

Marketing History: Illuminating Marketing's Clandestine Subdiscipline

Alfred C. Holden
Fordham University

Laurie Holden
New York University

As Nevett and Hollander (1994) note, marketing history brings to the study of marketing an expansion of intellectual boundaries. This broadening of perspective may well be essential if marketing—about to complete a golden century as a formal discipline—is to maintain its key role in boosting corporate performance. That is, by conducting research in and incorporating inputs from, such fields as history, geography, economics, and sociology, marketing historians offer understanding and explanations of factors or conditions that influence marketing thought and practice. Nonetheless, the subdiscipline is of primary interest to only a small minority within the profession.

A special edition thus represents a timely opportunity to evaluate this puzzling disinterest in widening the boundaries of marketing. For even among those familiar with the literature, no one claims that history will repeat. But, as Hollander and Nevett (1995) point out, there are many analogues between past and present marketing processes; short-sighted marketing endeavors of the past often have a way of being tried again. Also documentable are instances where marketing campaigns today, including those of nonprofit/public-sector institutions, are closely linked to past successes, with details buried in corporate archives, in the memories of long-retired colleagues, or in secondary sources for many pre-20th-century activities. It is clearly time to heed a conclusion of Hollander and Nevett that anyone trying to direct marketing's attention to the past need not offer a *long* rationale. However, five issues appear to us

to warrant attention if the full potential of this subdiscipline is to be realized.

ISSUES LIMITING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARKETING HISTORY

First, there seems to be concern that *marketing* will not be fully accepted by university colleagues unless theories are proposed, models built, and hypotheses tested. Low regard is typically given to research that aims to provide a careful description of events, one staple of marketing history studies. Presumably, these contribute little to the science of marketing, a perception held by some whose training strongly emphasized data analysis.

Tamilia (1993) confronts this perplexing issue by noting that most disciplines consider it unscholarly to ignore their origins or the work of so-called founding fathers. A descriptive approach was at the core of the emergence of a formal marketing discipline a century ago, as elaborated by several authors (e.g., Converse, 1960; Hagerty, 1936). This focus upon observation of actual business problems provides interesting lessons. For example, Pollay's (1985) description of activities of magazine editors during much of the 20th century demonstrates that those people were not reluctant to focus their product toward the needs of advertisers.

Second, many marketers do not welcome a subdiscipline that may unearth roots put down by some well-publicized early practitioners. What insight can be gained by spotlighting activities of deceptive advertisers or salesmen who had the ability to unload misrepresented products upon unwary householders?

Relief for embarrassed colleagues who might view marketing as an exact science comes, for example, from insight by Hollander and Singh (1993) into a century of consumerism. Pollay (1993) shows with cigarettes and C. R. Taylor and Chang (1993) with billboards that there are limits to what self-regulation, consumerism, and social marketing can accomplish in the face of skillful marketing; yet J. C. Taylor and Taylor (1989) find the historical approach can enlighten public authorities. Regarding other promotional efforts, Powers (1991) and Strong and d'Amico (1991) demonstrate that, by early in the 20th century, most profitable businesses realized the opportunity cost of relying upon disreputable salesmen.

Third, the marketing history subdiscipline suffers from a lingering paradigm fashioned around a speech and a much-referenced article by Keith (1958, 1960). As executive vice president of Pillsbury, he described that firm's shift from a production orientation before 1929 to a sales orientation for the next few decades to a marketing orientation. These three distinct eras would be featured in introductory marketing texts

for more than a generation, effectively disconnecting today's marketing mix elements from the complexity of exchange activity and intellectual thought undertaken here and abroad long before the mid-20th century.

While Fullerton (1985, 1988) demolished the artificial eras model, Mittelstaedt and Dickinson (1995) make a strong case about a related difficulty. That is, the discipline of marketing (marketing thought) is defined by each generation in light of the contemporary environment, whereas marketing objectives have not altered much over the ages. For example, Grossman (1985) elaborates long-term marketing skills shared by U.S. manufacturers that have paid annual dividends for a century. Keehn (1985) examines how a century of external changes prompted marketing responses by the manufacturers of Jockey underwear. Holden and Holden (1995) document how U.S. sheet music publishers responded to an overnight change in the 1917 environment with a flood of new products. A case study of the 1939 New York World's Fair by Holden (1994) shows that nonprofits also could be quite adept at marketing in the interwar period. Finally, many researchers benchmark the marketing adjustments that firms outside North America have made for centuries in the face of a variety of external challenges.

Fourth, a formal century-long separation of marketing and economics has left some unaware of marketing's emergence as a unique field. Detailed descriptions of exchange activities by companies in the late 19th century were not of primary interest to the contemporary economist, which left it to the new discipline to focus on problems associated with rapidly shifting production and consumer needs, means of distribution, and sources and uses of new technology. As summarized by Tosdal (1939) and Webb and Shawver (1989), neither practitioners nor scholars found ready-made studies that could be precedents for today's marketing.

Although the debt to economics is acknowledged by marketing's founders, heavy borrowings would be made from fields that helped in problem solving. For example, Mittelstaedt (1989) shows how consumer behavior drew upon psychology to understand the consumer as a goal-seeking, problem-solving, information-processing person. Pollay (1993) illustrates how motivational research regarding the psychology of smokers was utilized by tobacco firms.

Fifth, with some notable exceptions, leading marketing journals and AMA educator conferences publish little marketing history output. This sends clear signals to new academicians amidst publish or perish criteria for tenure, promotion, and research grants; marketing history remains a high-risk track, at least until the professor has first secured recognition in a more traditional subdiscipline. An informal survey, by the authors, of attendees at the 1995 marketing history conference attests to this reality.

Witkowski (1991) addresses this issue by providing practical advice to researchers determined to find outlets: seek out primary sources (if

possible), use linkages within the narration, position the selected topic within the marketing literature, present the research methodology in a succinct manner, and provide implications for business (if applicable). For example, Hollander's (1960) wheel of retailing and Fullerton's demolition of the production-era myth affected many marketing textbooks. Meanwhile, for those who champion the value of biography (e.g., Jones, 1995), it may well be time to reintroduce that genre of marketing knowledge into *Journal of Marketing*, as it existed during 1956–1974. Proponents (e.g., Wright, 1989) make a strong case for this in view of students' limited knowledge about business leaders or the history of marketing.

WHAT CAN A SPECIAL EDITION CONTRIBUTE?

A special issue on marketing history ideally will illustrate how this sub-discipline can make unique contributions to marketing thinking and practice, and how marketing historians confront the issues mentioned above.

First, these articles reiterate that a description of marketing developments and of the thinking of marketing pioneers is useful. Witkowski's analysis of recurring themes and patterns in architecture and furnishings demonstrates that a variety of businesses long have been aware of popular household tastes and have worked to incorporate an early-American motif into products as quixotic as Quaker Oats and colonial ranch-style homes. The biography of Theodore Beckman by Jones is an example of how today's marketing concepts can be clarified by illuminating the thinking of those who developed the profession.

Second, these articles reconfirm what other marketing historians point out: that the model associated with Keith might be fair for Pillsbury but bears little relationship to what many other enterprises, including nonprofits, were doing. McKinley-Floyd demonstrates how African American universities and churches have encouraged their more successful constituents to work toward bettering conditions for the less fortunate. The Holdens show how an individual, cooperating with magazine co-editors, influenced women in America to accept possible participation in a war.

Third, these contributions show that environmental uncontrollables have always been difficult. For example, the social-cultural transformation confronting African Americans and their institutions after 1865 was unique, as was the bewilderment of American families facing possible global war in 1939–41. The financial ability of American households to own and to furnish homes on a mass scale also had no obvious precedent. However, these situations prompted flexible responses by enterprises and individuals that could be applicable today, that is, using

product/service appeals that evoke the past or call upon social/civic pride.

Fourth, Jones demonstrates that marketing pioneers had no ready-made body of knowledge about exchange activities of firms, forcing teachers to draw upon diverse disciplines and to observe actual business endeavors in order to formulate principles. His study reemphasizes that academic writings are often strongly influenced by the observer's view of contemporary conditions.

Finally, no special edition can resolve the issue of whether marketing history can pull even with other subdisciplines. So far, there is no AMA special interest group for marketing history, and few of its conferences feature marketing history tracks. But special editions and proceedings of the biennial marketing history conference highlight contributions at a time when enterprises in all sectors are calling upon marketing to be a major creative force for yet another golden century.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to: A. C. Holden, Graduate School of Business Administration, Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus, 113 W. 60th St., New York, NY 10023.