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Foundations of Marketing Theory: Toward a General Theory of Marketing

By Shelby D. Hunt
Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002,
323 pages, \$39.95

In *Foundations of Marketing Theory: Toward a General Theory of Marketing*, Shelby Hunt targets those who want a book that focuses exclusively on traditional marketing theory topics. In essence, this is a return to the first two versions of this book (Hunt 1976, 1983) with a focus on applied topics in the philosophy of marketing science. Readers familiar with Hunt's third version of the book (Hunt 1991: *Modern Marketing Theory*) will recognize most of the content of *Foundations of Marketing Theory*. With relatively few changes, the first seven chapters of *Modern Marketing Theory* appear in *Foundations of Marketing Theory*.

Other than some changes in wording, reorganization of paragraphs, and addition of examples for clarity, the major changes in these seven chapters include one or two notable additions and deletions. The additions, all occurring in the first chapter, include discussions of the positive/normative dichotomy in philosophy of science; whether all marketing thought is normative; and the three-dichotomies model as a general taxonomical framework for marketing. The most notable deletion is that of the discussion of science and objectivity that concluded the "Theory: Issues and Aspects" chapter in the *Modern Marketing Theory*. In *Foundations of Marketing Theory*, the "Theory: Issues and Aspects" chapter concludes with a discussion of the nature of general theories.

In addition to the seven chapters that appeared in both *Modern Marketing Theory* and *Foundations of Marketing Theory*, there are two new chapters in *Foundations of Marketing Theory*. The titles of these chapters are "On the Marketing Discipline" and "Toward a General Theory of Marketing." In the first new chapter, Hunt discusses several issues including the nature of the marketing discipline, the nature of marketing research, and why marketing's major journals are devoted almost exclusively to studies using quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods. The second new chapter is the concluding chapter of

the book. In it, Hunt argues, based on the philosophy-of-science toolkit developed in the book, why he believes that his and Robert Morgan's Resource-Advantage theory of competition provides the foundations for (i.e., is a step toward) a general theory of marketing.

Much of the content of *Foundations of Marketing Theory* that also appears in previous versions of the book has been reviewed elsewhere (Angelmar 1983; Arndt 1983; Brown and Brunswick 1991). Consequently, there will be no repeating of these comments unless absolutely necessary. However, after rereading previous versions of this book, it is apparent that across the versions, Hunt does attempt to address several of the concerns raised by previous reviewers.

Whether one agrees with Hunt's view of science, method of science, or marketing, this book remains the most comprehensive text discussing various philosophical orientations toward science and relating them to the application of the method of science (not to be confused with the scientific method) in marketing. This work is representative of "contemporary empiricism" (or "modern empiricism"), one of many orientations in marketing, but it continues to be one of the major orientations embraced within the marketing discipline.

More than just an explication of the philosophy and method of science associated with an orientation, this book also provides considerable insight into the thinking of "contemporary empiricists." Hunt's writing style is clear, precise, and very readable, and he strives to be internally consistent and logical in his conceptual development. He is able to take what could be a complex, dry, and impenetrable subject area and simplify it to an understandable level. Granted, at times there is oversimplification, but it serves the author's purposes in developing his arguments. Hunt is a rhetorician. His familiarity with the art of debate is evident throughout the book. He is always in control of his words, persuading the reader to reach the conclusions he wants them to reach, but it rarely seems forced. For an "intellectual voyeur," the parallel between Hunt's approach to writing and the philosophy he embraces as constituting the method of science is fascinating.

Other strengths of this book are the historical analyses that serve as backgrounds in developing various topic areas and viewpoints. Through these historical analyses, Hunt reveals the strong philosophical bases that have contributed to his thinking on science, method of science, and marketing.

For all the reasons stated above, this is a particularly appropriate book for use in graduate seminars encompassing a variety of topics, including marketing theory, marketing research, and general methods, among others. This book is also useful as a vehicle for demonstrating the skill of crafting an argument. Regardless of whether one agrees with Hunt's conclusions, many readers will have a lot to learn from analyzing the structure of Hunt's writing as he presents his arguments.

While I recommend *Foundations of Marketing Theory* even if you are familiar with the previous versions, it is not



without its shortcomings. In discussing these, I turn to some of the additions I highlighted earlier while describing the contents of the book.

The first part of the added chapter "On the Marketing Discipline" (chapter 2) raises several issues that may be of interest not only to marketing academics but also to anyone who is curious as to what it is we do in a School of Business in general and a Department of Marketing in particular. The two major issues addressed in chapter 2 are the following: What is the nature of the marketing discipline? and What is the nature of marketing research? In addressing these issues, Hunt provides the reader with a brief history lesson on business schools and the marketing discipline, he then examines marketing as a variety of disciplines (university, applied, and professional), concluding that marketing is, or at least should be viewed as, a university discipline that aspires to be a professional discipline. In this view, Hunt argues that marketing can also be considered as a set of responsibilities, duties, or obligations to society, students, disadvantaged students, and the academy, providing examples for each of these. With respect to the nature of marketing research, Hunt, drawing from his own work (Hunt 1987), explores the inclusivity of the 1987 American Marketing Association (AMA) Board-approved definition of marketing research. He also provides his view on the fundamental question, "To what extent should marketing academicians focus on consulting research versus scholarly research?" by examining the potentially significant role that the AMA definition plays in discouraging scholarly marketing research.

The second part of chapter 2 addresses the issue of why marketing's major journals are devoted almost exclusively to studies using quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods. In answering this question, Hunt begins with a discussion of the nature of scholarly journals and then provides four reasons that he believes have led to the aversion to qualitative methods. One of the main points that comes out of this discussion is that qualitative researchers have been (and may still be) their own worst enemies. However, an interesting undertone that emerges is that ignorance and myopia, particularly on the part of many established quantitative researchers (not just sophomore reviewers), have also played a major role in promoting this aversion. Hunt concludes this discussion by embracing the goal of the adoption of qualitative methods, suggesting that the extent of their adoption depends, in large part, on the willingness of qualitative researchers to abandon "the standard argument."

On one hand, this is a welcomed chapter. It is well written and, at times, is provocative. It deals with issues that marketing academicians should think about, and it provides several views on these issues that should serve as a catalyst for lively discussion. Consequently, I will let the readers form their own opinions on Hunt's views. On the other hand, although related to the content of the surrounding chapters, there are times when this chapter distracts the reader from the main thesis and flow that is present in these chapters. Most of chapter 2 appears to be able to stand on

its own and does not necessarily need the surrounding chapters for background or support. Consequently, chapter 2 requires a more thorough integration with the rest of the book.

The second new chapter, "Toward a General Theory of Marketing" (chapter 9), is concerned with resource-advantage (R-A) theory (Hunt 2000; Hunt and Morgan 1996). During the past several years, Hunt has published extensively on R-A theory, including a recent book, *A General Theory of Competition: Resources, Competencies, Productivity, Economic Growth*, which was reviewed in this journal (Peterson and Prasad 2001). Specifically, in chapter 9, Hunt attempts to demonstrate that R-A theory provides the foundations for a general theory of marketing by arguing that R-A theory is (1) a general theory of competition, (2) accommodates and integrates key concepts and generalizations from Alderson's functionalist theory, and (3) provides a positive foundation for normative marketing strategy.

As with the contents of chapter 2, the other new chapter, the contents of chapter 9 seem a bit out of place. This is not meant to be a criticism of R-A theory; rather, it is a comment on the lack of integration of chapter 9 with the other chapters. In particular, previous chapters focus, in detail, on developing a method of science in marketing. In contrast, chapter 9's focus is almost exclusively one of a conceptual overview of R-A theory and its relationships to various selected theories (discussion of the positive nature of the theory aside). Clearly, how R-A theory accommodates other theories is an important criterion in arguing why one may wish to construe it as a general theory. However, from a pedagogical viewpoint, the discussion in chapter 9 would benefit from revisiting previous chapters and guiding the reader through how all the various concepts and criteria apply with respect to R-A theory.

In effect, Hunt arms the readers with eight chapters worth of tools to allow them to scientifically assess theory. Chapter 9 should be an application of this entire set of tools. Surprisingly, not even one of the end-of-chapter questions asks the readers to use any of their newly acquired philosophy-of-science toolkit to assess R-A theory. In addition to promoting R-A theory, chapter 9 should be taken as a pedagogical opportunity to demonstrate the application of the entire complement of tools in the context of Hunt's own theory. Doing so will also allow for the assessment and evaluation of the soundness of the theory from Hunt's own method-of-science perspective. In Hunt's defense, however, it is understandable how introducing a new chapter among other chapters that have held together for almost 25 years could result in problems of integration. This is something that can easily be addressed in the next version of the book.

Other opportunities also present themselves in chapter 9. For example, in chapter 1, Hunt argues that a science must have a distinct subject matter, and what distinguishes marketing is that it is the only discipline in which the transaction is the focal point. Yet, in chapter 9, rarely is the transaction highlighted as the focal point; instead, it often

remains tangential, and the focus revolves more around the inputs (resources) and outputs (advantages) surrounding transactions. This appears to be more representative of the focus of economics. Clearly, there is an opportunity here to bring the discussion more in line with the distinguishing subject matter of marketing to demonstrate why R-A theory is a general theory of marketing, in particular, and not a general theory of economics, organizational behavior, or even human behavior (Peterson and Prasad 2001), in general.

There is one observation to be made about evaluating theories in general and general theories in particular. In evaluating theories, it seems important to apply the same stringent (or, likewise, lenient) criteria to all theories. If one theory is allowed the privileges that come with being a work in progress, so should all other theories—in essence, that is what theories are, works in progress. Consequently, as works in progress, it appears inappropriate to cast aside any theory for not being a general theory since most theories have some potential for becoming general theories at some point in time (albeit, some may purportedly be advancing toward that goal faster than others). Given this, Hunt misses an important pedagogical opportunity—that of discussing the process involved and the difficulties encountered in actually attempting to take an idea, develop it, and market it to the academic community as a “general theory.” This appears to be an inextricable part of moving any theory toward a general theory (Peter and Olson 1983). Hunt’s insights from his own attempts, including observations about the process and the extent to which other academicians apply the method of science in discussing and evaluating these attempts, would likely provide valuable lessons for all theorists.

As for the rest of the book, it was somewhat disappointing to find that a decision had been made to relegate philosophy-of-science issues to another book. The rationale for this decision presented in the preface is understandable. Nevertheless, it detracts from the cohesion of the presentation. In fact, I was hoping to find more integration of the two parts of *Modern Marketing Theory* in any subsequent book, but it appears that quite the opposite happened. While the entire philosophy-of-science debate does not have to be replicated in *Foundations of Marketing Theory*, there clearly are elements of the debate that would further enhance the reader’s understanding of various concepts (just as concepts in this book would enhance readers’ understanding of the philosophy-of-science debates). For example, simply from a historical basis, for many, it is likely to be difficult to appreciate the relevance of the discussion on the nature of science and the nature of a method of science without appreciating the relationship between different philosophies and different perspectives on these issues and their application in practice.

Finally, the discussion about the nature of science could benefit from an update. The dated references to philosophers of science imply that the debate about the nature of science is over, and we are simply in the process of “mopping up.” However, this is far from the truth. In the physical sciences, questions about the nature of science continue to

be raised from a variety of constituencies including scientists themselves. With debates about the validity of pseudosciences and the relationship between religion and science, scientists and philosophers continue to think about and discuss the nature of science (e.g., some books include Brown 2001; Dupre 2002; Giere 1999; Kitcher 2001; Shermer 2001; Weinberg 2001, among a plethora of others). Updating the discussion on the nature of science would serve to bring more of a present urgency to the question and demonstrate that marketers are not alone in their feelings of insecurity about their discipline.

In sum, *Foundations of Marketing Theory* should be considered for inclusion in anyone’s methods library and for use in graduate classes across a variety of topics. Hunt presents a concise and understandable introduction to contemporary empiricism. While this is but one of many languages spoken in the marketing discipline, it continues to be a popular language. Hunt’s ability to clearly explain his views provides a profound and often enlightening insight into the mind of a contemporary empiricist.

NOTE

1. There is a forthcoming companion volume, *Controversy in Marketing Theory: For Reason, Realism, Truth, and Objectivity* (Hunt forthcoming), that focuses exclusively on the philosophy debates that appeared in the second part of *Modern Marketing Theory*.

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Defining Markets Defining Moments

By Geoffrey E. Meredith and Charles D. Schewe
New York: Hungry Minds, 2002,
363 pages, \$24.99 (hardcover).

Defining Markets Defining Moments identifies commonality among cohort groups based on important shared life experiences. The authors defend that these shared experiences affect lifetime values and attitudes. Issues that can affect our attitudes include life stage (spouse, parent, divorcee, retiree), physiographics (change in health and bodily appearance), emotional/affinity effects (age's impact on attitude), and socioeconomic (financial, educational, career, marital). When looking at the depression cohort, key marketing insights relate to the fact that this group does not want to throw unused products away, and they are therefore willing to pay more for single-serving foods to avoid waste. The World War II cohort group reacts positively to romance in advertising as they experienced a great deal of patriotism and shared suffering throughout World War II. The postwar cohorts are healthy, active, educated, and have considerable wealth and are perhaps undermarketed to by many companies who address younger target audiences. As you can see from these examples, the authors make generalizations that relate to the categories they have developed.

The book tests our belief as to whether we share relevant similarities with those who were a part of our generation. Meredith and Schewe present seven cohort groups ranging from those born in 1912, the "Depression Cohorts," to those born in 1984, "N Generation Cohorts." The titling of the cohort groupings tells a story in and of itself: Depression, the World War II, Postwar, Leading-Edge Baby Boomer, Trailing-Edge Baby Boomer, Generation X, and N Generation. As I read through the classifications, characteristics, and personal values of each category, I felt much more comfortable with the characterizations of the earlier cohort groups than the later groups. This may be a function of my age and reference groups, as well as awareness of the diversity found in recent generations. When it comes to understanding prevailing characteristics of the Generation X and N Generation groups, I was less convinced that there were generalizable similarities in beliefs and values. However, I was fairly convinced

that the first five characterizations were fairly accurate and could apply to a majority of those in the specified age categories. The events of earlier generations, such as the depression and World War II, were very dominant, social, economic, and life-changing occurrences. The events that have shaped later generations have been less well defined, without a national focus on major phenomena that shape attitudes and develop a consensus.

A major concern about the categorizations is their breadth. Most categories covered short, defined time ranges from 5 to 10 years. The postwar cohort grouping covered a range of 17 years, from those born in 1928 to 1945. I question the consistency of values and beliefs among such a broad categorization and would suggest that this category be further broken down. I would also be inclined to believe that the characteristics of those on the fringes of each category would be less likely to reflect the dominant values and beliefs as those more centered within the age ranges.

While the generation categorizations use available statistical information to classify and describe the stereotypes of each generation, these categorizations are probably overly simplistic. There is a significant amount of variation and diversity in each generation. On the other hand, the common characteristics that exist can be the basis for defining markets and developing a marketing strategy.

The marketing implications for these categorizations are great. The examples given illustrate how important it is to understand key physiological, social, psychological, and economic factors that are relevant to target markets. The understanding of a specific generation can unlock insights into the development of a marketing strategy that appeals to these unique segments. Comparing the efforts of Healthy Choice with Lean Cuisine in marketing frozen entrees to postwar and baby boomer generations reveals the potential value of understanding differences in generations. Healthy Choice used a smaller type and less visible color contrast in its cooking instructions, with its American Heart Association endorsement hidden near the pull tab. Lean Cuisine used larger type, more readable color contrasts, and more vivid product photos that appeal to the postwar and baby boomer generations.

We appear to be in a period of time where there is significant "nostalgia marketing." Consider the Old Navy spots that use TV genres from the 1960s and 1970s—Green Acres, the Brady Bunch, and Family Feud. Information presented about these generations that were exposed to popular media provide a common knowledge base for using nostalgia to communicate values. TV shows, icons, music, fads, and so forth are presented for each category and allow one to appropriately tap the target audience's memories. With so much replayed programming on stations such as Nickelodeon and TV Land, it is sometimes difficult to align the correct programming to a target market.

This book could be helpful in defining market segments in an advertising or consumer behavior class. I plan to assign the book next semester in my advertising class, requesting teams to characterize one of the generations and present their own examples of how marketers could