MARKETING'S UNIVERSE: IMPLICIT PRESENCE IN MARKETING RESEARCH TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

To resolve the anomaly of wide-ranging definitions of "market" in *Principles* textbooks, we examined *Marketing Research* (*MR*) textbooks, for their treatment of the task-relevant universe. Although *MR* authors, in part, illustrate "population," "screening," and cognate terms with venture-relevant examples, they fail to discuss the marketing-theoretic significance of doing so.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a series in which the definition of key marketing terms - market, market segmentation, target market - is examined in a sample of current leading Principles of Marketing textbooks (Fennell and Saegert 1998, 2000; Fennell, Saegert, and Hoover 1999). We noted that across the sample of textbooks, the term "market" could be understood to span a wide range of meaning that included, at one extreme, population members with ability to buy, through a middle ground of individuals screened for predisposition to buy management's product class, to, at the other extreme, individuals predisposed to buy a particular brand. Moreover, authors failed to refer to managerial practice with regard to defining its market. For each venture, i.e., as regards a particular offering - which could involve management's continuing to support an existing brand, or newly designing and offering some version of a product class - management selects a criterion that qualifies individuals as market members. The criterion specifies a domain of activity (e.g., individuals who own/care for a dog), or product use (e.g., individuals who buy/use dog food) for which management is planning to support an offering.

For any venture, then, management addresses the strategic task of defining a relevant universe, essentially a universe of behavioral relevance for the venture, within which it makes its strategic choices from then on. It regards as prospects individuals who engage in such behavior. Within that outer limit, management may define a variety of subgroups of interest for analytic and strategic purposes including, most importantly, market segments, i.e., qualitatively diverse segments of demand. The concept of market segmentation presupposes an entity such as a venture-relevant universe, in which management investigates the nature of heterogeneous

demand as found. Additionally, within a universe of prospects, management may want to consider more restricted definitions, such as heavy users of the product category, triers ofmanagement's brand, triers who are not repeat purchasers, nontriers, prospects who are aware/not aware of management's brand. In industry, marketing researchers designate such analytic groups by the term, "base." For example, a table reporting findings for heavy users includes the designation, "Base: Heavy Users = 100 percent."

Noting that the concept of relevant universe is neglected, if not totally overlooked in *Principles* textbooks, for the present paper we turned to textbooks in marketing research. There is ground for expecting that *Marketing Research (MR)* authors will not have neglected to discuss the issue of relevant universe. Research procedures, including statistical concepts, raise the issue of identifying the relevant population or universe.² In the context of research design issues, it may be reasonable to expect that *MR* authors discuss how marketers conceptualize the relevant universe, and consider various operationalizations thereof.

The objective for the present study is to examine how MR authors address the subject of the relevant universe for business ventures.³ In the section immediately following, we give details of the MR textbooks, chapters, and topics that we examined. We then present our findings. In a final section, we discuss implications of the findings.

METHOD

We assembled a set of latest editions of 22 MR textbooks. A representative of one of the largest textbook companies in the U.S. confirmed that our sample includes the best-selling MR textbooks. Issues concerning the relevant universe for marketing tasks may arise when authors discuss research design, sampling, research procedure, and questionnaire construction. Authors address such topics, sometimes overlappingly, in chapters with titles such as The Marketing Research Process, Basic Techniques, Sampling Fundamentals, and Questionnaire Design. For our study, we initially relied on the indexes, searching for the following terms: population/universe, screening/qualifying, incidence, and prospects. We have included a fifth term, "filter," because we found that some authors confuse the concepts of screening and filter

questions. We selected such terms as likely to provide an opportunity for authors to discuss marketers' defining, and implementing their definition of, a venture-relevant universe. In texts for which our search terms did not appear in the index, we scrutinized pertinent chapters to check if authors may have addressed our topics without using, or indexing, the search terms we had identified. Our objective is to explore the general state of affairs rather than to review individual authors' work. Accordingly, we do not provide citations for specific examples. To do so may seem to criticize individual authors for what is a pervasive state of affairs, as our finding of greatest interest is universally present in our sample of textbooks. Our records contain citation details.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the presence of our search terms in the index of each of the 22 MR textbooks.

Population

Somereference to the concept of population is present in all texts (Table 1). It may be minimal as in "the broadest and vaguest group in sampling is the universe," or comprehensive as in "the collection of elements about which the researcher wishes to make an inference," or "the group that the marketer is interested in knowing something about." Authors generally convey the notion of a universe that is *relevant to the task at hand*. More particularly, we were looking for discussion of the characteristically *marketing* nature of the relevant universe as consisting of individuals selected for their *behavioral* relevance, i.e., for the kind of activity in which they engage. Absent such conceptual discussion, we considered authors' illustrative examples.

Authors use two approaches to illustrate a taskrelevant universe: (1) nondomain-relevant, i.e., a preexisting group unrelated to the domain of the venture, often expressed as a demographic subgroup, e.g., "women older than 40 residing in the United States;" "all families within the corporate limits of the city of Chicago," or (2) domain-relevant, i.e., corresponding to the range of relevance of a product class, e.g., "households with checking accounts." Most authors implicitly recognize the characteristically marketing-relevant universe by giving such product- or activity-corresponding examples, e.g., "households owning TV sets," "frozen-pizza eaters," "purchasers of women's perfume for own use or as a gift." Individual authors may use both kinds of example. Following are three reflections on authors' treatment of the task - relevant universe.

Conceptual v. Operational Definition. First, many authors fail to have recourse to the helpful distinction between conceptual and operational definition. Authors'

tend to illustrate the concept of relevant universe by what is, in effect, an operational definition of some unspecified conceptual definition. Moreover, cautioning students to ponder alternative ways to *define the population* (sic), authors miss an opportunity to clarify that the alternatives they discuss are, properly considered, not definitions of the relevant universe but possible ways to operationalize management's conceptual definition of its relevant universe. One author, for example, implicitly conveys the distinction between conceptual and operational definition:

If Terminix were interested in determining how prospective customers were combating roaches, ants... the Terminix manager would probably define the population as "everybody who might use our services." However, the researcher in charge of sample design would use a definition such as "heads of households in the metropolitan areas serviced by Terminix who are responsible for insect pest control." Notice that the researcher has converted "everybody" to "households" and has indicated more precisely who the respondent will be in the form of "head of households."

Here, the conceptual, venture-relevant, definition of the universe is: "everybody who might use our services," which must be converted into an appropriate, venture-relevant, operational definition. Another example makes essentially the same point, also without explicitly drawing the distinction between conceptual and operational definition: "If... research questions involve prospective car buyers and the population includes all adults with driver's licenses, the research output will be unlikely to provide the relevant information."

More properly, prospective car buyers are the (conceptual) universe at issue, which, in the author's illustration, someone has mistakenly operationalized as "adults with driver's licenses." A further example follows:

"Suppose the task is to determine the relative importance of such features as compactors, saunas, and patios in medium-priced homes. The target population could be present owners of medium-priced homes, shoppers in middle-income shopping centers, those who might upgrade their homes, or clients of real estate firms. The choice will depend on the research objectives. The key point is to recognize that alternative definitions exist."

To the contrary, the relevant universe is prospective buyers of compactors, saunas, and patios in medium-priced homes. The options presented are alternative operationalizations of that (conceptual) definition of "prospective buyers." Clearly, not all operationalizations are equally appropriate. Recognizing that what authors are

TABLE 1
Presence^a of Five Topics in Marketing Research Texts

			Screen	Filter	Incidence	Prospects
	Aaker/Kumar/Day	X	X			X
02.	Boyd/Westfall/Stasch	X				
	Burns/Bush	X	X		X	X
04.	Chisnall	X		X		
	Churchill	X	X		X	
	Crask/Fox/Stout	X			X	
07.	Dillon/Thomas/Firtle	X	X	X	X	
	Fay/Wallace	X				
09.	Hair/ Bush/ Ortinau	X	X	X		
10.	Kinnear/Taylor	X				
11.	Kress	X				
12.	Lehmann/Gupta/Steckel	X	X			
13.	Luck/Rubin	X				
14.	Malhotra	X	X		X	
15.	McDaniel/Gates	X	X		X	
16.	Parasuraman	X		X	X	X
17.	Peterson	X	X	X		
18.	Shao	X				
19.	Sudman/Blair	X				
20.	Tull/Hawkins	X			X	
21.	Weiers	X				
22.	Zikmund	X		X		

^a "X" indicates that the topic is mentioned in the index.

calling alternative *definitions* of the relevant universe are properly regarded as alternative *operationalizations* of a conceptual definition is immediately helpful in selecting an appropriate research operation. Moreover, it is further helpful to consider each of the two traditional ways to operationalize prospective customers for the venture, i.e., people who use the focal product category, or who pursue tasks/interests in which they could use some version of the focal product category.

A final example, this time where the author may understand that the venture-relevant universe is present in the conceptual definition of prospective buyer/user:

"A university offering a graduate program in business wants to conduct a study to determine the criteria prospective students use in evaluating different graduate business programs. In this scenario, the population can be defined (*preferably*, *operationalized*)⁴ as 'all individuals with an interest in pursuing a graduate degree in business within the next year."

Discussion in the text continues along the lines of considering how to locate individuals in the relevant universe as operationalized.

In sum, authors fail to articulate a marketing-theoretic concept of the relevant universe as consisting of prospective customers, and its operationalization as individuals who engage in pursuits that correspond to the behavioral relevance of management's focal product class. Remarkably, this lack co-exists with a tacit understanding, as revealed in many of the authors' illustrations, that marketing relevance equates to behavioral relevance of the venture. Authors fail to recognize that their illustrations operationalize a characteristically marketing conception of a universe comprising an outer limit of prospective customers.

Return on Investment (ROI) Implications. Secondly, related to the previous point, aside from those who refer to demographic groups, many authors implicitly illustrate a characteristically marketing sense of behavioral relevance of the focal venture. In MR textbooks, an opportunity is thus missed to discuss the two classic approaches to operationalizing the relevant universe, i.e., users/buyers of a product category (e.g., shampoo); engaging in activity (e.g., washing hair) for which some version of a product category could be helpful. Authors similarly fail to refer to the business reason for defining prospective customers as individuals already allocating

behavioral resources to the venture-relevant domain, i.e., implications for ROI of putting scarce managerial resources to best use by building on existing tendencies.

Focal v. Target. Third, many authors exhort students to "have a clear idea of the 'target' (sic) population." However, the marketer's "relevant universe" is far removed from the classic concept of "target." Elsewhere (Fennell, Saegert, and Hoover 1999), we have noted a comparable difficulty with the term, "target market." Management's targets comprise the most concentrated level of marketing strategy. Consequently, the term, "target market" combining words that refer, respectively, to the narrowest and broadest reach of management's interest, is an oxymoron. Similarly, consider definitions of "population" noted above, e.g., "group that the marketer is interested in knowing something about." The most that may be claimed for a population in that sense is a universe to be studied, a concept that is remote from the meaning of the term, target. Following investigation and analysis, management identifies targets among its prospects, having concluded that tailoring its brand offering for conditions that these prospects experience is the best use of its resources to obtain a satisfactory ROI.

Marketing's venture-relevant universe consists of prospects, defined as individuals in the general population who qualify as comprising the outer limit of individuals likely interested in buying/using some offering in management's product category. Once the qualifying criterion is selected, management investigates such a universe to identify, inter alia, the nature of diverse demand and state of want-satisfaction therein (i.e., market segmentation analysis). Eventually, management may decide to devise an offering to respond to some kind(s) of demand as found, thus targeting the conditions that generate that kind of demand. The individuals who experience the targeted conditions are management's targets. Patently, such a traditional marketing meaning of "target" is far removed from "target" qualifying "population," i.e., the outer limit of management's market for the focal venture. Perhaps a useful term by which authors may designate a venture-relevant universe is "focal" rather than target. Given a naturally occurring population as found in some geographic region, management chooses a venture-relevant universe on which to focus its analytic attention. It searches therein to find the best use of its productive resources, as manifest, eventually, in its product strategy for the prospects it selects as targets.

Screening

We turn next to consider how authors treat the concept of screening or qualifying respondents for inclusion in MR. Further relevant to authors' anomalous use of "target," we note the same problem here. We find, for example, the statement, "The questionnaire begins with

screening questions to make sure that the person contacted falls into the target group" (qualifies as belonging in the focal universe). Similarly, another author urges students to "identify... exactly who are the appropriate target respondents" (state the criterion on which respondents are to be qualified as belonging in the focal universe). Yet another example is:

"Screening questions are used to avoid interviewing individuals not in the target (focal) population. Only those subjects who 'qualify' are then presented with the full survey."

In all these cases, when management has qualified individuals as prospects, i.e., as belonging in the relevant universe, such individuals may or may not be selected as targets and, if they are, it will be following analysis, investigation, and judgment.

Nine texts discuss screening or qualifying respondents for inclusion in research (Table 1). As was the case with the previous topic, authors' treatments range from minimal (e.g., "determine who the sampled respondents are"), through more concretely implying the notion of a criterion (e.g., "identify qualified prospective respondents and prevent unqualified respondents from being included in the study"), to providing an example of a screening question with no accompanying discussion (e.g., "Have you visited a fast food outlet in the last month?"). As shown in Table 2, the authors who discuss screening questions provide illustrations that, in most cases, de facto reflect the conceptual rationale for marketing's venture-relevant universe.5 The intent of the illustrative questions is, apparently, to qualify respondents as likely buyer/users of management's focal product category. As noted concerning authors' treatment of defining a venture-relevant universe, the examples are not consistently venture-relevant and there is no discussion of the conceptual point at issue.

We decided to include "filter questions" as a search topic, because some authors erroneously equate screening and filter questions. For example, "Screening questions (also referred to as 'screeners' or 'filter questions') should always be used in any type of interview. Their purpose is to identify qualified prospective respondents and prevent unqualified respondents from being included in the study." Such a statement is unexceptionable except for the parenthetical comment erroneously equating "screeners" and filter questions.6 Also, "Only two kinds of questions are typically asked in the introductory section (of a questionnaire). One is a screening, or filter, question " As it happens, including "filter" questions as a search topic led to adding two authors to the list of those who discuss screening. However, the comments of all six authors who discuss filter questions produced no further insights relative to our research objective.

TABLE 2 Screening Question Examples in Marketing Research Texts

Individuals who have patronized Wendy's in the last 30 days.

Respondents who buy the cooking ingredients for their family, do most of the cooking, and make a baked food item at least once a month.

Have you shopped at the Gap in the past month?

Household owns pets? \rightarrow Yes \rightarrow Pet food purchaser available?

Which, if any, of the following products have you, yourself, consumed at home in the past month? Instant coffee, Frozen orange juice, Carbonated soft drink. Have you visited a fast food outlet in the last month?

Do you use toothpaste? No (terminate) Yes, Q. 2. How often do you brush your teeth?

The basis of screening may be visual (e.g., age, make of car, whether they just bought a particular product) or verbal (asking screening question, such as "Do you smoke?").

Do you have dietary restriction or other reasons that prevent your use of any of the following dairy products? Whole milk? Yogurt? Butter? (etc.)

Have you ever bought or personally used any of these dairy products? Whole milk (etc.) (IF NOT USED YOGURT, SKIP TO ASKING QUESTION 12A.)

The screening qualifications for a respondent included in the survey were (1) has lived in the Jacksonville area for more than one year; (2) 25 years or older; (3) listens to classical or pop music; and (4) attends live performances of classical or pop music.

"Have you been snow skiing in the past twelve months?"

The last time you shaved, did you use an electric razor or a razor that uses blades?

How many times have you shaved in the past seven days?

Are you 21 years of age or older? No (Interviewer: Ask for someone in household who is 21 or older. If no one is present, determine callback time or terminate.) Yes (Continue.)

Have you eaten in a restaurant in the past month? What local restaurant comes to your mind first?

Incidence

Eight textbooks list "incidence" in their index (Table 1). What authors have to say regarding incidence yields an outcome similar to what we found regarding screening. To illustrate incidence, authors mainly use venture-relevant examples without conceptual rationale.

Prospects

We included "prospects" in our search, because the concept of prospective buyer/user of management's product class is the idea underlying management's articulating the behavioral dimension of its venture-relevant universe. As noted, the product class in which management plans to launch, or continue to support, a venture is finite in its range of relevance to a behavioral universe and, as a consequence, to a universe comprising individuals who engage in the relevant behavior. That being the case, it is essential that management have a reasonable estimate of the outer limit of likely interest in its venture. In brief, then, this is the rationale for management's strategic task in defining its market, the first step of which

is identifying the pursuits and, thereby, the individuals who engage in those pursuits, that constitute its focal universe. As Table 1 shows, we found only three uses of the term prospect or variants, e.g., prospective customers or buyers. (See earlier discussion of conceptual v. operational definitions of the relevant universe.)

To summarize: Our purpose is to investigate if MR authors discuss the strategic task of defining a behaviorally-relevant universe or if, as we found in Principles texts, authors seem unaware of such a domain of strategic choice. Our findings are quite extraordinary. Emphatically, we did not find that authors articulate the conceptual basis for marketers' relevant universe. Yet, to illustrate the concept of task-relevance, and the practice of qualifying respondents for inclusion in MR, authors repeatedly use venture-relevant examples, e.g., individuals engaging in pursuits where they could use, or in fact buying/using, some version of management's product class. Along with venture-relevance, authors' illustrations sometimes consist of general personal descriptors such as demographic class, which lack explicit behavioral-relevance. Accordingly, we reach the provocative

192

conclusion that authors of MR textbooks know more than they are stating. Their examples mainly reflect marketing practice, which proceeds within a venture-relevant universe. Yet, doubtless due to the same lacuna that we noted among Principles' authors, they appear not to have understood the systematic significance for ROI, and essential place in marketing theory, of their behaviorally relevant illustrations.

DISCUSSION

Recent reviews of glossary definitions of core marketing terms from twenty leading Principles of Marketing textbooks (Fennell and Saegert 1998, 2000; Fennell, Saegert, and Hoover 1999) show that, as regards the terms "market,"7 and "market segmentation," many definitions are ambiguous. Across the textbooks examined, the reader is left with unclear guidance regarding the scope of the terms "market" and, relatedly, "segment" as a subdivision of market. In sum, for two terms that are central to the marketing discipline, our reviews of glossary definitions in Principles textbooks show both ambiguity and wide diversity among authors regarding the universe that is relevant in marketing. Divergence among authors, even as regards central issues, is not necessarily problematic. If diversity reflects closely argued positions and/or positions that appear to be empirically supported, there may be reason to hope that efforts toward achieving resolution are underway. That is not the case here. Diversity and ambiguity appear not to have been recognized, and authors are not moved to support their positions by argument or evidence.

In the present paper we turned to MR textbooks, where we may expect authors to address the relevant universe as an explicit issue. Here we find that all authors

do indeed mention a task-relevant universe. Although there are instances where MR authors illustrate the relevant universe with general, nonventure-relevant examples, in the main their illustrations are venture-relevant. Authors do not explicitly refer to an existing state of affairs in which marketing planning and analysis proceeds within a universe whose outer limit corresponds to the behavioral relevance of the focal product class (Fennell, Saegert, Hoover 2000). Also missing, is conceptual discussion of marketing's "relevant universe" and, within the outer limit of that universe, of market segmentation analysis, as implementing a managerial policy of putting its resources to best use by building on the way (some) people are disposed to use theirs. Absence of unambiguous treatment of marketing's relevant universe in Principles and MR textbooks is regrettable in that students are not being fully grounded in the business practice of seeking satisfactory ROI. Graduates who proceed to the public policy arena, for example, without first working in business will not know that research conducted among members of the general public, without regard to product category predisposition, fails to reflect marketing practice.

CONCLUSION

Having detected a definitional problem regarding market and market segmentation in *Principles* texts, we undertook the present study hoping to find a resolution in *MR* authors' treatment of relevant universe. We found no conceptual discussion among *MR* authors, who implicitly reflect marketing practice while failing to articulate its marketing theoretic source in the business philosophy of seeking satisfactory ROI. We trust our documenting such ambiguity in current texts will lead to authors clarifying their treatment of a basic marketing-theoretic issue.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Managements may support numerous brands. We regard each brand as a venture requiring a decision regarding its relevant universe.
- ² We use the terms, population and universe, interchangeably.
- ³ We note the special case of syndicated research and some omnibus studies, whose purpose includes establishing incidence in the general population of buying/ using certain goods/services or engaging in certain activities. Such studies provide management with an indication of the outer limit of interest in its immediate and cognate product categories. Incidence information is also managerially useful for estimating the likely cost of conducting research among alternative operationalizations of prospective buyers/users
- of a focal product category.
- ⁴ Here and following we include our recommendations italicized within parentheses.
- ⁵ In a recent survey of marketing research suppliers, 94 percent and 86 percent, respectively for qualitative and quantitative projects, reported that in their work for marketing clients they always or mostly qualify participants based on a venture-relevant criterion (Fennell and Saegert 1999).
- ⁶ A screening question is the gatekeeper to participating as a respondent in a particular survey. A filter question determines whether or not a respondent is asked to respond to a particular question or set of questions within a survey. Only individuals already qualified as respondents may be exposed to filter questions. We referred earlier (note 3) to the role of syndicated research in establishing incidence in the

general population of buying/using individual product categories. The questions that provide incidence data may also be viewed as filter questions, in that a No answer means that the respondent will not be asked to respond to a series of further questions regarding the product category at issue.

⁷ The definitions do not touch on other aspects of defining one's market. The dual nature of scope, for example, as it exists on each side of the marketplace, i.e., prospective user predisposition, and competing producers; other dimensions of competition, such as

alternative technologies, product forms, within and outside the marketplace, stated objectively and as viewed by the prospect (Dawar, Ratneshwar, and Sawyer 1992; Day, Shocker, and Srivastava 1979; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991; Rosa et al. 1999), the time dimension, i.e., management has in mind and should make explicit the timeframe with regard to which it is defining a market; the media of communicating with prospects and effecting exchanges with buyers; the price range, e.g., premium, regular, economy (Fennell 1982, 1985).

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