

## EXPLORATIONS AND INSIGHTS

# Forgotten classics: *Marketing Methods* by Ralph Starr Butler (1918)

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide a retrospective review of an early marketing text, *Marketing Methods* (1918) by Ralph Starr Butler.

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Marketing Methods* is summarized, and perspectives of scholars that have occurred since its publication are provided.

**Findings** – *Marketing Methods* represents the first college textbook to use the term “marketing” and, thus, represents a major and important early work in the field.

**Originality/value** – This review of *Marketing Methods* provides a retrospective on the development, structure, critical reviews and influence of this text.

**Keywords** History of marketing thought, Advertising, Sales, *Marketing Methods*, Ralph Starr Butler

**Paper type** General review

### Introduction

In the fall of 1981, I entered the PhD program at Michigan State University unaware that I would be exposed to the subject of marketing history. I soon learned that some of the leading scholars in the area such as Stanley Hollander and William Lazer were on the faculty of Michigan State. As with many people entering a PhD program, I had a scant perspective on what would come my way. Interestingly, as a business undergraduate, I had become fascinated by historic ads and other early marketing materials that were at the library of the university I attended. I never suspected that this would be anything but a passing curiosity or that this material would later have an influence on my academic career, and that I might actually write and teach about this subject. The first course that I took in the PhD program at Michigan State was the *History of Marketing Thought* with William Lazer. On the first day of the course, he gave a lecture on the early origins of marketing, and I am convinced to this day that Dr Lazer’s first lecture began with the words “Ralph Starr Butler”. Although numerous names of early marketing scholars would be mentioned that day and in the weeks to follow, I believe that Ralph Starr Butler was mentioned first, and more so than any other.

With this thought in mind, I will provide an overview of *Marketing Methods*. It is important for us to reflect on and to preserve the work of individuals such as Ralph Starr Butler as few contemporary marketing academics would recognize the name or



contributions of early twentieth century marketing pioneers such as Butler (Shaw, 2009). The review of this book involves several key areas: the career of Ralph Starr Butler, the development and structure of *Marketing Methods* and perspectives on the book when it was published and in the decades that followed.

### Ralph Starr Butler

Ralph Starr Butler (1882-1971) is regarded as a major early leader in marketing thought, and is often cited as the first individual to use the term “marketing” in a text with the publication of *Marketing Methods* in 1918 (Kaur and Sharma, 2009; Maynard, 1942). Butler’s text is also thought of as the first comprehensive textbook on marketing as well as the first truly teachable book on general marketing (Converse, 1933). Ralph Starr Butler’s career was very lengthy and interspersed with time spent in both business and academia. He spent the majority of his career as an advertising manager and executive, although his academic work remained part of his life-long focus. To begin telling this story, we are fortunate to be able to begin with Butler’s own words:

I have, perhaps, a unique story to tell because, as far as I am aware, I wrote the first book on the marketing of manufactured products. The story is as follows: After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1904, I taught commercial subjects for a year and a half in a high school in Racine, Wisconsin, and then came to New York to run the New York office of a Chicago teachers’ agency. After a few months I left that work and actively began my business career with the Herring-Hall-Marvin Safe Company in New York. In 1907 I went to Cincinnati to serve as assistant to the eastern sales manager of the Proctor and Gamble Company. Here I had my first experience in the field which we now know as Marketing. In 1910, I left the Proctor and Gamble Company and went to the University of Wisconsin as Assistant Professor of Business Administration, with the assignment of developing correspondence study courses in business in the University Extension Division (Bartels, 1976, pp. 248-249).

When Butler joined the extension staff at the University of Wisconsin, there were 96 courses available for correspondence students, including courses in Advertising and Salesmanship, Advertising Campaigns, Sales and Purchases and Store Management (Maynard, 1942). Butler felt that these courses should be preceded by a basic course in the “principles of marketing” (Maynard, 1942). This course became available to correspondence students in the fall of 1910, appeared in a printed catalog in 1911 and, in 1913, was announced as a course in “*Marketing Methods*” (Maynard, 1942). This work had a great influence beyond the confines of the University of Wisconsin. Butler’s work resulted in a series of books published by the Alexander Hamilton Institute and put Butler in a position to influence teaching in other institutions (Maynard, 1942). It is significant to note that in the previous passage referenced to H. H. Maynard, he refers to a course in the “principles of marketing”. Hence, the modern term *Principles of Marketing* was associated with Butler’s course long before the term became synonymous with course names and textbook titles.

Through the use of the title *Marketing Methods* for Butler’s text, the term “marketing” became common on campus and in the business environment (Maynard, 1942). However, Butler was not the first individual to use the term “marketing” in a college course. As noted by Maynard:

But it must be recognized that although this use of the term is, so far as the author has been able to determine, the first in any book, the term “marketing” had already come into considerable use at least in catalog descriptions of the rapidly rising courses in the field of Marketing in the

various universities. But to Dr Butler must be assigned the honor of first giving the dignity of a book title to the term, "Marketing", as applied to the distribution of manufactured products (Maynard, 1942, p. 159).

Although some contemporary writers give Butler credit for the first use of the term "marketing" (Enright, 2002), it is more widely reported that it was used in course titles for 15 years prior to *Marketing Methods* (Bartels, 1976, pp. 24-25). Butler, however, is widely considered to be the first person to use marketing in conjunction with an academic text. Edward D. Jones, who taught at the University of Wisconsin from 1895 until 1902 and later the University of Michigan, taught what is presumed to be the first marketing course taught in the United States (Bartels, 1951). Although Ralph Starr Butler was at Michigan at the same time as Jones, as far as it is known, neither of them had contact with each other (Bartels, 1951).

After leaving the University of Wisconsin, Butler spent a year at New York University. After that, he began working for the United States Rubber Company in 1920 and joined the Postum Company (General Foods Company) in 1926 as advertising manager. Although the academic rank of Ralph Starr Butler is not totally clear in the literature, it is noted that:

Associate Professor Ralph Starr Butler became professor of business administration at New York University School of Commerce, Accounts and Finance, his work to be in marketing methods and marketing costs (NOTES, 1916, p. 1020).

Butler's subsequent work as a practitioner was no less innovative than his prior academic work.

At General Foods, Ralph Starr Butler created the Maxwell House *Showboat*, radio's first one-hour sponsored program. He also used popular comics to advertise Grape-Nut Flakes. This idea was based on the work of George Gallup who had identified the great interest that newspaper readers had in the comic sections of their newspapers (Wood, 1962). Butler created the brand name "Birds Eye", and in 1938, both public relations and research and development at General Foods were assigned to him. He sponsored radio coverage of the Byrd Polar expedition, showing that radio could be a major advertising medium. Butler said that he was not a creative advertising person, but a marketing man who used advertising as a tool to promote business (Wood, 1961).

Butler's (1918) book is but one of the many publications during his early and relatively brief academic career (La Londe and Morrison, 1967). Besides his work at the University of Wisconsin, he published and participated in the marketing and advertising fields throughout his career. Butler is mentioned as a member of the New York University chapter of the Alpha Delta Sigma national advertising fraternity in the 1930s (Lucas, 1961). He was at a meeting of the organization that is considered to be the predecessor to the American Marketing Association, the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World in 1915 (Agnew, 1937), and gave an address at the Advertising Awards dinner in New York in 1941, focusing on the efficiency and cost effectiveness of advertising (Simmons, 1941). Ralph Starr Butler continued to be active in the academic area as well, publishing *The Place of Advertising in the American Scene* in 1940 (Cox, 1940) as well as chapters in other textbooks (Kahn, 1952). He was considered a person who readily helped others in the marketing and advertising field and, in 1947, was presented with the *Printers' Ink* Gold Medal (Borden, 1961). In 1947, Ralph Star Butler retired as a Vice President of the General Food Corporation (Wood, 1961).

### The development of *Marketing Methods*

*Marketing Methods* was developed at the time that marketing as a discipline was being formed. Harvard University and the University of Wisconsin were early centers of influence on marketing thought. Many early marketing scholars attended the University of Wisconsin or Harvard University at some time in their careers. The University of Wisconsin attracted early students of marketing such as Jones, Hagerty, Hibbard and Macklin (Bartels, 1976, p. 26). Wisconsin is credited with the conception of the field that would become known as “marketing”. However, “marketing” was commonly termed *distributive trade practices*. College courses related to selling were offered for the first time in 1902 and expanded rapidly in the following decade. The University of Michigan offered a course *The Distributive and Regulative Industries of the United States* taught by E.D. Jones (Maynard, 1941). This course may be considered the first marketing course taught in the USA (Bartels, 1951). *The Marketing of Products* was taught at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania by W.E. Kruse (Maynard, 1941). At Ohio State University, J.E. Hagerty taught *The Distribution of Products* (Hagerty, 1936). Paul T. Cherington at Harvard taught *Commercial Organization and Methods* (Hagerty, 1936). It should be noted that the development of marketing was taking place in other parts of the world as well, with Romilla (Robert Millar) (1916) writing a textbook in Norway that included the notion of looking at business from the customer’s perspective (Lagrosen and Svensson, 2006).

Between 1900 and 1910, conceptual changes occurred that resulted in the more formal adoption of the term “marketing”. Butler considered marketing to have two basic elements – salesmanship and advertising (Wood, 1961). He wrote pamphlets on the subject that were combined to create a 209-page section “Sales, Purchase, and Shipping Methods” (1911). In 1914, he published *Marketing Methods and Salesmanship*, which preceded *Marketing Methods* (1918), the subject of this review. Although many people were involved in the early process of the development of marketing, we have on record how Ralph Starr Butler as a professor at the University of Wisconsin conceived his perspective of marketing:

In consideration of the whole field of selling, I developed the idea that personal salesmanship and advertising had to do simply with the final expression of the selling idea. My experience with the Proctor & Gamble Company had convinced me that a manufacturer seeking to market a product had to consider and solve a large number of problems before he ever gave expression to the selling idea by sending a salesman on the road or inserting an advertisement in a publication. I surveyed the very meager literature of business which was available at the time and was astonished to find that the particular field that I have very briefly described above had never been treated by any writer. I decided to prepare a correspondence course covering this phase of business activity.

In brief, the subject matter that I intended to treat was to include a study of everything that the promoter of a product has to do prior to his actual use of salesmen and of advertising. A name was needed for this field of business activity. I remember the difficulties I had in finding a suitable name, but I finally decided on the phrase “Marketing Methods”. Under this name, a course consisting of six printed pamphlets was published by the university in the fall of 1910 (Bartels, 1976, p. 249).

It should be noted that Butler’s account was based on his own personal recollections some 30 years after these events occurred (Jones, 1987, p. 87). Some of the courses were taught jointly by Butler and Benjamin M. Rastall who was in charge of business administration courses in the Extension Division at the University of Wisconsin. These two men also jointly taught a course entitled “Advertising Campaigns” and Rastall taught “Credits and Collections”

(Jones, 1987, pp. 87-88). Prior to Butler being hired, Rastall published a pamphlet for the Extension titled “*The Business Sciences*”, which included a chart of business courses showing the organization of the business field. The courses were grouped under the subdivision “Marketing”, which was part of the division titled “Business Organization and Management” (Jones, 1987, p. 88). These pamphlets went through several iterations including the change of Butler’s (1918) *Selling and Buying* (1911) to *Marketing Methods* (1914), and ultimately became the text, *Marketing Methods*.

### **The framework of *Marketing Methods***

In describing the content of *Marketing Methods*, an appropriate starting point is to identify what the author was attempting to do (Shapiro, 2014). In the Introduction to *Marketing Methods*, Butler describes his intent:

This Text deals with the marketing of manufactured goods. It is concerned chiefly with the various methods of getting goods from the manufacturer to the consumer, and with the many problems arising from the complicated trade relations of modern commerce. In the series of Modern Business Texts the subject of selling is logically divided into its parts, and presented in the following order: First, the problems that lie behind every campaign are discussed in the present Text on “Marketing Methods”. Then the two different expressions of the selling idea, advertising and salesmanship, are presented in separate Texts. Later, general principles of salesmanship are exemplified in the Text on “Business Correspondence”, the specific application of selling principles to wholesale and retail establishments is shown in a text on “Merchandising”; and finally, the marketing of raw materials is considered in the Text on “The Exchanges and Speculation.” These Texts combined and in their proper order present a complete and logical view of the universally important subject of selling (Butler, 1918, pp. 5-6).

Butler begins by saying that the book deals with the marketing of manufactured goods. One cannot help but note that the majority of introductory marketing texts that would follow in the decades to come also consider manufactured products as the primary focus. The “parts” of the book that Butler referred to in his introduction were marketing methods, advertising, salesmanship, selling to wholesale and retail establishments and the marketing of raw materials. It is interesting to note that Butler appears to describe the chapters as “texts”, perhaps relating to the origin of this material in separate pamphlets. It is also possible that this introduction was taken directly from an introduction in the previous pamphlets, as Butler’s description does not correspond to the chapters in the book. Although *Marketing Methods* begins with Chapter I “The Field of Marketing Methods”, it does not end with “The Exchanges and Speculation”. Rather, the final chapter of the book is “The Cost of Competitive Selling”.

In examining the content and structure of *Marketing Methods*, the book is 335-page long and is divided into 21 chapters. The first chapter of the book, “The Field of Marketing Methods” provides an introduction to the topic as well as Butler’s perspective on the marketing task being salesmanship and advertising (Butler, 1918, p. 1). He describes this as “personal selling and advertising are the only ways in which anything can be sold.” Butler goes on to describe what *marketing methods* includes and explains how his selling perspective translates into “marketing”:

The word *selling* might properly include everything that is done by the man who has anything to dispose of in a commercial way. But in general usage this word is often incorrectly restricted in its meaning to personal salesmanship only. In its stead the work *marketing* is gradually coming into popular use to apply to the distributing campaign generally. Some advanced

business houses have officials called marketing managers, who direct both the salesmen and the advertising. The word is a good one and we shall use it (Butler, 1918, p. 5).

He then goes on to explain how the content of the book is not on specific techniques of advertising or sales, but rather on “considerations” that must be made in this regard:

The term *marketing methods* includes everything done to influence sales. In these chapters, however, the study of marketing methods will exclude the consideration of the technique of advertising and the technique of salesmanship, and be devoted to those sales considerations that must receive attention before either salesmanship or advertising is started on its mission of influencing the market (Butler, 1918, p. 5).

This description can be seen as quite similar to a professor today explaining to a class that the focus is not on specific marketing tactics but rather on broader strategic issues facing a marketer. In fact, Butler explains in a section of the first chapter on “why study marketing methods” something very similar to a modern perspective on marketing strategy:

The need of business is for executives who can get back of the technique of making sales – who can investigate, analyze, weigh and understand basic market conditions – who, on the foundation of their broad-minded seeking after facts, can construct a sales-making campaign that will use one or both of the two selling methods as conditions may demand, and who can weld them both into a common weapon for competitive offense (Butler, 1918, p. 6).

Chapter 2 goes on to explain the “Development of Modern Marketing”, and again, there are very interesting parallels with what would be seen in a modern marketing text. Butler describes several periods in the development of business and concludes with a description of the “overlapping of the periods” (Butler, 1918, p. 13) that is not unlike the notion that we have today of not accepting a sales-production-marketing development of marketing. Subsequent chapters focus on trade channels; selling to the consumer; distribution methods such as retail, chains and mail-order; advertising; branding; and price maintenance. The final chapter is on “The Cost of Competitive Selling” that focuses on the efficiency of the marketing system and the need for ethical behavior. This is again very much like a modern text that might have a concluding chapter on planning and controlling the marketing function or on marketing ethics.

The chapter topics can roughly be seen to relate to modern terms such as marketing management, advertising, personal selling, distribution, pricing and ethics. As a point of comparison, Agnew and Houghton’s (1941) *Marketing Policies* has 24 chapters spanning over 500 pages without sections and with topics that do not run in a specific order or structure. Interestingly, it is noted in the preface of *Marketing Policies* that its topics are limited to marketing and merchandising, and does not cover advertising and sales management (Agnew and Houghton, 1941, p. 5). The latter two areas are the focus that Butler used to develop *Marketing Methods*.

### **Perspectives on *Marketing Methods***

An early review of *Marketing Methods* was not particularly kind and did not reflect the admiration and respect that it would later receive. In a review written by Ray B. Westerfield, covering both *Marketing Methods* and another text, he began by noting the void that *Marketing Methods* and other books of the period were filling:

[...] these books make the best existing treatment of their field; in fact they are quite alone in their field, and the importance of this field is being recognized more and more; as “schools of commerce”: are instituted in our universities the need of text books for courses in these lines in being acutely felt (Westerfield, 1917, p. 629).

Westerfield, however, goes on to take issue with several areas of the book, including academic rigor, conceptual foundations and even the use of a historical perspective:

[...] the texts are sketchy and artificial for use by upper college classes; they are written for too popular an audience and not in the scientific strain and depth which fit college men; there is a crying need for genuine college texts in this field (Westerfield, 1917, p. 629)[1].

In reference to a conceptual foundation, he goes on to say:

The texts are also written from a purely business point of view; they are divorced from the economic principles developed by the earlier courses in the elements of economics (instance volume V, pp. 276-277 on process); there is a need of texts which correlate economic concepts and doctrines with practical business economics; texts so built will find a more warrantable berth in economics courses (Westerfield, 1917, p. 629).

Westerfield concludes on a note focusing on the absence of a historical perspective:

[...] this exposition would be much improved if the historical side were given more attention; if the genesis of certain business practices, with their whys and hows, were delineated (Westerfield, 1917, p. 629).

It is interesting to note that the author of this review, Ray B. Westerfield, was an economist at Yale University and was a writer in the field of business history. Several books that he authored are still in print as of 2015. These include *Middlemen in English Business, Particularly Between 1660 and 1760* and *Branch Banking: Its Historical and Theoretical Position in America and Abroad*. Given Westerfield's interest in history, it comes as no surprise that he wanted more historical background in Butler's book and wanted to see more of the academic as opposed to the practitioner perspective. Although Westerfield was an economist, similar to other early marketing scholars, he participated extensively in the marketing field. He was the second author with Clyde Phelps on a pricing article that appeared in the *Journal of Marketing* in 1939 (Phelps and Westerfield, 1939). Westerfield's historical work was cited later in the marketing literature, including a reference made by William T. Kelly in 1956 (Kelley, 1956). Perhaps, on balance, this early review gave credit for the need and role of *Marketing Methods* but justifiably took issue with the level of academic and historical rigor.

Subsequent perspectives on *Marketing Methods* were very positive, leading to the great respect that it is given nearly 100 years after its publication. In 1926, Paul Converse stated that the teaching of marketing involves three factors, commodities, middlemen and functions. He then referred to the “middleman approach” as studying marketing institutions and attributed this method to *Marketing Methods* by Ralph Starr Butler (Converse, 1926). As noted earlier in the paper, Ralph Starr Butler and *Marketing Methods* have both received continued recognition in the following decades (Converse, 1933; Maynard, 1942; Bartels, 1951; Wood, 1961; Borden, 1961). As explained by Wood (1961):

The first marketing course in the USA was given by the man who also wrote the first, and for some years the only, textbook in marketing. He was, in fact, the first man to use the word “marketing” in connection with the distribution of manufactured products (Wood, 1961, p. 69).

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Clearly, Butler's contribution to the marketing discipline is profound, and *Marketing Methods* represents his most notable academic achievement.

*Marketing  
Methods* by  
Ralph Starr  
Butler

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### Final thoughts

In conclusion, Ralph Starr Butler's *Marketing Methods* has made a significant impact on the discipline and holds a very distinctive place in the field of marketing education. As this review concludes, I should note that the copy of *Marketing Methods* that I referenced is from my own collection and that inscribed on the inside front cover is a name and the date "1963". It would appear that the book was somehow being used at this point in time. This represents 45 years since the publication of the book that in itself indicates the longstanding contribution of this work.

This review began with a personal note and will end with one. As I wrote this review, I had just developed an online MBA Marketing Strategy course that was done in conjunction with course designers who had rather rigorous rules regarding statements of "learning objectives" and the like. So, the question became what was the single best term to describe all of the elements of marketing strategy that would be taught? Should a term such as "tool", "concept" or "procedure" be used? Each of these terms seemed to have a limitation in scope or application; the term that I selected after much thought was "marketing methods". The subsequent review of this book reinforces the logic of that choice.

### Note

1. This paper was published in 1917 and references *Marketing Methods* as dated 1917; however, the details and page numbers correspond exactly to the 1918 text.

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