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## COMMENTARY

Commentary

# The spherical marketing concept

## A revitalization of the marketing concept

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – In the marketing literature it is often argued that corporations should pay attention to the needs and wants not only of their own customers, but also to those of their customers' customers. This is often referred to as "the marketing concept". The objective is to revitalize the marketing concept beyond the traditional levels of manufacturers, suppliers, wholesalers, retailers, customers and consumers in marketing channels.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Conceptual discussion and approach are undertaken.

**Findings** – The term "spherical marketing concept" is coined. This term connects the distinct upstream and downstream levels of marketing channels, as well as reconnecting their indistinct subsequent and preceding levels.

**Research limitations/implications** – The dilemma with the common use of the marketing concept in the literature is that it fails to acknowledge the simultaneous connection of the components and interfaces between the upstream and downstream distinct levels from the start to the end of the marketing channels with the reconnection of the components and interfaces from the subsequent and preceding indistinct levels of the marketing channels. Further research efforts should be dedicated to bridge the start and end of distinct levels of marketing channels by way of the indistinct preceding and subsequent ones. Economic, social and ecological factors should be included.

**Practical implications** – It is not enough simply to match the supply and demand between the start and the end of marketing channels – a revitalization of the boundaries of the marketing concept towards a total circulation approach is necessary. Best practice tends to be more and more aware and skilful in this respect.

**Originality/value** – The spherical marketing concept contributes to pin-point the importance of the seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of components and interfaces in marketing channels. It also contributes to place current theories and practices in perspective for the future.

**Keywords** Marketing theory, Distribution channels and markets

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

### Introduction

At the end of the 1940s, production efficiencies were regarded as essential for achieving and maintaining successful and prosperous business operations in the marketplace. In the 1950s, marketing scholars began to argue that corporations should pay more attention to customers' needs and wants (e.g. McKitterick, 1957). This fundamental approach is often referred to as "the marketing concept". It is one of the most important and famous concepts ever developed in marketing literature. McKitterick (1957, p. 78) states:

... the principal task of the marketing function in a management concept is not so much to be skillful in making the customer do what suits the interests of the business as to be skillful in conceiving and then making the business do what suits the interests of the customer.



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Thus, the marketing concept holds that customer needs and wants should be the aim of any marketing activity and marketing process. Subsequently, the turn towards the customer was a major shift in current management views at that time. In addition, other contemporary scholars of that time agreed. For example, Keith (1960, p. 35) concludes that:

Our attention has shifted from problems of production to problems of marketing, from the product we can make to the product the consumer wants us to make, from the company itself to the marketplace.

A well-known and famous concept related to the marketing concept is the phenomenon labeled as “marketing myopia”. Levitt (1960) argues that marketers believe that because the current situation is profitable, they neglect, and/or do not realize, that changes in the market place must be handled with great respect. The concept of marketing myopia widens the approach of the marketing concept. The marketing mix concept is also a contemporary concept that has been promoted by scholars such as McGarry (1950), Frey (1961), Lazer and Kelley (1962), Borden (1964), McCarthy (1964), Booms and Bitner (1982), Kotler (1986) and Judd (1987). The marketing mix concept describes areas of application of the marketing concept, such as price, product, promotion and place.

In the 1990s, customer- and consumer-driven marketing channels have been implemented in the automotive, textile, and retail industries. In the automotive industry, the term “just-in-time” (e.g. Sugimore *et al.*, 1977; Toyoda, 1987) has been used, while in the textile and retail industries the terms “quick response” (e.g. Stern *et al.*, 1996; Fernie, 1994) and “efficient consumer response” (e.g. Kurt Salmon Associates, 1993) have been applied in order to enhance corporate performance in the marketplace. The view of the marketing channel is sometimes seen as having its starting point at the consumer, not as the final one itself (Svensson, 2003). Steudel and Desruelle (1992) state that being world-class means being capable of bringing to the marketplace products that offer better value than the competition.

Consequently, the significance of the marketing concept has been of substantial importance in marketing literature for many years. The importance has existed on its own as a concept, and also in relation to other concepts, such as marketing mix and marketing myopia. Furthermore, it has been applied by both scholars and practitioners. In sum, it is an influential concept in today’s marketing practice, literature and thought. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the marketing concept, it still fails to address the seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of yesterday’s, today’s and tomorrow’s marketing channels. It is limited to the distinct levels of marketing channels, leaving the indistinct one behind. Therefore, the term “spherical marketing concept” is coined. The objective is to revitalize the marketing concept by connecting upstream and downstream levels (i.e. the distinct levels), as well as by reconnecting preceding and subsequent levels (i.e. the indistinct levels) of marketing channels.

#### **A retrospective frame of reference**

The marketing concept takes a downstream and vertical approach. It refers to single or consecutive levels between direct or indirect actors in marketing channels. In addition, it applies a market orientation and focuses on the levels of customers, customers’

customers, and/or consumers in the marketplace. The marketing concept does not normally comprise horizontal matters, even though they become crucial at the consumer level. McKitterick (1957, p. 78) comments that:

... to plan at all, and think adequately of what competition might do and its possible effects before committing multi-million dollar resources, requires knowledge of the customer which penetrates to the level of theory.

The theoretical perspective on the marketing concept is mainly supported by, and limited to, channel theory (e.g. Weld, 1916; Bucklin, 1966). The marketing channel should be regarded as a single entity (Alderson, 1965), a super-organization (Stern *et al.*, 1996) or a social system (Balderston, 1964) that consists of a number of interdependent corporations that are involved in the task of distributing products to the consumer. The dilemma is not to design a marketing channel in theory, but to make it work in practice (Stern *et al.*, 1996). The selection of an appropriate marketing channel becomes of vital importance for the effectiveness of the marketing concept (Magee, 1960). In a nutshell, management is only as strong as the weakest link (Coleman and Jennings, 1998).

At the beginning of the 20th century, scholars utilized economic foundations to analyze how marketing channels can be structured more efficiently for the eventual benefit of the consumer (Sheth *et al.*, 1988). Different principles may dominate business operations performed in marketing channels. For example, there is the principle of postponement (e.g. Alderson, 1950), which might be described as a pull-approach, and the principle of speculation (e.g. Bucklin, 1965), which might be seen as a push-approach. The holistic approach of marketing channels is of major interest in many industries (e.g. Culliton *et al.*, 1956; Brewer and Rosenzweig, 1961) in today's competitive marketplace. The unifying feature is that there is a start and an end of marketing channels.

Traditionally, channel theory has concentrated on vertical dependencies between the business operations of corporations. Marketing channels consist of a number of actors or intermediaries that take part in the exchange processes, since together they may improve the efficiency of the channel (e.g. Alderson, 1954). The point of departure may also be what creates independence for corporations in marketing channels (e.g. Blau, 1964). In marketing channels, activities are specialized and there is a functional distribution between corporations (e.g. Bucklin, 1966; Alderson, 1954). The dependence between corporations may be explained by the division of labor (e.g. Stigler, 1951; Stern and El-Ansary, 1992). Nowadays, corporations in marketing channels often strive to satisfy the consumer. Generally, there is a mutual dependence between corporations in marketing channels (e.g. Alderson, 1957, 1965; McCammon and Little, 1965; Stern, 1969). Existing interdependencies create the necessity for co-operation and co-ordination of business operations between corporations in order to achieve individual and sometimes mutual goals. The dependence that exists between corporations in marketing channels influences the marketing concept, because it is not only sufficient to satisfy the customers, the customers' customers, and the consumers' needs and wants, but also to pay attention to the needs, wants and requirements of others beyond the marketing channels.

The creation of value in marketing channels is often expressed as a successive or stepwise process in which value increases along value chains or value systems (Porter,

1985). Even at the beginning of 20th century, the idea of the value-added process was recognized. Weld (1916, p. 6) wrote:

At each step an increment of value is added by those who handle or transform the product.

It starts, for example, with the manufacturers, and continues to other corporations (middlemen), all the way to the consumer. Often it is argued that each step or actor in this process exists because it provides or improves the value or adds value to the product in the marketing channel, and attributes value to the consumers. It is common that scholars conclude that marketing channels ought to be consumer-driven. In other words, marketing channels have an end at the consumer level. This is a severe flaw reflected in theories and the best practices described in most marketing literature. Marketing channels should be seamless in order to encourage sustainability of corporations' continuous business operations in the short- and long-term future of total circulation. The overall view should stress economic, social and ecological factors.

Although the marketing concept was founded as a concept in the 1950s, the underlying principle of the marketing concept as a phenomenon has been mentioned in the literature since the beginning of the 20th century. There are early examples of the vital importance of recognizing that activities and processes performed by corporations strive towards consumer satisfaction. For example, Shaw (1912, p. 736) states:

Goods are being made to satisfy rather than to sell.

He also states (Shaw, 1912, p. 708):

Today the more progressive business man is searching out the unconscious needs of the consumer, and is then producing the goods to gratify them.

At the time, others also wrote about the importance of the consumer. Copeland (1923, p. 288) wrote:

One of the first steps to be taken by a manufacturer, who is seeking to effect economies in selling his product, is to make an elementary analysis of the habits of consumers in buying articles of the sort he is producing.

Products represent a certain value, but only when they satisfy the consumer in the marketplace. It is not until the efforts of corporations reach the consumer level that final value may be evaluated (Svensson, 2003). For example, Ford and Crowther (1923, pp. 135-6) wrote:

Does the manufacturer exist for the consumer or does the consumer exist for the manufacturer? If the consumer will not – says he cannot – buy what the manufacturer has to offer, is that the fault of the manufacturer or the consumer? Or is nobody at fault? If nobody is at fault then the manufacturer must go out of business. But what business ever started with the manufacturer and ended with the consumer? Where does the money to make wheels go around come from? From the consumer, of course. And success in manufacture is based solely upon an ability to serve that consumer to his liking.

One might assume that marketing activities in marketing channels should originate from the consumer. As Faurote (1928, p. 302) states:

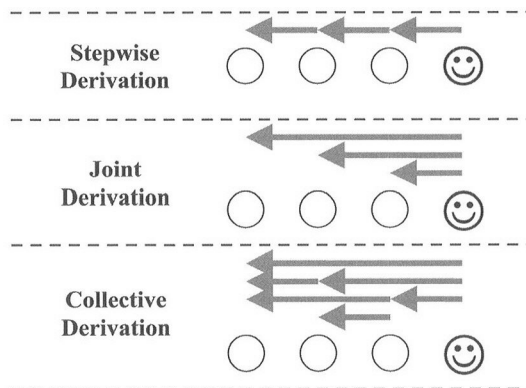
After all, the product is the thing. It is the final test of management. Is the product good? Will it stand up? Is it worth the price, and is the price lower than that charged for a similar article or by others for the same? That is the acid test.

Thus, it is decidedly troublesome if the consumer is ignored.

**The spherical marketing concept**

There is an inherent complexity in marketing channels, caused by a set of generic components and interfaces. There are generic *components* such as actors, activities and resources. There are generic *interfaces* such as interaction, coordination, co-operation and competition. There is also a need for seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation in terms of economic, social and ecological factors. The ecological factors provide the outer boundaries wherein everything coincides. The economic factors are the fundamental ones, while the social ones depend upon the economic and ecological ones. Together, they all shape the derivatives of the spherical marketing concept in marketing channels. In this section, the approach of the spherical marketing concept is conceptualized and described in comparison with the common views of the marketing concept in theory and practice.

The common derivatives of the marketing concept can be divided into three categories of consumer needs, wants and requirements (see Figure 1). In the first place, the marketing concept may be based on a stepwise derivation between actors' activities and resources in marketing channels. This means that each actor only considers the needs, wants and requirements of the next downstream level (e.g. the manufacturer focuses on the wholesaler, the wholesaler on the retailer, and the retailer on the consumer). This represents down-upstream step-by-step derivation of the marketing concept in marketing channels. In the second place, the marketing concept may be based on a joint derivation between actors' activities and resources in marketing channels. This means that all actors' activities and resources consider the needs, wants and requirements at the consumer level (e.g. the manufacturer, the wholesaler, the retailer all focus – separately from each other – on the consumer in the marketplace). This represents a united down-upstream derivation of the marketing concept in marketing channels. The emphasis on co-ordination and interaction between the levels is weak. In the third place, the marketing concept may be based on a collective derivation between actors' activities and resources in marketing channels.



**Figure 1.**  
A typology of derivatives of the marketing concept

This means that the actors consider the needs, wants and requirements of all the downstream levels (e.g. the manufacturer focuses on the wholesaler, the retailer, and the consumer; the wholesaler focuses on the retailer and the consumer; and the retailer focuses on the consumer). This is a complete down-upstream derivation of the marketing concept, even though it lacks the seamless, sustainable and circular features of the marketing channel. It requires extensive co-ordination, co-operation and interaction between the actors' activities and resources.

In Figure 1 the typology of derivatives of the marketing concept suffers from the "beam-of-light" syndrome (see Figure 2). The beam-of-light syndrome refers to when torchlight is dispersed more and more by increasing distance (i.e. it is cone-shaped). However, the dispersion and the distance weaken the beam of light and cause gradual invisibility to occur (i.e. enters the invisibility zone). Finally, it reaches a certain point (i.e. the visibility line) when it does not light up enough. In the literature, the visibility zone of the marketing concept usually refers to the levels of customers, the customers' customers or the consumers in the marketplace. The beam-of-light syndrome occurs because it does not go beyond these levels of marketing channels. In fact, there are always levels beyond the marketing channel. They belong to the invisibility zone. This means that there are subsequent levels that should be acknowledged, but usually are not (i.e. visible in business practice and marketing literature). Generally, levels closer to consumers in the marketplace tend to distinguish their needs, wants and requirements in a better way. In particular, these needs, wants and requirements tend to fade by each additional level aggregated upstream in the marketing channel. The beam-of-light syndrome supports the view of the marketing channel consisting of a start and an end, instead of endlessness. The former represents a halfway cycle (see upper part of Figure 2), while the latter represents a turnaround cycle (see lower part of Figure 2).

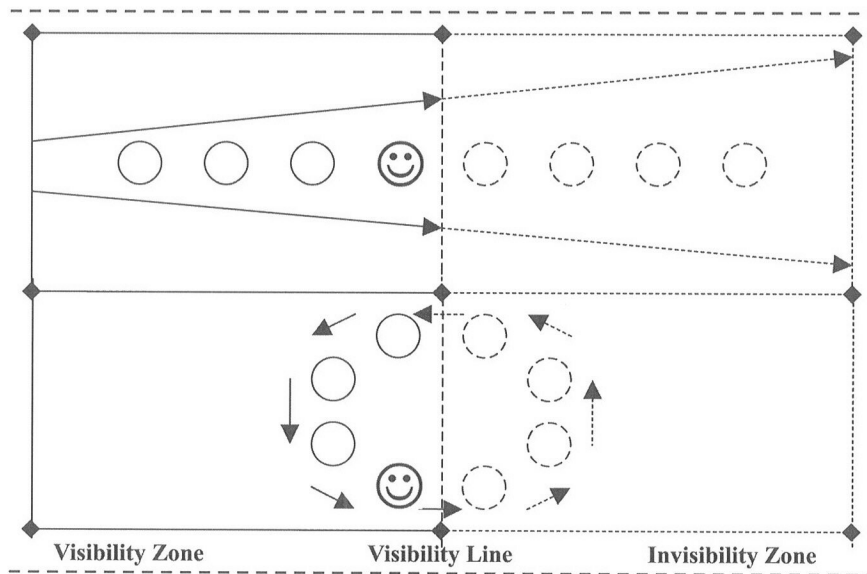
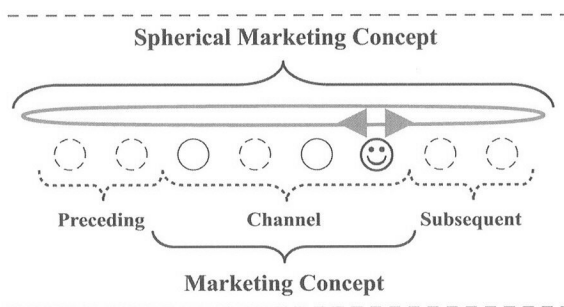


Figure 2.  
The beam-of-light  
syndrome

The marketing concept has evolved towards a strong vertical emphasis on the different levels within marketing channels. Furthermore, the marketing concept tends to focus on the customer, the customer's customer and/or the consumer (see Figure 3). These are distinct levels of the marketing channel (i.e. manufacturers, suppliers, wholesalers, retailers and consumers), all of which are in the visibility zone. The focus is on the downstream levels of marketing channels. In addition, the marketing concept has a market orientation. This means that the scope, boundaries and extension of the marketing concept resemble the classic and traditional level structures of distribution/marketing channels (e.g. Weld, 1916; Bucklin, 1965). The preceding levels of marketing channels (e.g. actors and activities of recycled resources) and the subsequent levels of marketing channels (e.g. actors' and activities' recycling of resources) are rarely acknowledged or explicitly highlighted. These preceding and subsequent levels may be labeled as indistinct levels, as they are not in the visibility zone. In fact they are vague, shadowy, obscure, and not always distinguishable. They are beyond the visibility line. Consequently, the reconnection of these indistinct levels between the end and start of marketing channels is not explicitly recognized in modern (and) up-to-date marketing concepts. However, the spherical marketing concept considers the reconnection of these loose ends. It considers both the distinct levels of marketing channels in the visibility zone and the indistinct levels beyond the start and end of marketing channels in the invisibility zone. Therefore, to achieve reconnection of the loose ends, the distinct and indistinct levels of channels should be seen as spherical over time and space, for which reason the term of "spherical marketing concept" is coined.

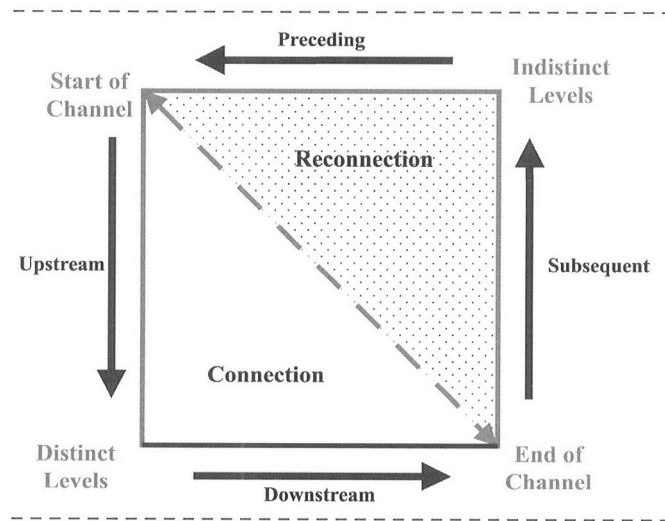
The reconnection of indistinct levels of marketing channels (i.e. subsequent and preceding levels) in a modern and up-to-date marketing concept is not obvious or apparent. Figure 4 highlights the importance of reconnecting the end and the start of the seamless marketing channel. There may be considerations in literature of the subsequent levels in terms of recycling.

Generally, the marketing channel consists of loose ends. However, it does not end at the consumer level, since there are subsequent levels beyond this point. In the same way, it does not begin at the manufacturer or supplier levels, since there are also preceding levels before this point. Rarely are there considerations of what lies beyond the preceding levels. In the literature, the seamless marketing channel is not seamless, but only seamless between the start and the end of the marketing channel. As a matter of fact, the marketing channel does not begin or end, but the subsequent and the preceding levels should be reconnected. Rather, it should be seen as being without



**Figure 3.** The spherical marketing concept versus the marketing concept





**Figure 4.**  
Connecting and  
reconnecting distinct and  
indistinct levels of  
marketing channels

loose ends (i.e. true seamlessness). Therefore, the meaning of the marketing concept should be extended beyond the start and the end of marketing channels. Actually, the extension of the marketing channel should strive to reconnect the subsequent and preceding levels of the marketing channel in order to achieve seamlessness and sustainability of actors' performance of activities and consumption of resources (see Figure 4).

The spherical marketing concept requires a holistic view of the components (i.e. actors, activities and resources) that goes beyond the start and the end of the marketing channels. It also requires a holistic view of the interfaces (i.e. interactions, co-ordinations, co-operations and competitions) that goes beyond the start and the end of marketing channels. The spherical marketing concept is not only about the connecting distinct levels of marketing channels, but of the total circulation of the components in the interfaces (i.e. the connection and reconnection of distinct and indistinct levels). Therefore, the circle should be closed to achieve seamlessness and sustainability. The spherical marketing concept has no start or end. It connects upstream and downstream distinct levels and it reconnects preceding and subsequent indistinct levels of marketing channels. Actually, it should be seen as a sphere! The preceding and subsequent levels of marketing channels contribute close the circle or heal the sphere. Current use of the marketing concept tends to neglect the preceding and subsequent levels of marketing channels. Therefore, the spherical marketing concept strives to highlight this current flaw of the modern and up-to-date marketing concept.

The introduction of the spherical marketing concept should not be judged as a restriction, weakness, or deficiency of the common marketing concept. On the contrary, the spherical marketing concept represents a major possibility for broadening the theoretical foundation and to improving theory generation and the best practices of the marketing concept in the future. An expansion and reconnection of the boundaries of



the marketing concept and its seamlessness and sustainability should evolve to comprise the subsequent levels beyond the consumer and the preceding levels of the marketing channel. Therefore, the spherical marketing concept is defined as a circulation approach that connects the components and creates an interface between the upstream and downstream distinct levels from the start to the end of the marketing channel, and reconnects the components and interfaces from the subsequent indistinct levels to the preceding indistinct levels of marketing channels. The spherical marketing concept equals the seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of components and interfaces.

### **Concluding thoughts and research proposal**

For almost a century the customer, the customer's customer and the consumer have all been crucial ingredients in the marketing literature and marketing thought. Nevertheless, scholars and practitioners still tend to omit, or even forget, the seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of components and interfaces in and beyond marketing channels in theories and in practice. The holistic view of the marketing channel is often mentioned as vital and crucial for successful business operations, in order to just go on alluding to it as a secondary source of importance. A principal dilemma in theories and practice is that they are restricted to parts of seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of components and interfaces in and beyond marketing channels. The dilemma with the common use of the marketing concept in the literature is that it fails to acknowledge the simultaneous connection of the components and interfaces between the upstream and the downstream distinct levels from the start to the end of the marketing channels with the reconnection of the components and interfaces from the subsequent and preceding indistinct levels of the marketing channels. There is an apparent lack of seamlessness and sustainability. Simultaneous attention is required to address the total circulation of components and interfaces in and beyond marketing channels in the marketplace. Consequently, it is not enough simply to match the supply and demand between the start and the end of marketing channels – a revitalization of the boundaries of the marketing concept towards a total circulation approach is necessary. Best practice tends to be more and more aware and skillful in this respect. The spherical marketing concept assists in revitalizing the boundaries of theory and best practice of the marketing concept. It positions current theories and practices of marketing in perspective for the future. Further research efforts should be dedicated to bridging the start and end of distinct levels of marketing channels through the indistinct preceding and subsequent levels. These research efforts should stress the seamlessness, sustainability and total circulation of the marketing concept in components and interfaces of marketing channels. Economic, social and ecological factors should be included.

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