



COMMENTARY

New marketing, improved marketing, apocryphal marketing Is one marketing concept enough?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to explore marketing’s ambiguous relationship with truth and, in so doing, to question the efficacy and value of the marketing concept and the very nature of marketing itself. Is marketing something that marketers do, or is it something much broader than this? If the latter, are marketers themselves either willing, or able to operate beyond traditional boundaries and, if not, should they focus – honourably – on what they do best, and encourage/support others who might market just as effectively, but in a different manner?

Design/methodology/approach – Starting with a summary of recent developments in marketing thought this paper argues that marketers find difficulty in implementing the marketing concept, and that market-oriented compromise and pretence should consequently be abandoned. The thesis goes on to suggest that both “performance” and the “part-time” marketer should be given greater respect and allocated substantially more credence by all marketing communities.

Findings – The argument concludes, ultimately, that marketing could find both greater respect and effectiveness by focusing its efforts more on the extremes of “marketing space”, and that the presently envisioned marketing concept offers scope only for a dispiriting and partially realised evocation of its stated aims.

Practical implications – Marketers should take marketing more seriously.

Originality/value – This paper seeks to add to current debates on marketing theory and will, hopefully, help inform ongoing exploration into the nature and role of marketing practice.

Keywords Marketing theory, Ethics, Corporate identity

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Truth and trust are not the same, but – in a sophisticated, information-rich society, where the “cynical and choice-ridden” consumer is set to dictate (McCole, 2004) – it is unlikely they can exist apart. Without truth there is no trust, and without trust what passes as truth is just utilitarian rhetoric. For marketing this is an important issue – and since it emerged, blinking, into the gathering light of the post-sales era, it has sought to establish for itself both social and academic approbation. The questions “Who are we?” and “Why are we here?” are continuously revisited (e.g. Baker and Erdogan, 2000; King, 1985; Shaw and Jones, 2005) and are symptomatic of an inherent insecurity and concern for intellectual and moral vindication. However, despite an enthusiastic and fastidious concern for trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Reast, 2005; Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000) marketing’s relationship with truth has often been touched with an uncertain hue, and this is something that has dogged the discipline from the start.



Satisfying customers

Marketing's response to the charge that it seeks to deceive has always been that it exists, merely, to please – that its “primary goal” is to satisfy customers (Witkowski, 2005). Furthermore, from the outset, marketing (rather than selling) has consistently claimed that for an organisation to be successful it must relate “all its thinking to the customer's needs” (Felton, 1959). This notion of satisfying the customer underpins a normative perspective on what marketing is all about, yet the marketing concept itself addresses a wider agenda. Holbrook and Hulbert (2002, p. 707) note Kotler's 1991 definition, one that encapsulates the principle elements of modern marketing: exchange, the 4 Ps, customer-centricity, and the key imperative of meeting organisational needs.

The marketing concept has existed now for some half-century (Enright, 2002), yet, though it has proved a remarkably robust edifice, neither its supremacy nor its efficacy have remained unchallenged. There have, over the recent past, been movements that have sought to shake it from a complacent sleep; principal amongst which are those this paper terms “new marketing”, “improved marketing” and “apocryphal marketing” (this latter, in the sense that it is still a largely unauthorised and highly debated version of the marketing scripture).

New marketing ...

Gummesson wrote his paper “The new marketing” in 1987. First articulated a decade earlier (Grönroos, 1978), the “new” Scandinavian approach challenged the domination and relevance of a hitherto US-formulated body of knowledge. Gummesson (1987a) noted a fixation with manipulation, mass markets and the 4 Ps, and suggested that the “old marketing concept” should be abandoned and that, instead, Nordic ideals should prevail.

The “new” approach identified marketing as a function rather than an occupation, and saw it and goods/service performance as mutually dependent realities – actioned, primarily, via the efforts of those subsequently termed “part-time” marketers (Gummesson, 1991). Organisations should, it was urged later, adopt a “service paradigm” (Gummesson, 1993), one premised upon a set of widely applicable ideas that facilitated mutual exchange, the keeping of promises and a more relational approach to marketing.

... improved marketing

At the same time the Scandinavians were looking to break the old order, others were concerned to revisit/refresh a tiring edifice. Webster's (1988) “rediscovery” of the marketing concept represented an attempt to adapt and enhance old ideas and, more importantly, to discharge the spirit of the original. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990) sought to formally redefine the contemporary marketing domain, and throughout the 1990s others sought to test, extend and explore their ideas (Lafferty and Hult, 2001). A consensus emerged suggesting a market orientation (MO) brings benefits, but is difficult to implement and at odds with traditional, transactional, modes of operation. Further conceptual work regarding relationship marketing (RM), meanwhile, looked to “further” its field of application beyond B2B and services into wider, and more generally contrived “product” (Christy *et al.*, 1996) markets.

MO and RM thus collided at the marketing middle ground and, together, now comprise the conventional marketing wisdom. Sin *et al.* (2002) offer the epithet “relationship marketing orientation” as a final, syntactical agglutination of two, formerly, distinct concepts. Marketing, in its “improved” configuration, is now a marriage of two, essentially, customer-focused ideals that appear to support the best of the marketing concept’s intentions.

... and apocryphal marketing

MO/RM was, perhaps, one response to marketing’s “mid-life crisis” (Brady and Davis, 1993) a phenomenon explored later by Stephen Brown (1995), whose forthright polemic was set firmly against the burgeoning orthodoxy. What seemed to be little more than a re-arrangement of out-dated platitudes was at odds with an altogether different, but also evolving, ideal. Venkatesh (1989) set in train a newly radicalised literature that presaged a total marketing rethink. With Brown (1993, 1994, etc.) its most prolific commentator the post-modern “camp” argued that marketing’s broadly structuralist foundations were no longer viable. Its key articles of faith were roundly critiqued (e.g. Hackley, 2001; O’Malley and Patterson, 1998; Robson and Rowe, 1997) and all concurred that the “generic concept of marketing has become a geriatric concept of marketing” (Brown, 2002, p. 317).

Brown’s (2001a) recent work suggests marketers should tease not please their customers, and should use pre-marketing ideals to address a new “preoccupation with consumption” (Jacobson and Mazur, 1995). His retro-marketing approach took “marketing-savvy consumers” as axiomatic and criticised the marketing industry’s “customer-centric sanctimoniousness” (Brown, 2003), perhaps concurring with Blasberg and Vishwanath’s (2003) contemporary observation that product innovativeness and aggressive advertising outperform other more customer-focused approaches.

Introducing marketing space

This paper, thus far, has charted a brief conceptual history of recent marketing thought, focusing specifically on the marketing concept. It suggests that, on the one hand, the concept has been refined, improved and polished to the point where rhetorical commitment to customer-centricity and organisational integration is complete. This is represented by a RM-boosted version of MO applicable across all marketing categories. On the other hand, total abandonment and a return to a pre-MO is prescribed. This demands a post-modern approach, premised on a shared marketer-consumer knowngness and focused on consumption, its symbolic role in contemporary life, and the rise of *homo consumericus* (Firat and Schultz, 1997).

The “new” marketing, however, appears somehow stranded, cast adrift as a sort Neanderthal dead-end that informed services marketing, B2B and RM, but that has no real stamp of its own. For “performance” (the “P” that has yet to find its proper place in the marketing lexicon (Woodall, 2004)) it has ever been so. In 1987, with his tongue fixed firmly in his cheek, Gummesson (1987b, p. 20) rebuked the marketing academy for its lack of scientific investigation into “lip services”, adding “This negligence is all the more serious as . . . it was found that lip services account for at least one third of the services produced”.

For a profession apparently in thrall to customer satisfaction such ironic censure should have been amiss, yet recently Gummesson (2002) still felt the need to return to a familiar theme. Marketing, he suggests, is reluctant to shake off reminiscences of discredited archetypes and disinclined to embrace quality, service, and relationships – not as special cases – but as an integral part of everyday concerns. Even Webster (2002, p. 20) suggests “The relationship between marketing and selling has never been resolved”, implying that, perhaps, marketers themselves are still historically hard-wired to the hard sell, and that only an expedient interpretation of the marketing concept can apply.

Figure 1 shows the “new marketing”, discussed earlier, to be focused primarily on quality – of product, of service, of experience – and assumes flexible wants and needs that can be accommodated at the customer/supplier interface. Champions of this position contend a conventional marketing perspective fails to recognise the importance of key criteria and lacks a “true” customer focus. Here, marketing is undertaken – not by the full-time professional – but by anyone/anything that comes into contact with the customer (Peppers and Rogers, 2000) and “performance” becomes the most important “P”.

“Improved marketing” assumes organisations can discover what customers want and provide products to match; that customer behaviour is both predictable and manageable. Although quality is important, needs and wants are reconceived as features and quantities, and the role of the organisation is – corresponding with the marketing concept – to provide appropriately “satisfying” outputs. “Apocryphal marketing”, by contrast, assumes customers do not know what they want – but that once seen, products are desired and consumed as signifiers of status, social and cultural belonging. Quality is viewed as most prestigious option, with plentiful/conspicuous consumption a defining factor. The marketing concept is of little use because this assumes rational consumers and rational responses to their behaviours.

Interestingly, examination of these differing perspectives also provides insight into the marketer’s role. For example, the post-modern literature implies a more isolated and functionally distinct position. Innovation and creativity are emphasised, with concern focused on behaviour of consumers, and little paid to that of the organisation. And though forays into the world of organisation theory might occasionally be encountered (e.g. Hackley, 1999) the poststructuralist *oeuvre* is largely of an extrinsic bent.

MO, on the other hand, is directed at both customer and organisation. It has been noted, however, that an emphasis on marketing, rather than the market, may prevail. Shapiro (1988) warned against this but, occasionally, and perhaps subconsciously, the term marketing orientation is occasionally used (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999; Dibb and Stem, 2000; Pappasolomou-Doukakis, 2002), signifying that marketing practitioners are prominently involved. A number of commentators (e.g. Akrimova, 2000) have exclusively privileged the views of marketing managers when exploring barriers to MO, and only last year Wilkie (2005 cited in Bolton, 2005) interpreted a new AMA definition of marketing as “capturing the marketing manager’s role”, again reinforcing the apparently inviolate alliance of the conceptual and the vocational.

Descent through marketing space

Figure 1 also explores the notion of “marketing space”, where positions “A” to “F” represent a range of marketing traits. Normatively, we might imagine the “new marketer” to occupy spaces “A” and “B”, the “apocryphal marketer” “E” and “F”, and

Marketing philosophy	Who markets?	Belief in the marketing concept (MC)	Customer connection	Product emphasis	Market emphasis	Primary objectives	View on the customer	Marketing space
The "new" marketing (quality/performance)	Non-marketer	MC does not go far enough	Interactivity	Services	Business and/or consumer	Functional quality	Needs/wants can be recognised and satisfied	A
Improved marketing (MO/RM)	Marketer/non-marketer alliance	Adherence to conventional MC wisdom	Relationship marketing	Goods and/or services	Business and/or consumer	Technical and functional quality	Behaviour can be moderated	B
Apocryphal marketing (postmodern marketing)	The marketer	MC is not appropriate	Transaction and/or sales approach	Goods	Consumer	Technical quality and quantity	Behaviour can be managed	D
						Quantity	Needs/wants can be imagined and created	E
							Behaviour can be understood but not managed	F

Figure 1.
Marketing space

the “improved marketer” “C” and “D”. There is, however, evidence to suggest that even where “B”/“C” territory is the objective, “D”/“E” may be the point of arrival, and a tendency for marketers to fall short of declared aspirations is frequently observed. Allegiance to a marketing, rather than a market, orientation may be a case in point. Perhaps this is now an easy target, but RM remains on trial. Gummesson’s (1996) definition positions customer, marketer and organisation in a state of “complete market equilibrium”; but Gummesson (1993, p. 94) was ever a dreamer – consider his expression of hope, that “. . . ‘good services’ and ‘good people’ in a ‘good society’ is underpinning my interpretation of the future”. Against this compare the later and more strident reflections from fellow Scandinavians, Möller and Halinen (2000) who posit the seller as “the active party” and the consumer, merely, as “object”.

RM has now moved beyond “new” Nordic ideals, the growth and potential of IT having already mapped out an inescapable trajectory. And while Ballantyne *et al.* concurred with Gummesson, in 2003, that RM means delivering shared or mutual value (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2003), O’Driscoll and Murray (1998) had, perhaps, already revealed the truth; that RM is a “device for capturing and locking in customers”, and has little to do with two-way exchange. Even in 1999 Kvali, Tzokas and Saren observed an unwelcome mutation into CRM, and it has been noted that the “lived experience” (Shankar and Fitchett, 2002) of relational endeavour now baulks at the spirit of the original. Occupation of marketing space “A/B” is all too readily demurred in favour of spaces “C” or “D”, where the “low-tech” interactivity of personal contact is sacrificed for the scale economies of mass marketing.

Marketing without consent

Gummesson knew the worth of a motivated and committed “part-time” marketer, but for the artfully inclined mass-marketeer such uncomplicated endeavour is not enough. Employees must now “buy-in” to the corporate identity (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2001) and “live the brand” (Smith and Blomqvist, 2005). Betts (1999) suggests that employees represent the brand in 3D, that each should be aligned to brand values, or have “oneness” (Smidts *et al.*, 2001) with the organisation. Such presumed alignment and brand-living, however, becomes little more than a cynical exercise in marketing-resource deployment – transposing “B/C” potential into “D/E” enactment. Holbrook (1999) refers, in his review of Ritzer’s work on “McDonaldisation”, to “regimented employees” interacting with customers in “degradingly mechanised relationships”. An extreme evocation perhaps, but when individuals are contrived, metaphorically, as organisational billboards, then the game is effectively up.

In a recent article on interactivity Laing and McKee (2001) make some intriguing points regarding healthcare professionals, noting that although they are reluctant to become “marketers” in a conventional sense they are happy to promote quality and service improvements they themselves have developed. Whether similar ideas can be generalised into less ethically demanding environments is unclear, but the research shows that some employees, at least, will work happily in marketing spaces “A” and “B” whilst simultaneously resisting invitations into marketing spaces below. As the Nordic school suggests, though, quality is marketing. Yet we continue to differentiate the two – and in so doing deny the potential for enhancing our discipline’s status and repute.

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Marketers appear locked into an increasingly dissembling relationship with both sophistry and customer satisfaction. They dislike association with the first – but practice it with vigour; and claim affiliation with the second – but find it difficult to commit. Consequently, consumers believe that, rather than “active, rational decision-making people”, they are perceived as “passive, sentimental lightweights” (Kanter, 1988/1989, p. 33). Marketers are, thus, conceived as manipulative and untruthful, a sense only heightened by their refusal to admit to duplicitous intent. Loyalty cards are a case in point – used primarily as a means of tracking buyer behaviour but disingenuously offered as a way of rewarding loyalty. This is marketing without consent (Petty, 2000) where truth is a fractured and contrived device, balanced precariously on the edge of the consumers’ suspended belief.

We want to sell you something ...

But we should, perhaps, be wary of perceiving customers merely as dupes. Venkatesh (1998) states that technology can be both threat and opportunity; no longer merely a means for marketers to communicate their message and explore the consumers’ wallet, but also a channel of search and exchange for the buyer; a source of both alienation and liberation. Holbrook and Hulbert (2002) observe that consumers no longer wait to be marketed at, and that in an increasingly uncertain marketing domain the hunted can become the hunters; even customer “cheating” has been noted by some (Wirtz and Kum, 2004).

Further, Venkatesh (1999) says that we adopt a “certain elitism” by ascribing privilege to production whilst simultaneously deriding consumption. To manufacture is good, but to buy is bad; and because marketing is perceived to encourage consumption (Abela, 2006) then marketing, itself, must also be bad. Venkatesh reminds us, however, that production and consumption are two sides of the same coin, and that excess in one begets excess in the other. Baudrillard, for example, was clear that consumerism was both a legitimate and necessary response to the development of industrialised society (Cherrier and Murray, 2004).

The guilt that forces marketers to act in a covert way, however, means that no-one wins; neither customer, nor organisation. Yet with a less ambiguous way of proceeding the pretence might be removed, and the marketer allowed to behave in an open and straightforward fashion. Building the marketing message on the theme of “We want to sell you something and we aim to persuade you to buy it” is Carson *et al.*’s (1999, p. 36) fifth of six philosophical aims, the last being to explicitly recognise that both organisations and customers want what is best for themselves.

But how much more convincing would such paean to the post-modern be if promises were kept and, at the point of buyer/seller interaction, the consumers’ intelligence was similarly free of insult? What if, for example, consumer’s hopes – the “uncertain but possible” (MacInnis and De Mello, 2005) – became a reality. Suppose, to paraphrase Bowen and Hallowell (2002), marketers took service seriously? Not the “24/7” service that allows us to vent our spleen on poorly-paid and mechanical call centre actants (Law, 1994), but the service that ensures there is nothing wrong to start with – the “truth” to be found in marketing spaces “A” and “B”.

Conclusion: is one marketing concept enough?

In “marketing space” there exists a continuum of marketing styles. At one extreme is a quality-oriented domain that is lived by part-time, or non-marketing marketers; and at

the other an imaginative, tricksterish place where the specialist prevails. In the centre is an area described, conventionally, as customer-centric – but which, by practitioners, is applied in a cynical and opportunistic way. Here, a blurring of functional roles is prescribed but is rarely encountered in practice; and even though academics call for a market-oriented approach, they appear attuned to a marketing orientation.

There are modes of activity that apply in the extremes of this space that, although apparently at odds, abide by the same principle – customer respect. In much the same way that Gummesson (1998) argues that interactivity allows customers the freedom to co-create their own quality and productivity, post-modern approaches encourage consumers to subvert, rather than submit to, the market (Henderson, 1998). The “apocryphal” approach legitimises such unorthodoxy by suggesting consumers find meaning in consumption; that competitiveness and innovation endure by driving, not following, the market; and that consumers are aware of what marketers do but concerned by their reluctance to admit it. Marketers themselves, however, appear embarrassed by their own “mercantile hyperbole” (Cova, 2005) and are cowed by a fear of being exposed. This anxiety insinuates itself within the marketing canon and marketers are compelled to compound the deception.

Further identified is a tendency, for both practitioners and the academy, either to slide inexorably downwards through marketing space, or to demur admission into its “higher” ranks. It is suggested that marketers, generally, are not taking quality of customer experience seriously – and that such reluctance limits marketing’s potential. Such arguments do not, however, suggest that marketing spaces “D” and “E” are to be avoided. On the contrary, this is where marketing can be at its most creative and inspiring. All points in marketing space are legitimate, providing their occupation is planned – and not merely the result of a lazy or duplicitous fall from grace. It is, rather, spaces “C” and “D” that are the problem – the spaces that provide sanctuary for those who cannot/will not aspire higher; or that are used, merely, to camouflage ulterior intent.

Perhaps, then, if we are to deliver truth and, consequently, earn the customer’s trust, we should give up the marketing concept and admit it is a flawed device – a compromise that disables its own best intentions. Maybe, instead, we can have two marketing concepts; the first, more or less in line with Carson *et al.* (1999) will focus, unashamed, upon organisational objectives and pursuing what would be right for the organisation and what could be right for the consumer. This will be the domain of the full-time marketer, where the “seven veils of marketing mystery” (Brown, 2001b) can be practised with honour and impunity.

The second will concentrate, again with conviction, on what would be right for the consumer and what should be right for the organisation. This will be the domain of the part-time marketer, where organisations will grapple with the “explosion of subjectivity” (Addis and Holbrook, 2003) inherent within the contemporary experience economy, and market in “real-time” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The full-time marketer establishes expectations, and the part-time marketer delivers on perceptions; everyone knows that satisfaction is a function of both (Oliver, 1997). Twin concepts will give equal priority and legitimacy to both groups, and allow each to do what they do best. To work, however, it requires both to embrace the paradox that they both have entirely dissimilar and contradictory agendas, and that they both have an identical aim – to encourage customers to move closer to purchase (Palda, 1966). Such

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acknowledgement requires, of course, mutual support, respect and humility between both sets of practitioners but, equally, it behoves the marketing academy to adopt a more rigorous stance and take as its guiding principles – not, as implied by the AMA's new definition of marketing (Wilkie, 2005, cited in Bolton, 2005), customer/relationship "management" – but, rather, inclusivity, truth and performance.

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