



# Everyone loves a secret: Why consumers value marketing secrets

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Everyone keeps secrets, and organizations are no exception. The current literature on secrecy in organizations is centered on the managerial perspective of secrets as competitive resources. In contrast, this conceptual article takes a consumer-centric approach and presents a detailed explanation of why and how marketing secrets create value for consumers. First, a discussion of agency highlights three consumer roles in the marketing of secrets: Insiders, who know the secret; Aspirants, who know of the secret; and Outsiders, who do not know of the secret. Second, based on two mechanisms of awareness and primacy, a value chain of secrecy is proposed that presents four types of value that consumers can extract from secrets: acquisition value, acknowledgment value, leverage value, and dissemination value. Lastly, secrecy is revisited as a strategic marketing tool for creating value for consumers. © 2015 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. The strategic value of secrets

Apple is renowned for staging large launch events for its new products. Consumers know months in advance that something is coming, but never actually find out what ‘it’ is until the day of the big reveal. This formula has worked for Apple for years, with each generational release of a new phone, tablet, or computer outselling its previous version. *Why does the formula work?* Because consumers love anticipation, particularly when it entails the anticipation of a wonderful new technological innovation from a trusted brand. *How does the formula work?* Apple is obsessed with secrecy. Apple does its

best to ensure that there are no data leaks anywhere in its global supply chain and goes to extreme lengths to protect its information: new products are chained to desks, walls and doors are built to shutter and separate working groups, and employees are fingerprinted upon entering and physically searched on leaving manufacturing premises (Dickey, 2013). Consumers value marketing secrets, but it is the strategic recognition and leveraging of such secrets that creates value for the firm.

To date, secrecy and secrets have been explored in the management literature primarily to the extent that they can be and are considered competitive resources (James, Leiblein, & Lu, 2013; Teece, 1998). From secret formulas to trade secret practices, firms keep and protect their own secrets from rivals in order to create competitive barriers

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(Hannah, 2006, 2007; Liebeskind, 1997). The overwhelming focus on competition is, no doubt, a reflection of how important trade secrets are to firms in the creation and protection of competitive advantages. This has also been leveraged, as at firms like Apple and Google, into integral components of organizational culture (Hannah, 2006).

The focus of this article, however, is the extent to which firms keep secrets from consumers to create marketing value. The majority of extant research on marketing secrets has taken a firm-centric orientation. Whether and how secrets create value from the perspective of the consumer remains to be explored in significant detail. It seems appropriate and necessary, then, to unpack the concept of secrets from a consumer-centric orientation. Beyond the premise that secrets create direct value for organizations by allowing firms to protect proprietary information (Hannah, 2006, 2007), are there ways in which marketing secrets create rents for organizations by creating and leveraging direct value for consumers? Here, secrecy is explored from the customer's perspective—what marketing secrets are, how and why they are used, and ultimately, how these secrets can create value for the consumer—in order to enrich and extend our understanding of secrets as a strategic marketing tool.

### 1.1. Defining secrecy and secrets

*Secrecy* is the deliberate concealment of information from others (Bok, 1989; Kelly, 2002). Secrecy is an inherently social phenomenon, as it necessarily involves a minimum of two parties. Secrecy is also an intentional phenomenon, as the concealment, protection, or withholding of information is a deliberate act. So, secrecy is an active, intentional, and conscious endeavor whereby, at the most individual level, at least one person conceals or withholds something from at least one other person. The act of secrecy applies similarly to groups of people, such as organizations and consumers.

If secrecy is the activity, then the secret itself is the content or object of that activity. A secret is the information that is purposefully withheld from one or more people by one or more people (Scheppele, 1988). A *secret* is information of intentionally limited availability.

Adding a marketing lens to these definitions, if one considers the secret to be a brand-related piece of information, it is then possible to view secrecy as a strategic brand activity. The brand secret can be related to either product or process. For example, as mentioned earlier, Apple keeps product secrets about which new models will be released and what the innovations and features of their new product

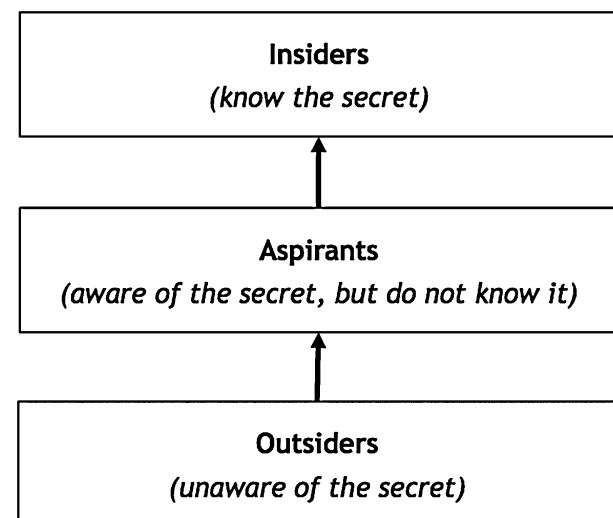
will be (Dickey, 2013). The brand secret can also be information about a process. For example, Kraft Foods protects the knowledge of the secret process by which caramel is inserted between layers of chocolate to make its infamous candy bar, Caramilk. This secret is held tightly by the company and is leveraged in a Caramilk Secret advertising campaign (“The Caramilk Secret,” 2011). In order to fully understand consumer secrecy, consideration of the various agents involved is necessary. In this context, and these examples, secrecy represents the deliberate withholding or concealment of marketing information from consumers. Agency is thus critical to secrecy in marketing, and is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

## 2. Agency in secrecy

When considering the role of agency in secrecy, it is critical to take into account not only those individuals or groups of individuals who *do* know the secret, but also those who *do not*. By definition, without someone to protect information from, the information ceases to become a secret. It is possible to identify three distinct roles in any circumstance of secrecy based on whether an agent or group knows, does not know, or knows of the secret (see Figure 1).

The *Insider* is the individual who possesses the secret information. The Insider knows the information and is also aware that the information is a secret. In other words, the Insider is aware that the information is sensitive, important, and worth protecting. The Insider can either be the individual(s) who created the secret or the individual(s) who became privy to the secret; the value here lies

Figure 1. Agency in secrecy



primarily in knowing the secret, more so than in creating it. Returning to the Caramilk Secret example, Kraft Foods is considered an Insider that knows the secret recipe. In a recent marketing campaign, the trademarked Caramilk Secret was removed from the corporate vault for the first time ever and given to a random Canadian consumer. If the consumer could successfully protect the secret for 6 months, he or she would be given \$250,000 as a reward (“The Caramilk Secret,” 2011). The selected consumer thus also became an Insider upon receiving the secret recipe. This illustrates two roles of the Insider: first, to protect the secret, and second, to decide whether or not to share the secret. Thus, the value of the secret to the Insider consumer is in terms of both exclusivity and empowerment.

Next, the *Aspirant* is the individual or group of individuals that does not know the secret, but is aware that the secret exists. Aspirants want to have the secret, but cannot. The value of the secret to the Aspirant consumer is in aspiration and striving: Aspirants want to be Insiders. Returning to the Apple example, in the days and weeks leading up to every Apple launch event, rumors and leaks abound, as consumers desire to have the inside scoop regarding which products will be launched or specifications of new models and technologies (Lim, 2013). Aspirant consumers do not know exactly what Apple has in store, but they anticipate, hypothesize, and desire to be in the loop. The value of the secret to Aspirant consumers lies in its scarcity, and this reinforces the value of the exclusivity to the Insider.

Finally, the *Outsider* is the individual or group of individuals that does not know the secret and is unaware of its existence. Thus, there is no value in the secret in terms of aspiration, striving, or desire. Consumers can be Outsiders for three reasons: they are not in the target consumer group and likely would not be concerned at all with the secret; they are in the target consumer group but beyond the reach of communications; or they are in the target consumer group and intentionally uninformed. For the first group, there is no value in the secret for the non-consumer. For the second group, the value of the secret can still be leveraged by Insiders through extending the reach of communications: awareness of the secret converts the Outsider to Aspirant, thus creating value. For the third group, however, the value of the secret is in its surprise. In 2013, music superstar Beyoncé Knowles broke the long-standing tradition of album pre-release promotions and launched a complete 14-song, 17-video collaboration album completely by surprise across 119 countries simultaneously via Apple’s iTunes online music store (Pazzanese, 2014). The surprise launch led to sales of almost 830,000 units in the first 3 days,

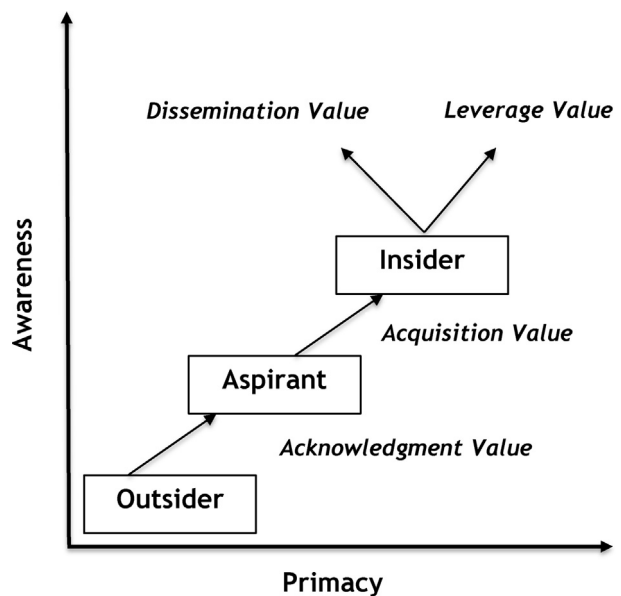
representing the fastest-selling album in the worldwide history of the iTunes store and the most successful album launch of Beyoncé’s career (Caulfield, 2013; Ramsay, 2013). In this case, the value to the consumer lies in the surprise and delight of receiving the secret without notice.

### 3. The consumer value of marketing secrets

Marketers may view secrets and secrecy through either a brand or a consumer lens. While others have introduced the concept of firm secrecy primarily as a competitive activity, thus examining the firm-oriented perspective of secrecy (Hannah, Parent, Pitt, & Berthon, 2014), here we take the alternative perspective and view secrets and secrecy through a consumer-oriented lens. Marketing, in essence, is concerned with value and the creation and extraction thereof, and secrets can serve as a vehicle by which value is either created or extracted by consumers. The value of secrecy for consumers is not a one-dimensional paradigm but rather a multi-dimensional construct, and the power of secrets can be converted into consumer value in four ways: (1) acknowledgment of the secret, (2) acquisition of the secret, (3) leveraging of the secret, or (4) dissemination of the secret. These four types of value are outlined in Figure 2 and discussed next in greater detail.

As highlighted in Figure 2, the two mechanisms of awareness and primacy work to either increase or diminish the value consumers extract from secrets.

Figure 2. The value chain of marketing secrets



*Awareness* refers to the total number of people that know, or know of, the secret. Generally speaking, power is reduced the more people have it equally; similarly, power is amplified when fewer people have it. So the power of a secret becomes valuable to the consumer relative to the degree to which the secret is considered scarce. *Primacy* refers to the earliness with which one learns the secret relative to others. Learning the secret sooner than someone else underscores and magnifies the value of the secret.

### 3.1. Acknowledgment value

The first way value is realized through secrecy is when the consumer shifts from being an Outsider to an Aspirant. *Acknowledgment value* is that value created for the consumer by gaining the knowledge that there is something unknown albeit valuable. While the secret can exist independent of awareness, to the individual consumer the secret has no power or value until the consumer becomes aware of its existence. Secrecy value can only be created when the consumer realizes that they do not know something or that something is being intentionally hidden from them. The marketing adage “scarcity equals demand” factors into value creation at this point, as the consumer becomes aware that information is not accessible and thus infers that it must be valuable.

The launch of new books in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series is a prime example of the value of scarce information and secrecy. Information about the books prior to launch was kept tightly under wraps, as printers were sworn to secrecy and review copies were not made available to book reviewers (Brown, 2001; Hannah et al., 2014). Plotlines and even the titles of the books were kept secret (Parker, 2012). Demand and excitement grew rapidly and exponentially prior to launch as consumers learned of these highly prized yet inaccessible secrets.

Key to understanding acknowledgment value is consumer anticipation and want: the greater the perceived desire for information that one does not currently have, and the greater the perceived anticipation of receiving that information, the greater the value of acknowledgment becomes. Part of the process of acquiring a secret involves consumers experiencing excitement and entertainment as they wait for the secret’s revelation, such as the release of a new or upgraded product or service. In these cases, the secret is kept by the firm and the consumers are Aspirants: they know the secret exists, but are not aware of what it is due to the firm placing a temporal distance between the consumer and the secret. During this temporal lag, organizations can create

buzz around the upcoming product or service, thus getting consumers excited for the release of the secret. Apple, for example, is well-known for selectively leaking information about new or upgraded products (Hannah, 2006). In addition, teaser campaigns are one common method of creating such value for consumers. In a teaser campaign, a series of small or cryptic messages are released by a firm, hinting at the ultimate release of a product, which serves to extend and magnify the value generated through acknowledgment and anticipation. Microsoft’s Bing search engine partnered with ad agency Droga5 to create a secret-laden teaser campaign for the launch of rap star Jay-Z’s memoir, *Decoded*, by creating a multimedia scavenger hunt for consumers: each of the book’s 320 pages appeared in a random location around the world, and consumers were encouraged to try to piece the ‘puzzle’ together to be able to tell the complete story (Grewal & Levy, 2014).

### 3.2. Acquisition value

Second, consumer value is realized when the consumer is given, takes, or discovers the secret. In this moment, the consumer transforms from Aspirant to Insider, thus creating *acquisition value* for a secret. When the consumer shifts roles from observer to participant, or from awareness of the secret to ownership of the secret, another level of the power of the secret is given (or perhaps transferred) to the consumer. When the consumer agency role shifts from Aspirant to Insider, the power of ownership imbues the power of autonomy and choice in deciding what to do with the secret, and why.

KFC values its secret chicken-seasoning recipe so highly that it protects the secret by having two different manufacturers each make half of the 11-ingredient recipe to insulate against competitive espionage. When a couple who purchased a home originally owned by KFC founder Colonel Harland Sanders claimed to have found a copy of the original seasoning recipe in the house’s basement, they had to make the choice of what to do with that secret: publicly auction it off to the highest bidder for financial gain or return it back to the company for safe keeping (Zuber, 2001). A similar situation arose in 2007 when three Coca-Cola employees unlawfully acquired samples of and recipes for a new product and attempted to sell the trade secrets to main competitor Pepsi for millions of dollars (Dornin, 2007). In these examples, the consumers gained as much control over the security of the secret as the firm itself.

The principle of separating the haves from the have-nots is central to understanding the power and value of secrets, and through acquisition of the

secret the consumer agent crosses the chasm from out-group to in-group. For example, the consumer now has bragging rights that they know a secret others do not; or, the consumer may simply feel increased power due to the knowledge that they have a choice of what to do with the information. Depending on what the consumer chooses to do with the secret information, they can extract further value in two ways: by leveraging the secret or by disseminating the secret.

### 3.3. Leverage value

Once in possession of the secret, consumers may extract value in two ways. Having the secret is one thing, but choosing what to do with it is another. The consumer becomes the gatekeeper of the secret, and the value of the secret lies not in simply having it but being able to use it. Put simply, this consumer choice is whether to share the secret or to keep the secret. By keeping the secret, the consumer creates value for her/himself by exercising the power of the secret for personal gain. *Leverage value* refers to this exercise of power by using the secret either for personal gain (e.g., exclusive access to beneficial circumstances) or by using the nature of private ownership of the secret to assert control, influence, or individuation over others.

Bok (1989) argues that secrecy is not only a source of power to the secret holder, but also that secrets can give the secret holder a sense of control over his or her environment. Having a secret provides a sense of control and perception of advantage over others and over the social environment in which the secret is being kept. In the previously mentioned example of Harry Potter book launches, almost all details about the books were kept intentionally secret before launch. However, when made available for sale in limited quantities, the first customers to buy and read the books often chose to keep those secrets rather than share that information with others (Hannah et al., 2014).

Secrets can also help to maintain or protect personal boundaries (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Acknowledging the division between those that know the secret and those that do not know the secret, and wishing to maintain and leverage that division for personal benefit, is a process called *othering* (Jensen, 2011; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). The Insider is able to feel and assert independence from Aspirants and Outsiders. Ticketmaster Entertainment, the largest ticket sales and distribution outlet in the United States, frequently holds secret ticket presales for select customers. These secret presales for events and concerts are announced in a number of ways—via social media, credit card promotions,

fan clubs, radio promotions, or album pre-orders—in very limited amounts for a select niche group of potential consumers (Waddell, 2006; “What’s in a Presale Ticket?,” 2014). Consumers with secret access to early ticket purchasing would lose the exclusivity of early access and possibly even ticket availability by sharing the secret with others.

So, the consumer is able to leverage the value of the secret by recognizing and exploiting advantages of possessing it in the presence of barriers for those who do not have the secret information. In this case, the value extracted from the secret is contingent upon the consumer not sharing the information with others. This insider-versus-outsider binary is key to an additional aspect of leverage value: highlighting one’s role as gatekeeper of the secret serves to allow a visible reframing of the consumer’s identity as an insider, thus imbuing that individual with power over the group of which they were previously a member. Those consumers with early access to the Harry Potter plot or hard-to-find concert tickets are given a boost in social status, if only temporary, over those other customers without access. In instances of use and/or gatekeeping, the Insider leverages the value of the secret over Aspirants and Outsiders. (This is value extracted from keeping the secret, as the value of not sharing the secret is greater than the value of sharing.)

### 3.4. Dissemination value

Finally, value can also be extracted from sharing or disseminating the secret. Whether sharing with select individuals or with the general public, the consumer is able to realize the power of recognition and primacy in exposing the secret through *dissemination value*. In contrast to leverage value, dissemination value occurs when the benefit of sharing the secret is greater than the benefit of not sharing the secret. With dissemination value, the consumer—as a gatekeeper—is able to extract more value by granting access to others than by protecting the secret.

In 2007, Apple released the first version of its new iPhone in exclusive contract with American telecom provider AT&T. New-Jersey based computer hacker George Hotz—who was 17 years old at the time—figured out a way to override the iPhone’s chip system, allowing him to ‘unlock’ and use the new phone on his existing service contract with another (competing) mobile services provider. Rather than keep the software unlock a secret, Hotz opted instead to release this hack to the public. In an interview with CNBC, Hotz later said that he released this information for the greater good of society: “More people want iPhones now if they can use them with any sort of provider” (Kushner, 2012).

As demonstrated previously, the concept of othering shows that secret-keepers can feel autonomous from and perhaps more privileged than those that do not have the secret. Within this, however, the Insider may choose to share the secret with a select group of other consumers, thus recruiting a team of Insiders versus being alone on the inside. The sharing of secrets may bring a sense of intimacy and belonging to the group (Richardson, 1988; Simmel, 1950). With sharing, the Insiders become a unique and empowered social unit that functions largely on the reciprocal trust of exclusivity of its membership. Trust and reciprocity in such a context serves to emphasize social cohesion among members and social intimacy within the group (Goffman, 1959). Gilt is an online luxury fashion retailer that brings the exclusive sample sale to digital distribution. However, unlike its deep-discount counterparts such as the TJX group, Gilt does not offer public access. Instead, members are recruited through referrals only (Sherman, 2008). Members of this elite shopping site would inevitably lose the advantages of being Insiders and receiving exclusive access to deeply discounted high-fashion goods if access became open to the public, but members can choose to invite and refer close friends or relatives to the inside to share in the available shopping deals. Dissemination value here is achieved by limited dissemination to a select group via invitation rather than widespread dissemination to the masses.

In some cases, value and power may be realized by affording access to a select group of others to create a small insider group (e.g., sharing ticket presale information or fashion sample sales only with friends or relatives). In other cases, value and power may be realized by affording access to a mass of people, thus equalizing the role of consumer agency (e.g., Hotz's iPhone unlocking).

In sum, the value of secrecy can be realized by consumers either through a process of gaining awareness of the secret (acknowledgment value), gaining ownership of the secret (acquisition value), and/or gaining the power of having the ability to choose how to use or what to do with the secret (leverage value and dissemination value). These four types of consumer value operate under the broader influences of awareness and primacy of access in the secrecy agency chain.

#### 4. Conclusions

To expand and enrich the existing understanding of secrecy, which heretofore has largely taken a firm-centric orientation, this consideration of the multiple types of consumer secrecy value has adopted a

consumer-centric perspective of the value of secrets. Secrecy is valuable to firms from a competitive perspective, and trade secrets are highly prized and guarded assets. But secrecy is also valuable to firms when considered a means of creating value for consumers. This article attempts to enhance the managerial understanding of secrecy by first proposing a typology of consumer agency in consumer secrecy and then subsequently unpacking four types of customer value that can be realized through the use of secrecy.

Organizations that want to create value for consumers would be well served by paying close attention to the strategic use of secrecy and the controlled and selective release of information. To accomplish this, firms must manage the tradeoff between disclosure and maintaining their secrets (Arrow, 1962; James et al., 2013). This process, called the *paradox of disclosure* (Arrow, 1962), highlights the complexity of balancing the disclosure of certain details while maintaining the secrecy of others. From the secret recipes of Coca-Cola and KFC to the next plotline in the Harry Potter book series or the specifics of the upcoming Apple product launch, many firms take the role of Insider and use acknowledgment value and leverage value to incite customer interest by virtue of the mysteries of their offerings. Some firms use the strategic release of marketing secrets to select customers to further compound their marketing value by creating consumer acquisition value for chosen target groups, as in Ticketmaster's presale events or Kraft Foods' Caramilk Secret contest. Some firms strategically leverage the value of exclusive dissemination by enabling invitation-only memberships and access. Managers are advised to note that, importantly, marketing secrets have value to consumers in and of themselves. The marketing of secrets is not exclusively a managerial function. Consumers use and value marketing secrets for their own reasons and of their own accord. Astute managers will identify, recognize, and then leverage these reasons for strategic benefit.

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