings also cannot be extended to purely social relationships without additional empirical support.

Other constructs that leverage gratitude should also be considered, such as perceived seller competence, individual versus group sellers, or the role of the "concreteness" of the benefits received. The number of people who give the customer an added benefit should also be considered. A customer might feel more grateful if he or she has a single person to whom the gratitude could be directed, instead of directing gratitude toward a group of people or a firm. For example, a customer may appreciate a seller who takes the individual initiative to offer a pair of football tickets more than a pair of tickets from "the sales team at Company X." In addition, with regard to gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors, it is much easier to reciprocate to an individual than to a group or team.

Gratitude can operate in both directions; therefore, additional research should investigate whether customers can generate meaningful concessions from grateful sellers. For example, customers may achieve larger price concessions from sellers if they generate feelings of gratitude before price negotiations. In other words, can customers use RM techniques effectively in their interactions with sellers? Although the focus here is the positive side of reciprocity (repaying gifts), reciprocity also includes negative aspects, such as taking revenge or exacting punishment for failures (Fehr and Gächter 2000). An investigation of the effects of both failure to reciprocate and its resulting punishment could provide another potentially fruitful avenue of research in RM.

Finally, the items measuring gratitude used here were designed to be general in nature to allow them to apply across contexts and industries. Further research in this area might benefit from the exploration of more narrowly focused or context-dependent measures to better understand the nuances of the phenomenon.

Our overall conceptual model receives support across two research formats and contexts, but further research should investigate how this model may vary across other contexts (e.g., different cultures), between groups of people and individuals, and as the intangibility of the offering varies (i.e., products versus services). Finally, research should investigate the role of guilt in the relational exchange and integrate this construct into the overall model of RM. For example, additional work might determine the impact of unresolved guilt on relationship formation and future behaviors.

Appendix A
Scenario Descriptions

High-Free-Will Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. Alex just punched out on the time clock and is ready to go home. On the way out, Alex notices that you look very tired. Alex generously goes into the break room and brings you a cup of coffee. Alex decides to stay after work (off the clock) to help you find a nice shirt.

Low-Free-Will Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. Alex just punched out on the time clock and is ready to go home. It is company policy that an employee cannot go home if a customer needs assistance. Alex punches back in on the time clock and helps you find a nice shirt. Alex gives you a complimentary cup of coffee.

High-Motive Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. You are the only customer in the store. Employees do not receive a commission for their sales. Alex rushes over to help you find the perfect shirt.

Low-Motive Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. You are the only customer in the store. Employees receive a commission for their sales. Alex rushes over to help you find the perfect shirt.

High-Risk Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. Alex realizes the store you're in doesn't have the shirt you want, but a competitor does. Although it's against store policy, Alex directs you to the store's #1 competitor who has just what you want. Alex could get fired for this.

Low-Risk Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. Alex realizes the store you're in doesn't have the shirt you want, but a competitor does. It is store policy to direct customers to another store if they don't have what you need. Alex directs you to store's #1 competitor.

High-Need Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. You are running out of time and have to find a matching dress shirt in 10 minutes or you'll be late to an important business meeting. Alex rushes to help you comb through all of the racks to find just the shirt you need.

Low-Need Scenario

You're shopping at a clothing store. And Alex, an employee, notices you looking for a shirt. You are leisurely browsing to see if there are any matching dress shirts to add to your wardrobe. Alex rushes to help you comb through all of the racks to find just the shirt you need.

APPENDIX B

Constructs (Scale Sources): Items	Item Loadings
RM Investments: Studies 1 and 2 (Adapted from Reynolds and Beatty 1999)	
[Target] worked hard to strengthen our relationship.	.82/.88
[Target] made significant investments in building a relationship with me.	.92/.81
[Target] devoted time and effort to our relationship.	.82/.88
Customers' Feelings of Gratitude: Study 1 (Adapted from McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang 2002)	
I feel grateful to [Target].	.89
I feel thankful to [Target].	.94
I feel appreciative to [Target].	.93
Customers' Gratitude-Based Reciprocal Behaviors: Study 2 (Adapted from McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang 2002)	
We have bought products based on our gratitude for their extra effort.	.71
We have given more business to this [Target] because we owed it to them.	.75
This [Target] has received opportunities to sell additional products as payback for past efforts.	.76

Constructs (Scale Sources): Items	Item Loadings
Customer Commitment: Studies 1 and 2 (Adapted from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Palmatier et al. 2006)	
I am willing "to go the extra mile" to work with [Target].	.86/.81
I have a desire to maintain this relationship.	.83/.77
I view the relationship with [Target] as a long-term partnership.	.61/.86
Customer Trust: Studies 1 and 2 (Adapted from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001)	
[Target} gives me a feeling of trust.	.74/.67
I have trust in [Target].	.98/.88
[Target] is trustworthy.	.92/.82
Customer Purchase Intentions: Study 1	
I would be very likely to buy something today.	.64
I would come back to this store.	.92
I would likely buy from this store in the future.	.91
Share of Wallet: Study 2a	
What is the % of products your firm is buying from this rep out of the total you could buy from them? (%)	N.A.
Customer Size: Study 2	
My firm is a very large company.	N.A.

Notes: All items were measured using seven-point scales anchored by 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree" unless otherwise stated. Standardized loadings reported as Study 1/Study 2 when applicable. The target for Study 1 was an individual retail person (Alex), and the target for Study 2 was a selling firm. N.A. = not applicable.

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