



# The Sad Side of Valentine's Day – What the Industry Should Know

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**Abstract.** – Valentine's Day, like other holidays, can be a depressing time for singles and some couples if they feel left out of the festivities. However, the service-hospitality industry is in a unique position to reach this audience – and in so doing – cater to a largely untapped market. We review the negative perceptions that some people associate with Valentine's Day and subsequently propose some ideas and recommendations to organizations who want to enhance their bottom lines by breaking away from the tradition of exclusively marketing to couples during this season.

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To the service-hospitality industry, holidays like Valentine's Day often make a positive contribution to a company's bottom line. For example, Americans spent an estimated \$13 billion for Valentine's merchandise in 2004<sup>12</sup>, and in the process, purchased approximately one billion greeting cards<sup>13</sup>, 36 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolate<sup>23</sup>, and 156 million roses<sup>19</sup>. And we have not even touched on the significant revenue from romantic get-a-ways, cruises or dinners.

For other cultures around the world, this Western holiday has taken on similar significance both in romantic and fiscal terms. This year Valentines Day falls just a few days before Chinese New Year on February 18<sup>th</sup>, adding to the celebratory spirit across China and other cultures that observe the lunar calendar. Five years ago the *People's Daily* reported that more than half those surveyed in Beijing, Guangdong and Shanghai bought Valentine gifts for loved ones. This year in the weeks before Valentine's Day all big and small theatres in Beijing are featuring love and romantic dramas. This is despite the Chinese having their Valentines equivalent on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month, August 19<sup>th</sup> this year.

*But what happens when the flowers, candy and cards are not forthcoming and there is no romantic partner in the picture to provide them?*

In fact, for many people across the world holidays of all types can be quite sad occasions. However, the service-hospitality industry is in a position to help these people, and in so doing, respond to the segment of the market that is typically ignored during holidays like Valentine's Day.

## **Holidays and Well-Being**

Although there is little research specifically relating to Valentine's Day, some studies on mental health during holiday periods are available. For example, a recent review revealed that many people report an increase in depressive moods following holidays<sup>6</sup>, and other researchers<sup>18</sup> found a significant increase in emergency contacts at a rural mental health clinic coinciding with holidays. Increases in deliberate (but non-fatal) self-harming behavior at a London hospital on Valentine's Day did not reach statistical significance in one study<sup>4</sup>, but another study<sup>5</sup> reported that the rates of parasuicide among adolescents on this holiday were significantly increased. Finally, Baier<sup>1</sup> described "holiday blues syndrome" as a situational stress reaction related to social demands, unmet expectations and biological stressors such as lack of sleep. Accordingly, her proposed interventions involve reducing the specific stressors activated by the holidays and promoting and mobilizing the support and coping mechanisms already in operation for an individual. These suggestions are similar to those of Goin<sup>7</sup>, who discussed how the "holiday blues" have great potential for being associated with anniversary reactions.

Unfortunately, the socio-cultural trappings surrounding certain holidays can make it difficult for some individuals to put Baier's proposals into successful practice. As we discuss next, Valentine's Day is one such event, because it has particularly strong psychological and societal connotations.

## **Socialization and Valentine's Day Expectations**

St. Valentine's Day is commonly believed to have its origins in ancient Rome. February marked the beginning of spring and a time of purification. Ancient Romans celebrated a fertility festival, *Lupercalia*, commencing February 15<sup>th</sup>. Young women practiced the ritual of placing their names in an urn from which bachelors would select the year's companion. Often these pairings resulted in marriage. Later, in A.D. 498, Pope Gelasius declared February 14<sup>th</sup> as St. Valentine's Day, and the Roman lottery system – frowned upon as an un-Christian practice – became outlawed. St. Valentine, for whom the holiday was named, was reportedly martyred February 14<sup>th</sup>, A.D. 270 for secretly marrying young couples, in direct defiance of Emperor Claudius II, who believed marriage interfered with their service in the military. In 1415, imprisoned in the Tower of London, Duke Charles of Orleans wrote his wife a poem, currently the oldest known Valentine. St. Valentine's Day became popularly celebrated in seventeenth century Great Britain. Handwritten love notes were later replaced by printed cards, which remain popular today, making Valentine's Day the second largest card-sending holiday.

In Chinese culture of the origin of Chinese Valentine's Day, comes from the legend of the seven daughters of the Goddess of Heaven. The daughters were bathing in a river during one of their visits to earth and they caught the eye of a Cowherd, Niu Lang. He decided to have a bit of fun by running off with their clothing, the prettiest daughter, Zhi Nu, the seventh born, hence the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, asked him to return their clothes. As Niu Lang had seen the daughter naked, they had to be married.

No matter the origins, the trappings of love and romance continue to be universally synonymous with Valentine's Day – and the psychological pressures of romantic relationships themselves are significant stressors irrespective of the commercialization of this holiday. For instance, Joyner and Udry<sup>10</sup> cited evidence that adolescents sometimes become romantically involved in order to raise their social status, to express their maturity, to individuate from their parents or to deny homosexual tendencies. This review also suggested that females' greater vulnerability to romantic involvement explains a large part of the emerging sex difference in depression during adolescence. These findings are consistent with other research indicating that females and feminine individuals regardless of sex are significantly more likely than males and less feminine individuals to say that Valentine's Day is important to them<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, it was found that they reported giving, as well as receiving, more valentines and they also were more likely to have purposely worn red for Valentine's Day.

Compounding these types of individual motivations and expectations are societal influences. As in the West, China and other fast developing cultures, no holiday experience is complete without shopping, and some research indicates that the gift-giving occasions start earlier every year<sup>14</sup>.

In Asia forget chocolates or roses this Valentine's Day, *The Taipei Times* reports on a Hong Kong company which makes designer condoms and hopes its sheathes will put a more romantic spin on safe sex. The condom itself does not sing – but the mint, strawberry, chocolate and banana flavors come in an attractive package with a music CD to get couples “in the mood.” Recently, the rise in US consumer activity has been accompanied by pressure to keep up with increasingly high status, high dollar acquisition<sup>22</sup>, and Valentine's Day is no exception. In fact, with its ritual of gift-giving to symbolize the importance and worth of a love relationship, the pressure could be greater than on most other holidays as evidenced by some recent consumer surveys. For example, 38% of men contemplate terminating a relationship rather than face the task of choosing a “really good” gift for their partners<sup>12</sup>. Rugimbana and colleagues<sup>17</sup> further noted that individual motivations for gift giving on Valentine's Day can be based on a confluence of obligation, self-interest and altruism, and that these motivations have deep manifestations in the perceived social power relationship between the genders. Faced with prospect of a gift-less Valentine's Day, 20% of women in the US took action on their own and ordered flowers for themselves in 2003<sup>9</sup>.

Similarly, Boden and Williams<sup>2</sup> discussed the “commodification” of romance and romantic relationships in their critique of Colin Campbell's seminal contribution to

consumer sociology, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*<sup>3</sup>. They theorized that the act of “buying romance” alters society’s connection with genuine emotion and the reality of how we experience the relationship itself. When we are focused on acquiring just the right gift to send just the right message, we become distracted from what is happening on a more direct interpersonal or intrapersonal level. At the same time, our own unique expressions of emotion are supplanted by mass produced physical representations of our feelings, marketed to us as the definitively appropriate means of demonstrating our love for another.

Boden and Williams<sup>2</sup> further argued how the female experience necessitates consumption on a vigorous scale in order to meet the exacting demands of our cultural images of beauty, considered a requirement in romantic relationships. Ironically, this consumption feeds into the development of women into “consumable objects” themselves, to be acquired by a man. Indeed, some authorities<sup>8</sup> believe that romance has fallen to the increased social pressures around accumulation of wealth and status and is now as much a capitalist activity as a genuine expression of emotion.

But much of the marketing around romance involves fantasy and false promises, and consumers are constantly faced with the shortcomings of reality as compared to these illusions. According to Boden and Williams<sup>2</sup> disappointment is not necessarily a bad thing in this context as it drives home the occasional sad truths about life and love. Whether such disappointments are accompanied by — or develop into — depression has not been investigated adequately. However, the relationship between feeling that one matters to others and levels of depression has been studied in recent research<sup>20</sup>. This research concluded that women experience higher levels of “mattering” to others than men, and that such mattering correlates negatively with depression. Conversely, it would appear that not-mattering – as is implied by not receiving Valentine’s Day gifts – should lead to greater depression in women than in men.

The preceding is consistent with Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson’s study<sup>15</sup> on gender differences in rumination, which can be seen as the expression of low levels of depression<sup>11</sup>. Women expressed feeling less control over negative events in their lives than men did, and they tended to engage in rumination as an alternative to taking direct action, perhaps as the result of socialization to remain femininely passive. Because women are still expected to play a recipient’s role in the Valentine’s Day ritual they might be more likely to resort to “brooding” – i.e., a “passive comparison of one’s current situation with some unachieved conduct” – rather than problem solving behavior. Such brooding is related to higher concurrent depression but lower depression over time<sup>21</sup>. Consistent with these ideas, Houran’s unpublished studies with online daters found that men rebound quicker from disappointment at Valentine’s Day than do women, and that the women can experience heartache for many weeks after Valentine’s if their partners do not provide them with a suitable gift.

## What the Service-Hospitality Industry Can Do

Clearly, Valentine's Day is a huge business opportunity for many companies within the service-hospitality industry. Yet, catering *exclusively* to couples during this season has at least two possible negative outcomes. *First*, it may unwittingly contribute to depression and anxiety in singles – and perhaps even couples that cannot afford extravagant gift giving. *Second*, a strict focus on couples misses the business opportunities associated with marketing to singles. In other words, singles are an untapped market during most holiday seasons like Valentine's Day. To counter these scenarios, we offer some guidelines for addressing the “Valentine's Day Blues:”

- ❑ ***Encourage family activities.*** For those not in a relationship, Valentine's Day can serve as an occasion to engage in deliberate acknowledgement and acceptance of oneself. The capacity for love of self directly influences the capacity to love others and be loved. What better day to build this skill set? Moreover, adult singles that exhibit happiness and contentment in their life are less likely to remain single than those who are depressed can be positive role models for adolescents, who are especially susceptible to premature romantic relationships due to psychological and social pressures.
- ❑ ***Host special singles-events.*** The service-hospitality industry serves as a beacon for those celebrating at Valentines, not so for singles. Visit any restaurant for dinner in any culture and the person dining alone is a minority. Turn up alone at a restaurant any time and you will invariably be greeted with “How many are you?” The answer, “I am on my own” gets a raised eyebrow at the best of times; on the 14<sup>th</sup> February it takes real courage to dine alone. Thus, offer special menus or activities for groups of friends to enjoy.
- ❑ ***Use Valentine's Day as a forum to market the idea of self-love and self-acceptance.*** When social pressures to celebrate through consumption become intense, individuals can respond on their own behalf just as well as couples do for each other. Shopping for one's own Valentine's gift is empowering if it is not a secret act, but instead an act of self-expression. Alternatively, a reasoned choice to refrain from spending can act as a gift to one's financial health, with the simpler pleasures in life serving as cost-free substitutes.
- ❑ ***Encourage extracurricular charity by your employees on behalf of your organization.*** Gestures of love need not be limited to the romantic sort on Valentine's Day. Donations of time, money and creativity through volunteering tend to benefit the donor as much as the recipient – and frankly from a business standpoint can be excellent opportunities for PR and brand exposure. From the perspective of personal and professional development, seeing first hand the real-life needs of the less fortunate can help keep romantic disappointment (and business disappointment) in perspective.
- ❑ ***Organizations can sponsor talks or seminars.*** A partner-less Valentine's Day can serve as a call-to-arms when individuals take the time to define what they are looking for in a relationship, the obstacles to achieving their goals in this area of their lives and what steps will take them closer to success. To that end,

hotels and even restaurants might consider hosting a seminar or talk on love and romance given by a local psychologist or other available expert. Not only does “sex sell” as a topic, but these types of events often serve as informal “mixers” for singles. On a humanistic level, the introspection events like this also promote may reveal that connectedness and relatedness are missing in all aspects of their life and that some transformation is called for that will provide the possibility to love and to be loved. This may require clearing up some broken relationships from the past that are cluttering up the present. Such a resolution may be the best Valentine's Day gift a partner-less person could give himself or herself.

- ***Offer products and services in a range of different prices.*** Service industry professionals can assist men looking for the “perfect gift” by making specific and thoughtful suggestions and offering suitable gifts in a wide selection of price points. Helping customers on a budget achieve a feeling of luxury will bring joy to both the gift giver and recipient of that gift.

For hotels and restaurants, sensitivity to these issues can be simply not turning all your bars and restaurants into shrines to romance and love. Instead, reserve some space and attention for those not with a loved one. The above points are merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg of what businesses could do. For instance, restaurants could also serve a complimentary piece of cake to every single, or hotels or casinos might provide business executives on a trip away from home and loved ones may appreciate a gesture like free Internet phone access on February 14<sup>th</sup> “to make that special connection.” Or airlines could be sure to offer everyone on the flight a special “Love Yourself” cookie with their beverage instead of pretzels. To know for sure what customers will appreciate, savvy organizations can conduct customized market surveys *before* the holidays.

While emotional, intellectual and physical intimacy might be the goal of most loving couples, similar feelings of connectedness and relatedness can be present for the single person during a *genuine service experience in a service-hospitality setting*. These warm, fuzzy feelings are particularly found in the comfort of a familiar place, where people remember your name. Casinos, lodges or hotels and restaurants that have built such relationships with their customers are serving more than just food and wine; they serve up large portions of recognition and compassion. And around Valentine's Day and other holidays some individuals will find it nowhere else. ♥

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