

Marketing Meta-narrative and Its Tenets: At Odds With Marketing's Realities?

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Abstract

An examination of key general marketing texts reveals a consistent set of claims for what may be termed the nine tenets of marketing. These are produced and reproduced in similar form, all using very similar sources. They are at the core of conventional marketing teaching and marketing thought. It is argued these tenets have little if any epistemological basis. Adherents to the marketing discipline do not enjoy the status of professions such as law, medicine and accounting. It is concluded that if it is to convince fully other business and organisational streams of its worth, marketing's elite and its chronicular base may need renovation.

Keywords: Nine Tenets of Marketing, Australia

Introduction

Since the mid-1940s, symbols of marketing thought have been aggregated into official marketing belief. The extent of this official belief is evidenced in the breadth of marketing writing. Variations of the official belief do arise, but often, that official belief remains an overriding framework in discussion. For example, Urban (1993) seeks an emphasis on the individual in the teaching of marketing, yet does so within the framework. Brownlie and Saren (1992) challenge the framework but nevertheless argue for a refined use of the marketing concept rather than a reappraisal of its tenets. It is this overriding framework of conventional wisdoms about marketing that is reviewed in this article. The value of such an overriding framework is challenged for the boundaries it places on marketing thinking in its local, Australian context.

When leaders, followers and influencers in almost any stream of thought come together, they often do so accompanied by an ideology. The ideology may be complete or in the process of construction. The process of construction is usually accomplished by an elite that is drawn from the leaders, followers and influencers. The ideology produced by the elite very often is based on a producible set of evidences that serve to support

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their propositions and their position.¹ The evidence is almost invariably produced in written form: chronicles that are held to be inviolate, beyond reasonable doubt, beyond question. They serve to verify both the ideology and the right of the elite to interpret, re-formulate and proselytise it. In this way not only does the elite control the ideology, it may control the argument for its own continued existence by predicating that position on the supposedly incontrovertible evidence of the chronicles it represents.

In this article, it is suggested that such a situation, in a distorted form, has arisen in the field of marketing, and that the relationship between its chronicular base and its elite is distorted. This article points to the inarticulation that appears to exist between marketing practice and between what is termed here the epic narratives upon which it is presumed to be based. Before looking at the situation with marketing, it is appropriate to examine whether such tripartite relationships between chronicle, elite and ideology exist in other fields.

The accounting profession in Australia exemplifies this situation. Internecine struggles for power occasionally surface, but these are essentially struggles between competing camps for their own form of accreditation. At this time, the dominant professional association credential is 'certified practicing accountant' (CPA). Another credential for those who cannot or choose not to gain the CPA accreditation is the 'national institute of accountants'. Accreditation as a CPA involves proven, appropriate work experience and the sitting of several examinations. Membership of the accounting elite does not come easily and those who join this elite are conversant with and adhere to the accounting practices of the CPA. All of these practices are written down.

What is significant is that these supreme laws of accounting practice seem rarely challenged; only their interpretation comes under scrutiny and debate. The chronicles that enshrine these rules remain under little challenge. This means that the sanctity of the accounting profession is not in question. The chronicular evidence remains as a continuity for debate and possible change.

There is a parallel here with another elite, that of the legal profession, which enjoys a strong relationship between its elite, its chronicular base and its ideology. Generally, the chronicular foundation is not in question, yet its interpretation by opposing legal representatives in a court of law can vary profoundly between defence counsel and the prosecution. Far from weakening the chronicular foundations or the elite, this adversarial process is condoned and indeed enshrined as a tenet of legal ideology. Modification to the ideology occurs; new laws are occasionally introduced. More outstanding in the legal ideology is the capacity of its elite to be a part of the change, even be the willing processors of it. Rules can also

be gradually modified by the principle of precedent, where those at the top of the elite can have their opinions treated as judgements that can have a bearing on future cases. These are the judges; people selected by the elite and its influencers as setters of the pace of change.

The various branches of the Christian Church perform in ways similar to the accounting and legal professions. Differences in interpretation of ideology and widely varying views between the Church orders are frequent. Subjects ranging from contraception and abortion through to the marital status of the elite and the presence or otherwise of women in these elites rarely, if ever, threaten the veracity of its chronicular foundations. What may seem to be a weakness in the Church - falling attendances at more traditional orders - is resolved by the growth of new ones, often more fundamentalist but nevertheless using the same indisputable chronicular source.

Marketing as counter-example

The marketing field is hard pressed to provide evidence of such stability. It has some, but not a complete set of components. Marketing lays claim to the chronicular evidence, to an elite and to an ideology. What seems absent is an articulation between them and its practising body of believers. People may not like or even believe in the accounting, legal or church ideologies. This does not appear to preclude them from believing that they nevertheless exist and that functionally, the basic tenets of the law, the Church and the accountant warrant or demand conformity, whether frequently or not. Few people do not file tax returns or not use the financial support of the accounting profession. Few people can avoid penalties of a traffic fine. Most people want to avoid the force of the law; so most people behave. Few people are not celebrated through church ritual (based on church chronicular materials such as prayer books and orders of service), as an infant, as a wedding participant or as a funeral participant. All in all, such professions, or their ideologies, would appear to have been successfully marketed.

What appear to be the key ingredients to the successful marketing of these groups? There is the chronicular platform. There are the codes and rules that must be conformed with. This codification is driven by the chronicles and ritually acted-out by the elites. The process of the ideology often has a specific geographic location - a place of truth, of proof of the interaction between chronicular evidence and elites - the accountant's office, the church, the court. There may even be ritual dress: certainly there is for clergy and counsel.

Compare and contrast this with marketing. There is less evidence of ritual dress codes than for the others, there are few if any hallowed places

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where external groups can interact with the elite. Further, the chronicular evidence itself may appear implausible to those beyond. It is to this last point that we will now turn, for it is the inability of the elite to impart the chronicular evidence that could be at the centre of marketing's problematic condition. To understand this, some key marketing chronicles were consulted.

Marketing's conventional wisdoms

The field of marketing has its own conventional wisdoms. In Australia, these wisdoms form the basis of much marketing course work. This is not to suggest that in the research literature, departures from these wisdoms do not occur, but often they are nominal (Speed, 1989). The wisdoms are regularly reinforced and buttressed in successive editions of textual works; the very works that almost always constitute required reading in undergraduate and postgraduate marketing courses in this country. They enjoy reiteration in a third area of marketing writing, that of popular marketing magazines.

Foremost among the textual works are those of Kotler (1994), Kotler *et al* (1989), McCarthy and Perreault (1990), Stanton *et al* (1997), Zikmund and d'Amico (1993), McColl *et al* (1994) and Assael *et al* (1995). Whilst variations in interpretation occur, they constitute, reconstitute and refine a key number of wisdoms through what amount to meta-narratives of the field.² They may be seen to serve the function of marketing chronicles to a growing number of adherents to what is called the 'marketing philosophy'.

Marketing's chronicular claims

Prominent among the key received conventional wisdoms are the following tenets;

1. that marketing is an ordered response to customer needs.
2. that through the function of marketing research, customer needs can be anticipated.
3. that the process of marketing planning facilitates the provision of products, be they goods or services, and that this can be undertaken in advance of the user or consumer of the product been cognizant of its final form.
4. that marketers can identify clusters of customers, known as target markets, with which they can communicate *via* the process of marketing communication;

5. that new product development processes can deliver new products to targeted customers in the most effective way;
6. that organisations staffed with marketing practitioners are more effective in these activities;
7. that the more one knows and understands of marketing theory and practice, the more commercially successful one will be;
8. that the marketing philosophy is a post-Second World War phenomenon of north American origin;
9. that the marketing philosophy is in its fourth stage of historical development and that this stage is one of social responsibility.

This is a bold series of claims. It is particularly so when relative depth of the thought in the marketing chronicles is examined in relation to the breadth of cross referencing. Almost all of the chronicles are in a citation chain, either each using the other as a reference or repeating the argument almost verbatim. Nowhere is this more evident than in the first tenet, that marketing is an ordered response to customer needs. This is a statement of belief, with no epistemological basis.

From the list, it would seem that marketing has much to offer. In consequence, and in the absence of clear empirical research supporting these claims, the marketing elite and its ideology also has much to explain. The claims need to be jointly, as well as severally assessed. To date, not one of the nine tenets is proven fact by virtue of universal applicability. Organisations that claim a marketing orientation still have failures. The failures, be they at a product item, product market or organisational level, are presented by the marketing elite - especially by authors - as examples of some form of non-compliance with marketing's tenets. There is even an established teaching process to support the argument for compliance, the case study approach. The case study approach is prevalent in all Australian university marketing courses, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. As a widely-used pedagogical device in Australian universities, it facilitates the interweaving of belief and tenet into an important constituent of the chronicular base, thereby forming a sort of proof by parable of every one of the chronicular claims of the marketing elite.

Marketing's compressed chronology

What the tenets of the chronicles appear to display is a rush to faith. In the absence of fact, under pressure to prove and in some cases, redeem itself

under the critical eyes of associated business professions and an often suspicious public, the marketing elite has, since its formation in the mid-to late-1940s, undertaken a most remarkable writing of its own history.

This is indeed the eighth tenet of the marketing chronicles, that the marketing philosophy is a post-second World War phenomenon of largely north American origin. Whilst some texts (Kotler, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 1989; Stanton *et al.*, 1997) have to some extent modified this notion, others (McCarthy and Perrault, 1990; Zikmund and D'Amico, 1993; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 1994; Assael *et al.*, 1995) reiterate it. All tacitly acknowledge it. Some include the production and sales approaches as orientations rather than stages, but nevertheless revert to a periodisation by the examples they use to illustrate the point. In the case of one text (McColl-Kennedy, 1994), the periodisation approach is assiduously avoided in favour of the orientation approach. Nevertheless, the example used of a production orientation is Henry Ford's perhaps apochryphal claim that all Model Ts would come in black.

Fullerton (1988) has challenged this chronological notion, yet in doing so, has inclined to the view that marketing began much earlier. This is a persuasive argument. Evidence of marketing practices can be found readily in the activities of the Dutch East Indies Company from the eighteenth century. In her article on radio marketing, Lavin (1995) points to pre-World War II marketing practices of the 1930s. In fact her claim could have been laid on a much earlier piece of evidence. The late nineteenth-century operatic tradition³ of including people, products and ideas into the lines of operas - and the changing of these to suit the time and venue of the particular opera - is evidence of marketing pre-dating the North American meta-narrative thematic of four phases of linear - and progressively improving - stages of rectification. We are supposedly in the fourth era of rectification right now; so called societal, social or socially-responsible marketing (Kotler, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 1989; McCarthy *et al.*, 1990; Stanton *et al.*, 1997; Zikmund and d'Amico, 1993; McColl-Kennedy, 1994; Assael *et al.*, 1995).

Stephen Brown (1993) has suggested that post-modern variations are already emerging; wrap-around marketing, relationship marketing and the like. To this might be added the question: were the word-changers of the operas and the Dutch merchants really performing a marketing function? Perhaps it depends on how one prefers to receive one's conventional wisdoms. If one prefers to follow the marketing epic narrative tradition, now embedded in chronicular form, these are, at best, accidental acts of some kind of unconscious marketing. Alternatively, if one prefers to believe that marketing well and truly predates the 1940s, it is probably possible to go as far back as one cares and identify marketing practice. Branding, or at least its precursor in the form of mnemonics, is found in

the ruins of the twelfth-century Bayon in the Angkor complex of today's northwest Cambodia, or indeed in the Angkor Wat structure itself.⁴ It is long-standing branding too. The ruins of Angkor Wat remain today as the centrepiece of the Cambodian national flag. When the Khmer Rouge re-wrote history in their own uniquely horrific way, they too invented a new history to explain their presence and purpose. They also paid *hommage* to the dominant brand symbol in their national flag. Give or take a tower or two, the outline view of Angkor Wat was the centrepiece of the national flag of the Lon Nol republican government, the Khmer Rouge, and now for the governments that replaced them in late 1978. That it had taken a French colonial presence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to help Cambodians create, then 'remember' this past (Chandler, 1983) might well be seen as a marketing - or at least, a public relations - feat in itself.

A rush to professional primacy

The question that arises from such events is whether the matter of which marketing is made only coalesced to form a 'real' marketing in the 1940s. Even if this were the case, is it then appropriate to send this concept travelling backward in time? Whether such time travel is used as an attempt to justify marketing as being in its fourth era of rectification or to prove that marketing predated this era may be less than useful if the ideology of marketing itself proves so illusory in terms of clear success stories in its every application.

It is hypothesised here that marketing has yet to pass this test. Further, marketing is yet to convince other professions and ideologies that it is 'real'. It has been projected as real on the basis, historically, of a very recent, post-1945 formation of its elite and a hastily-composed chronicular 'evidence'. The problem is that the marketing elite has not done a good enough job of consolidating the marketing ideology. It is too easy to claim marketing belief, profess a marketing orientation, hire a marketing person and study marketing subjects. Worse still, the foundation of marketing - its chronicular evidence - is contemporary with its authors, who also happen to be among its elite. Few professions have such a problem of temporal compression. Whilst other professions and their ideologies can advance, change direction here and there, and, occasionally revise their tenets, marketing has much greater difficulty in accomplishing this. Medicine can call upon ancient Hippocratic oaths, the law can stay calm amidst change by virtue of historic precedents going back to Roman times, accountants have a corpus of rules and ritualised procedures that are formulated in CCH manuals that have their antecedents in the nineteenth century, the Church can go back to texts so old and obscure that

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they are open to both a nominal and a fundamentalist interpretation. Most of the writers of the marketing elite are still alive and revising their original works.

This is not to suggest that marketing should either be less accessible to the community or 'harder' to join. Nor is it to suggest that the only good ideology is one with a deceased chronicular authorship. What is being put forward is that the marketing elite is in danger of disrepute if it seeks to create its own history, then write it into truth *via* extremely recent sources. History is a story to be told; it is less useful as a place in which to create a story.

Why does the marketing elite pursue such a hurried course? The answer needs more elucidation than can be provided here⁵ but at the heart of the situation would appear to be a desire to establish a primacy in the business and broader communities. The problem occurs that the establishment of such a primacy is being accelerated to the extent that the chronicular sources have had to build-in a fabricated memory. The desire to help us 'remember' the past in a convenient sequence is by no means unique to marketing. Rarely, however, have we been witness to such a notable attempt at such selective memory and selective forgetting.

If indeed marketing, or, societal marketing is the ultimate stage in business development, why are its so-called precursors - the production and selling eras in particular - still so abundantly present in our society? The more the marketing elite seeks to decry these 'eras' and place marketing ideology as a successor to it, the more the *bravura* suggests a rivalry rather than an inheritance. There are organisations out there today that do not claim fellowship or association with the nine tenets of the marketing chronicles who are doing better than those who profess it.

This is a hard point to prove, but one side door allows us a look into the marketing ideology to see how much unnatural disturbances to reality are dealt with: it is the marketing mix.

Marketing mix power

The marketing mix is so all-embracing that virtually any organisation or product (whether good or service) can be absorbed into its interpretative language. The marketing mix concept exemplifies two extremely successful and potent components of the marketing ideology. These are its capacity to very quickly develop its own dialect (or language) and its capacity to develop models that can account for just about anything that current marketing philosophy either has not thought of or feels bound to absorb.

Neil Borden's (1965) original marketing mix concept has not altered all that much in terminology, but the breadth of its application has. As a concept, it was particularly suited to goods. The application of the marketing mix concept to services has been accomplished with a minimum of change to the model. To be sure, one attempt to broaden the four Ps of the marketing mix to 'seven Ps' stands out as an attempt at modification (Magrath, 1986). Nevertheless, even using this, the marketing mix mantra can still be chanted with the alliterative ease of old - only the number of Ps has changed. The marketing mix concept is cited in the seven marketing chronicles as a basic model. As a model, it is highly applicable to almost any product offering. So much for its capacity to be applied. What of the language power?

The marketing mix is an exemplar of the marketing elite's ability to develop specific terminology that can produce the appropriate answers. This is language power. The power comes from being able to set questions, through a model, that almost exclusively necessitates a 'yes' or 'no', a 'right' or 'wrong'. Answers that may raise questions are removed from the scene. Discourse between practitioner and elite is arranged to confirm the elite as a repository of correctness. A key form of discourse has been discussed already, that of the case study. Most case studies are accompanied by a set of 'correct' answers.

In this way it is suggested here that by its capacity to develop its own *lingua franca* and its tendency to develop uni-directional models, the marketing elite, whether it knows or cares to acknowledge it or not, has a tendency to posture from a far more inquisitorial platform than its 'history' (as laid down in its chronicles) would indicate it has reason to. The marketing elite has moved far too quickly into such positions. A glance at the nine tenets would suggest that almost every one of them characterises this tendency.

Conclusion

A critical analysis of these tenets may show them to be widely-held and widely-accepted claims that are without grounds in fact or evidence, and that marketing is more a discipline operating in chaotic environments within which the received conventional wisdoms often act as a recourse to succour for followers of marketing rather than the readily-applicable tools of a business science. The advancement of marketing as a cause, a philosophy, a science or a practice is being characterised by claims that are held by the elite to be truth. In this there is nothing particularly unique: after all, the previously noted professions have acted in similar vein. What is problematic is that the assembly of these into chronicular form and the tenets these chronicles share may have been more rapid than the capacity of the marketing elite to prove

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their worth through regular application. Marketing may be debasing itself by prematurely positing its indispensability in advance of its proven worth. Marketing needs to ensure that it is seen as a form of organisational response as much if not more than one of control.

What are marketers and the marketing elite to do? Perhaps nothing will be done. Maybe the sheer persistence of the elite will see the marketing ideology through to a position of dominance or at least, a favoured seat in the pantheon of business philosophies. Yet the marketing elite may not be successful in this course. Marketing ideology and chronicular evidence seem out of synchrony. Oh for a corpus of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century works upon which to predicate the marketing ideology.

Teaching implications and recommendations

It will be interesting to see how the marketing elite deals with its drastically compressed chronicular evidence, its lay practitioners and its emerging ideology. Right now, it is a discipline whose practices tend to diverge from its narratives. The conventional wisdoms of current marketing thought are regularly taught in undergraduate and postgraduate marketing classes in Australian universities. Virtually all universities have one, usually several, of the previously cited meta-narrative texts as required reading in their courses.

The questioning of the tenets these texts contain generally is confined to those researchers and research students who are so inclined and who, being somewhat distanced from the coursework confines of syllabus and text, are able to move beyond the contemporary discourse of marketing. If marketing were to be approached as having part, not all of its story told in the meta-narrative texts, room for manoeuvre for the questioning few may give way to a more vigorous and hopefully productive inquiry by a greater number of marketing thinkers. In this way might there develop an assessment of what marketing has to offer rather than what some narratives tell us 'marketing' has to say.

Notes

1. To illustrate this point, it is necessary to travel somewhat beyond the boundaries of marketing thought. See, for example Lévi-Strauss (1968), Dumont (1980) and Douglas (1984).
2. The concept of meta-narratives has been discussed in Brown (1993). A deeper analysis of meta-narratives, from the people who brought them to us, is given in Klein's thought-provoking discussion on postmodernism (1995).
3. Puccini's capacity to localise operas and hence improve their appeal in differing regions and countries is discussed in Colles' (1926) five-volume musical dictionary.
4. The significance of Angkor Wat as a ruin belies its continued use as a powerful nationalist mnemonic. Successive and differing interpretations by historians (Chandler, 1983), travel writers (Gorer, 1986) and diplomats (MacDonald, 1987) attest to the capacity to 'brand' a thing whilst bestowing it with varying meanings.
5. This issue is the subject of an article currently under preparation by the author.

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