What's so funny about marketing? Twentieth-century cartoonist portrayals of US marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – This purpose of this paper is to present an investigation into changes in portrayals of marketing by individuals outside of the industry during the important time frame between 1930 and 1999. The twentieth century was a period of significant development in how scholars and practitioners viewed the theory and activities of marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – The study consisted of a content analysis of 1,400 randomly selected marketing-related cartoons published in The New Yorker magazine from 1930 through 1999.

Findings – The aspects of marketing portrayed by individuals outside of the discipline, specifically cartoonists, shifted over the early/mid to later parts of the twentieth century. In particular, earlier portrayals focused primarily on retail store transactions, while later portrayals depicted an increased incidence of marketing communications taking place outside the store setting. Eventually, more portrayals also addressed the adoption of marketing ideas and vocabulary into non-marketers' everyday lives. Overall, the proportion of portrayals that showed marketing in a negative light was low.

Originality/value – This study investigates changes in portrayals of marketing by non-marketers over a seven-decade period of significant development of marketing thought. Both the relatively long period and the outsiders' perspective provide meaningful contributions. Also, findings do not support the perception that marketing and marketers are commonly viewed by those outside of marketing as unethical or likely to be in conflict with customers.

Keywords Advertising history, Relationship marketing, Humor, Evolution of marketing, Cartoons, Marketing sentiment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the past several decades, marketers and marketing academics have continually addressed the question of what marketing is and how to improve its practice (Houston, 1986; Kotler and Levy, 1969, 1973; Levy, 2002; Urban, 2005). Various theoretical frameworks suggest an evolution from more rudimentary ways of marketing to more sophisticated, generally more customer-centric, approaches (Fullerton, 1988; Keith, 1960). This is reflected in the alternative views of the marketer's role from being focused largely on product development and the selling function to customer needs satisfaction (McKenna, 1991). Presumably, there has been a refinement of marketing practice, as the theory has developed and disseminated among those working in the marketing arena.

The literature on the historical development of marketing thought generally takes a marketing insider's perspective on marketing (Jones, 2010; Shaw and Jones, 2005). While this is an important perspective, the question of how marketing is perceived by those outside of the field is also important. Outsiders can, in essence, hold up a mirror to marketers. If the marketers don't like what they see, they can take remedial action. Also, to the extent that

marketing has evolved or progressed, marketers can investigate the extent to which non-marketers have observed the course of this development. What do outsiders see as the most salient aspects of marketing, and how has this changed over time? Customers' feelings or attitudes toward marketing have been researched in the context of consumer "sentiment" toward marketers (Gaski and Etzel, 1986, 2005; Hustad and Pessemier, 1973). However, less studied are how the non-marketer defines the concept of marketing and what parts of the marketing function are more top of mind for those outside of marketing. Understanding customer thoughts and perceptions of marketing can give marketers insight into what kinds marketing course changes are having an impact.

This paper begins to address some of these issues by examining outsider perceptions of marketing and marketers from the early-mid twentieth century to the end of the twentieth century, a period corresponding with much of the progress in the development of marketing thought. Specifically, this paper examines what marketing means to people outside the field and how they see marketing fitting into the lives of customers. It also examines the degree to which these outside observers have portrayed marketing in a negative light. The data were collected from marketing-related cartoons published in *The New Yorker* magazine between the years 1930 and 1999 and have been analyzed to begin to understand how perceptions of marketing, as portrayed by the cartoonists, developed over that span. The research looks at what aspects of marketing were the foci of cartoonists' efforts during that period and how that shifted over time.

Background
Perceptions of marketers and marketing
An initial issue addressed in this article concerns the perceptions of marketers and the discipline of marketing in general, specifically the extent to which marketers and marketing activities are portrayed negatively, as opposed to positively or neutrally. Marketers' concerns over people's perceptions of marketing and its practitioners have been aired for decades (Farmer, 1967; Sheth *et al.*, 2006). Capturing much of this unease, Farmer (1967) asked, in the title of his article, "Would you want your daughter to marry a marketing man?" The idea was that consumers saw marketers as pushy, sleazy and deceitful, and the work of marketers as trivial. Gaski and Etzel (1986) quantified these perceptions in their consumer sentiment scale, through which they found people's views of marketing to fall on the lower half of the scale, with men somewhat more hostile toward the discipline than women. This result has persisted across several decades, although with some movement toward more positive sentiment (Gaski and Etzel, 2005). More recently, 65 per cent of consumers were identified as having a negative attitude toward marketing, while only 8 per cent had a positive attitude (Sheth *et al.*, 2006). Repeated evidence of this negative sentiment toward marketing may be a contributing factor to what some see as a discipline with overly low aspirations for itself (Sheth and Sisodia, 2007).

Of course, negative sentiments are not universal. Some work finds that many consumers express pro-business and advertising attitudes and that just as many have mixed, rather than fully negative, attitudes toward business and advertising (Hustad and Pessemier, 1973). Other work suggests that consumers tend to find that marketing provides some value, despite its flaws (Calfee and Ringold, 1994; Pollay and Mittal, 1993).

However, not all aspects of marketing are viewed equally. Advertising and public relations professionals tend to be perceived less negatively than sales or telemarketing professionals (Sheth *et al.*, 2006). Among marketing mix elements, the distribution/retailing functional area of marketing scores more positively than the advertising and product areas, with pricing scoring the lowest (Gaski and Etzel, 2005). Some marketing practices have been

found to be of particular concern for customers, particularly lack of emphasis on product quality, lack of advertising believability and failure to provide expected value (Barksdale and Darden, 1972). Further, telemarketing calls, internet pop-up ads, sweepstakes and sales that last only an hour or two are specific marketing tools that generate negative perceptions from consumers (Sheth *et al.*, 2006).

Much of the negative sentiment toward marketing seems to be tied to perceived ethical violations. Marketing has been described as the functional area of business most strongly associated with ethical abuse (Murphy *et al.*, 1978). Likely, this is due to the fact that marketing activities are at the boundary between customer and company. Marketing of harmful products, customer deception and pricing issues are the types of ethical issues most typically associated with marketing (Gaski, 1999). Ethical issues related to promotional activities are the most frequently addressed in marketing ethics academic research (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007), with much of this research being summarized in Hyman *et al.* (1994) and Drumwright and Murphy (2009). In an annual Gallup Poll where respondents are asked to rate the honesty and ethics of practitioners of various professions[1], only about 10 per cent of respondents rate the ethics of advertising practitioners as "very high or high", which places them near the bottom of the list, just above car salespeople, telemarketers, members of Congress and lobbyists (Zanot, 1984). Interestingly, however, in studies testing the actual, rather than perceived, ethics of marketing practitioners as compared with consumers or the general public, the practitioners have not been found to be more or less ethical (Fraedrich *et al.*, 1989; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1999). Nevertheless, the perception of lack of ethics among marketers strongly persists, perhaps fanned somewhat by the media. Some work suggests that perceptions of marketing as a whole, as opposed to advertising in particular, are not as negative as would be suggested by public messaging (Gaski, 2008) and that consumers do, in fact, believe that they are treated ethically by businesses and that they expect to be treated ethically in the future (Tsalikis and Seaton, 2006).

In light of the above, and in regard to the timeframe of study, this paper asks the following research question:

RQ1. To what extent were marketers and marketing activities portrayed negatively, as opposed to positively or neutrally?

Historical developments in marketing
A second research question concerns what aspects of marketing are emphasized when marketing is portrayed by non-marketers, such as in pop culture, and how these emphases shift over time.

Marketing as a discipline is a relatively new field, emerging as an academic subject around 1900 (Wilkie and Moore, 2003) and coming of age as a distinct and legitimate scholarly discipline by the 1930s (Witkowski, 2010). As a discipline, marketing has evolved through various eras (Hollander *et al.*, 2005). Although not without debate, some suggest that marketing first went through a production-oriented era (extending to the 1930s), then a sales-oriented era (extending to the 1950s), followed by a marketing-oriented era (extending to the 1960s) and into the current marketing control era (Keith, 1960). Others suggest that modern marketing has its roots in the mid-1700s in Britain, Germany and North America (Fullerton, 1988) and that customer-centric marketing practices occurred as early as the 1890s, if not earlier (Fullerton, 1988; Jones and Richardson, 2007). Marketing research, the emergence of marketing departments and the acceptance of the marketing concept began emerging in the early to middle part of the twentieth century (Fullerton, 1988).

Over time, the umbrella of marketing has expanded greatly (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Marketing may have begun as something critical for manufacturers and sellers of tangible

goods, but it quickly evolved into something for all selling organizations to be aware of, with the concept of "product" extending to services, persons, organizations themselves and ideas (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Eventually, despite some concerns (Bartels, 1974), marketing has become recognized as a function of all organizations, reaching into education, health, culture, church and place marketing (Kotler, 2005), and it has been recognized as being increasing in need of embracing social responsibilities, such as consumerism and environmental degradation (Lavidge, 1970). McKenna (1991, p. 65), in declaring that "marketing is everything", documented the frequent blending of services and tangibles into a single product. More recently, Peñalosa and Venkatesh (2006) have suggested that markets and marketing should move beyond the services orientation to a perspective where they are viewed largely as social entities.

Clearly, marketing thought and practice are seen as having shifted over time, although the nature and timing of those shifts is not fully agreed upon. However, it is unclear whether non-marketers have noticed these shifts. For example, through the 1930s, when non-marketers observed marketing, did they see primarily the production-oriented aspect of marketing? Then, over the next two decades, did their conception of marketing shift more to the selling function, keeping in line with the shifting focus of insiders and academics studying marketing? Viewed from a consumer perspective, marketing is still probably viewed as largely a communication function, although consumers have probably noted a shift toward more listening to and protection of customers by marketers. In more recent years, customers have probably also noted marketing support for viral marketing, green marketing, sustainable approaches to marketing and corporate social responsibility.

Shifts in marketing practice suggest that it would be instructive to understand how non-marketers have portrayed marketing over time. Thus, the following research question for the period spanning the middle to end of the twentieth century is posed:

RQ2. In marketing portrayals, what aspects of marketing tended to be emphasized, and how did this emphasis shift over the decades?

The customer's role in the marketing process

A third research question concerns the role of marketing in the day-to-day lives of customers and the extent to which that role has shifted over time. Marketers are increasingly recognizing the importance of company–customer relationships in the consumer realm, as opposed to just the business-to-business domain (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). In the context of consumer–company relationships, consumers have been found to foster important and sometimes complex relationships with brands that share characteristics with person-to-person relationships (Fournier, 1998). Simplifying the consumption task, reducing risks and maintaining cognitive consistency are just some of the reasons consumers may act to develop relationships with companies or brands (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Not surprisingly, customers are more likely to form strong relationships with companies that have similar identities to their own, that are distinctive and that are trustworthy (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Such strong relationships benefit the marketer as such customers exhibit greater brand loyalty, more willingness to try new products associated with the brand and increased promotional word-of-mouth about the company or brand (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). This relationship building reflects a fundamental shift in the role of marketing in the consumer's life from an exchange-of-goods viewpoint to a service-dominant, consumer-centric perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Another byproduct of relationship building between companies and consumers is that such consumers become more informed or expert about companies and brands, creating efficiencies in marketing transactions (Sproles *et al.*, 1978; Alba and Hutchison, 1987). Being

more sophisticated as a consumer and more literate with regard to marketing jargon or advertising approaches (Liu, 2010; O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998; Titus and Bradford, 1996), can lead to innovativeness and creativity among consumers (Hirschman, 1980) and more engaged consumption-related activities. Consumers with greater knowledge of and connection to marketing as well as to the products themselves become influential with other consumers – the so called "market mavens" (Feick and Price, 1987).

As consumers become more knowledgeable and more engaged with organizations, an opportunity for co-creation of value can result (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). While co-creation of value began as a concept to describe consumers taking on some of the activities previously performed by marketers, such as filling one's own car with gas, it has developed into a true blurring of consumer and producer roles (Cova *et al.*, 2011). The consumer can initiate co-creation through word-of-mouth, blogging, and reviewing, for example (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010), or, perhaps more significantly, the marketer may sponsor it, such as through product or promotion development initiatives (Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008; Zwass, 2010). The concept of co-creation of value and shared roles of marketer and customer suggests a shift in the meaning of marketing to the consumer and the position of marketing in the life and self-concept of the consumer. This suggests a need for inquiry into the third research question:

RQ3. To what extent do the data suggest a shift in the role of marketing in the day-to-day lives of customers? What is the nature of the shift, if any?

Method
Data source and sample selection
Many potential sources for outsider perspectives on marketing are available, including books, television shows, movies, plays and so forth. By analyzing primary sources of content such as these, important insights into historical ideas and practices can be gained that can provide deeper understanding than could be gained merely through review of academic interpretations (Kassarjian, 1977). Sources that provide imagery, rather than just words, can be particularly helpful (Witkowski and Jones, 2006). One rich source of marketing portrayals is comics and cartoons (Belk, 1987; Gordon, 1998; Spiggle, 1986). Beyond supplying historical continuity, the fact that cartoons are designed to be humorous suggests that the subject is not likely to be treated delicately. Rather, one might expect that perceived bad dealing might be more likely to be portrayed than ignored. Short and concise, cartoons are more accessible and more widely read than longer works created by those outside of the marketing profession, suggesting greater impact. Cartoons are also sufficiently plentiful to allow the kind of quantitative data analysis that is reported on here.

While the cartoons of *The New Yorker* magazine have served as the basis of academic inquiry (Thibodeau, 1989), they have not been examined from a marketing perspective. Nevertheless, *The New Yorker* is a particularly good source of marketing-related cartoons for multiple reasons. First, New York has long been considered at the heart of business activity in the USA, whether on Wall Street or Madison Avenue. Anything that is new in business or marketing is as likely to be observed there as anywhere. Because marketing activities are an important part of life, many of the cartoons in *The New Yorker* do in fact portray marketing-related activities. Second, as a weekly magazine, *The New Yorker* has published hundreds of cartoons per year for many decades, starting in 1925. This provides a continual window into outsider portrayals of marketing across much of the twentieth century. Third, *The New Yorker* is an iconic, influential publication that saw continual growth in readership throughout the century, with circulation reaching above 800,000 by the end of the 1990s, and the cartoons are a highlight, and almost certainly the most widely read

part, of the publication (Lee, 2000; Yagoda, 2001). For these reasons, marketing-related cartoons published in *The New Yorker* were chosen for analysis in this study.

In 2004, *The New Yorker* published and indexed, in digital form, all of the cartoons printed in the magazine since its inception in 1925. Search terms were used to cull all of the marketing-related cartoons from the nearly 62,000 cartoons published during that nearly 80-year period. The search terms that were used for this process included terms such as market, buy, sell, consume, advertise, product, retail, brand, price, discount and the like, using all forms of the words. The number of newly identified cartoons dwindled with each additional search term, to eventually provide a high degree of confidence that the majority of marketing-related cartoons had been identified. Spot checks of various years did not turn up a significant number of cartoons that had not previously been identified, so this set of 5,105 cartoons (8.27 per cent of the total published) constituted the set that was sampled from for the study. Interestingly, the percentage of cartoons with a marketing-related focus varied significantly by year, as indicated in Figure 1, with a general downward trend over the period.

To account for the variation in the number of marketing cartoons from year to year, 20 cartoons published in each year from 1930 to 1999 were randomly selected to constitute the final sample for 1,400 cartoons for analysis. This period was used, due to the constraints of the underlying data set and the drop off in number of marketing-related cartoons around the turn of the century. For comparison purposes in most of the analysis, the cartoons were grouped by decade, beginning with 1930-1939 and ending with 1990-1999. While periodization of marketing eras by decade or century is discouraged (Hollander *et al.*, 2005), the study here is an investigation of shifts over time, rather than an attempt to establish distinct eras. Using decades allows the bigger picture to emerge, and decade-based analysis is frequently used to understand societal changes taking place in in the twentieth-century USA (Belk and Pollay, 1985).

A coding sheet was developed that addressed various marketing-related elements of the cartoons. Since a study of this type had not been conducted previously, an original coding system was designed for the study. Coding categories were selected that reflected the various aspects of marketing, as it is currently defined in the academic literature, including the four p's, parties to the transaction, and so forth. Additionally, since these were cartoons, codes were selected to determine what aspect of the cartoon provided the humor. In developing this coding procedure and coding sheet, every attempt was made to create coding categories that
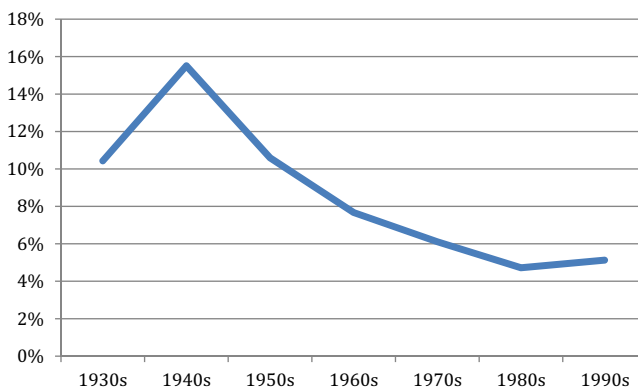

Figure 1.
Proportion of total cartoons with some relation to marketing, by decade

could be coded as objectively as possible. (See Appendix for a complete list of coding categories.) In addition to the year and setting of the cartoon and the main type of product addressed (if any), the cartoons addressed in this study were coded as to whether or not:

- sellers/spokespersons/marketers play a role in the cartoon, and, if so, their genders (although gender was not considered here);
- buyers/customers/shoppers/ad targets play a role, and, if so, their genders (although gender was not considered here);
- a seller/advertiser/spokesperson/marketer is or says something silly, funny, clever or strange;
- a buyer/customer/shopper/ad target is or says something silly, funny, clever or strange;
- someone playing a role in the cartoon appears to be part of a couple or family with someone else in the cartoon;
- an advertisement (ad) appears in the cartoon, and, if so, in what medium;
- an ad is silly, funny, clever or strange;
- an ad appears in an unusual or clever way or place;
- an ad idea is being pitched;
- a product is silly, funny, clever or strange;
- a brand/store/company name is mentioned, either real or fabricated;
- a brand/store/company name is silly, funny, clever or strange;
- price is a meaningful element;
- marketing slogans or jargon are used or referenced, other than by the marketer;
- conflict between marketer and customer is displayed or a customer seems angry or upset; and
- the marketer is engaging in unethical or illegal activity.

Working independently, two trained coders coded each cartoon. Since coding took place over many hours and days, the danger of coders' attention or expertise changing over the coding period was a concern. To address this, coders coded Year 1 from the first decade, followed by Year 1 from the second decade and so forth. After the first year of the last decade was coded, the second year from the first decade was coded and so forth through the entire data set. Intercoder reliability was calculated with ReCal2 (Freelon, 2010) using per cent agreement, Scott's Pi, Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorf's Alpha. While per cent agreement is easy to calculate, it fails to take into account the possibility of chance agreement, which is addressed by the other coefficients (Lombard et al., 2002). The coefficients for per cent agreement and Krippendorff's Alpha are shown in Table I. In every case, the Scott's Pi and Cohen's Kappa coefficients were nearly identical to the Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient, so they are not listed here.

While there are no established standards for "acceptable" levels of intercoder reliability, Lombard et al. (2002) suggest that coefficients of 0.80 or greater would generally be acceptable and that lower levels may be acceptable for exploratory research or with more conservative estimates, such as through using Krippendorff's Alpha. In this case, the percentage agreement for each of the variables considered here is above 80 per cent, and generally above 90 per cent. The Krippendorff's Alpha coefficients, however, are lower, and, in some cases, substantially lower. The lowest coefficients (Krippendorff's Alpha less than

Variable	(%) agreement	Krippendorff's alpha (nominal)	No. of agreements	No. of disagreements	No. of cases	No. of decisions
Seller in cartoon	91.9	0.796	1,286	114	1,400	2,800
Buyer in cartoon	91.2	0.721	1,277	123	1,400	2,800
Funny seller	84.7	0.683	1,186	214	1,400	2,800
Funny buyer	87.3	0.719	1,222	178	1,400	2,800
Couple or family	90.4	0.632	1,266	134	1,400	2,800
Ad in cartoon	84.1	0.691	1,178	222	1,400	2,800
Funny ad	93.9	0.744	1,314	86	1,400	2,800
Funny ad location	96.7	0.557	1,354	46	1,400	2,800
Setting of cartoon	80.6	0.780	1,129	271	1,400	2,800
Ad idea being pitched	97.7	0.697	1,368	32	1,400	2,800
Funny product	84.0	0.439	1,176	224	1,400	2,800
Brand named	88.8	0.634	1,243	157	1,400	2,800
Funny brand	97.7	0.519	1,368	32	1,400	2,800
Marketing slogan or jargon by non-marketer	96.4	0.426	350	50	1,400	2,800
Customer upset or in conflict with marketer	94.6	0.492	1,324	76	1,400	2,800
Marketer unethical or engaged in illegal activity	95.7	0.422	1,340	60	1,400	2,800

Table I.
Interrater reliability
for initial two coders

0.60) are for the variables addressing whether the cartoon involves an ad in a funny location, a funny product, a funny brand, a marketing slogan or jargon used by a non-marketer, an upset customer or an unethical marketer. These variables do involve a level of judgment beyond, for example, whether a seller is portrayed in the cartoon. Further, judges were coding cartoons on 27 items, and many of these items came up fairly rarely and may have been missed by one of the judges when they did appear in a cartoon.

While the fairly low Krippendorff's Alpha coefficients suggest caution with regard to the level of reliance on the results, Krippendorff (2004), suggests that far lower standards than, for example 0.80 or 0.67 cutoffs, in situations without life or death consequences. Further, in the current study, resolution of disagreements between the judges was accomplished through the decision of the researcher who developed the coding categories and operational definitions. Thus, disagreements were eliminated at that point by, in essence, a majority two-to-one vote. While this approach should generally produce reliable results in the face of possible deficiencies in the skills or training of the initial judges, the possibility persists that some instances of items to be coded that were missed by both initial judges would not be included in the final data.

Because of the qualitative nature of the data, cross tabulations were used for analysis. Generally, in the results presented below, there is a p value associated with each variable indicating whether there is any unexpected pattern over the course of the decades. In most cases, there is significance at the 95 per cent confidence level. Analysis of the adjusted residuals for each decade's percentage indicates where the significant differences lie over the time span (Beasley and Schumacker, 1995; García-Pérez and Núñez-Antón, 2003). In addition to indicating whether a percentage for a particular decade is significant, significance of the adjusted p value cutoff of 0.0071 is also indicated. The adjustment reflects the higher likelihood of finding significance for any given decade due to there being seven significance calculations for each variable.

Findings

*What's funny about marketing – positivity or negativity of marketing portrayals (*RQ1*)*

Over the years, marketing has sometimes had a reputation for being slimy, sleazy, unfair or dishonest (Barksdale and Darden, 1972; Farmer, 1967). Studies of sentiment toward marketing continue to show that people have a somewhat negative view toward the field (Gaski and Etzel, 2005; Sheth *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, one might expect that marketing's perceived shortcomings could provide a great deal of the humor in marketing-related cartoons. The cartoon data do not wholly back up this expectation.

Data on two different types of negative portrayals of marketing were collected:

(1) the percentage of cartoons where customers are angry, upset or in conflict with marketers; and

(2) the percentage of cartoons where marketers are portrayed as being engaged in unethical or illegal behavior.

In both cases, the relative percentages are not high. (See Table II for the percentage of cartoons portraying these two types of negative aspects of marketing.) The peak decade for portrayals of upset customers or unethical marketers was the 1950's, where about 15 per cent of the cartoons included one type of negative portrayal or the other. A cartoon exhibiting a typical example of unethical marketers from that era shows a number of middle-aged businessmen surrounding a conference room table discussing potential advertising copy for a toothpaste brand. One of the men says to the others, "Now let's decide which we like best – 'Remember, folks, Klenodent contains anethol!' or 'Klenodent contains less anethol than any

Decade	Percentages of cartoons portraying customers who are angry, upset or in conflict with marketers ($p = 0.030$)	Percentages of cartoons portraying marketers engaging in unethical or illegal behaviors ($p = 0.002$)
1930s	2.5	6.5**
1940s	2.0	2.5
1950s	8.0**	7.5*
1960s	6.0	4.5
1970s	6.5	2.0
1980s	3.0	1.5
1990s	4.5	1.5
Overall	4.6	3.7

Notes: **Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05 in relation to other decades; *indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071 in relation to other decades

Table II.
Negative portrayals of marketing, by decade and overall

other leading tooth paste'" (March 7, 1953). The man's comment suggests that he is willing to say whatever it takes to sell the product, without regard to actual customer benefit.

Overall, fewer than 5 per cent of cartoons show upset customers and fewer than 4 per cent show marketers engaging in unethical or illegal activities. These findings suggest that the funniest thing about marketing does not appear to be that it is practiced by a bunch of scoundrels. This is surprising, given that marketing is not one of the most highly regarded fields and the prevalence of disparagement as a form of humor (Zillmann, 1983).

Since marketers behaving badly did not provide a great deal of the humor in the cartoons, what did provide that humor and how did that shift over the course of the decades? Table III summarizes the percentage of cartoons in each decade in which each of various cartoon elements were coded as being "silly, funny, clever, or strange".

The proportion of cartoons containing these various humorous elements did differ somewhat from decade to decade, although not always in a linear pattern. The most apparent trends were with regard to a decreasing number of funny sellers over the course of time and increasing funny ads and brands over the course of time. Buyers were less likely than sellers to be a funny or clever element in the earlier decades, but were more on par with sellers in the later years, suggesting, perhaps, that they had begun taking on a bigger role in the transactions as the perceived role of marketing expanded from merely selling to customer need satisfaction. Despite the shifts, there continued to be more funny buyers and sellers than

	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Overall
Seller ($p = 0.000$)	64.5*	47.5	50.5**	37.5	26.0*	36.5	36.5	42.7
Buyer ($p = 0.006$)	29.5	40.0	32.0	44.5*	40.0	33.0	30.0	35.6
Ad ($p = 0.000$)	2.5*	8.0**	14.0	11.5	21.0*	21.5*	20.0*	14.1
Ad Place ($p = 0.022$)	2.0	2.0	3.5	4.5	1.0**	4.5	7.0*	3.5
Product ($p = 0.018$)	13.5	11.0	10.0	11.0	18.0	14.5	20.5*	14.1
Brand ($p = 0.000$)	1.0	1.0	0.5**	1.0	3.5	4.0	7.5*	2.6

Notes: Percentages add to more than 100% in each decade because a cartoon could be coded as having more than one of these; **indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05 in relation to other decades; *indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071 in relation to other decades

Table III.
What's silly, funny, clever or strange – percentages by decade and overall

ads, products or brands over the course of the data. In essence, people are most likely to be funny, and buyers and sellers can be funny directly, whereas when it comes to ads, products and brands, people are being funny more indirectly.

Some of the shifts in what cartoonists portrayed as funny in marketing were accounted for by overall shifts in what aspects of marketing cartoonists were portraying. For example, if, as in later years, there are more cartoons containing ads, then there will tend to be more cartoons in which an advertisement is the source of the cartoon's humor.

*Historical shifts in marketing activities portrayed (*RQ2*)*
The method for identifying marketing-related cartoons was consistently applied throughout the data set. Therefore, shifts in the aspects of marketing that are portrayed in the cartoons over time should convey how cartoonists view the "what" and the "how" of marketing. This, in turn, should be a reflection of what people in general are observing with regard to marketing.

The data suggest that earlier portrayals of marketing are most likely to address marketing in the context of a face-to-face buying and selling transactions, whereas later portrayals are less likely to take place in this context. Figure 2 shows that in the 1930s, 83 per cent of cartoons portrayed both a buyer and seller, suggesting that a sale is taking place or likely to take place imminently. This percentage dropped to 74 per cent in the 1940's and 67 per cent in the 1950's. Following that point, the percentage remained around the 50 per cent range, with the lowest percentage, 43 per cent, in the 1990s. The drop may be tied to a lower importance placed on shopping activities by time-crunched consumers as the twentieth-century progressed. It also reflects the greater proportion of cartoons addressing non-transactional aspects of marketing in the latter half of the century, as addressed below.

The pattern for cartoons set within a retail store tells a similar story. Most cartoons in the 1930s take place in a retail store or at an outdoor store. In a typical cartoon from that era, a saleswoman in a bookstore attempts to sell a romance novel to a customer by offering this praise for the book: "It treats infidelity with dignity and respect" (March 17, 1934).

As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of cartoons set in a store or at an outdoor store was at 84 per cent in the 1930s, and dropped to the 40-50 per cent range in the 1960s to 1980s. By the 1990s the number of cartoons within a store setting was 36 per cent.
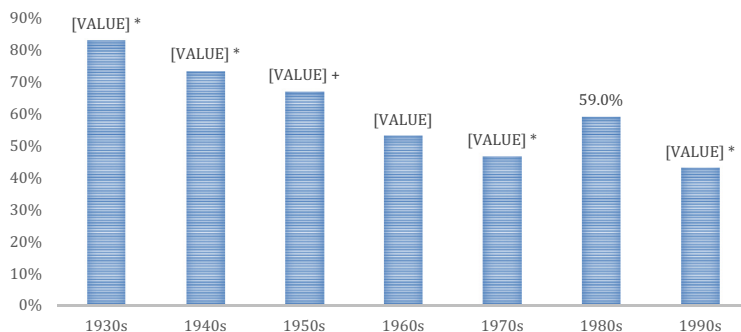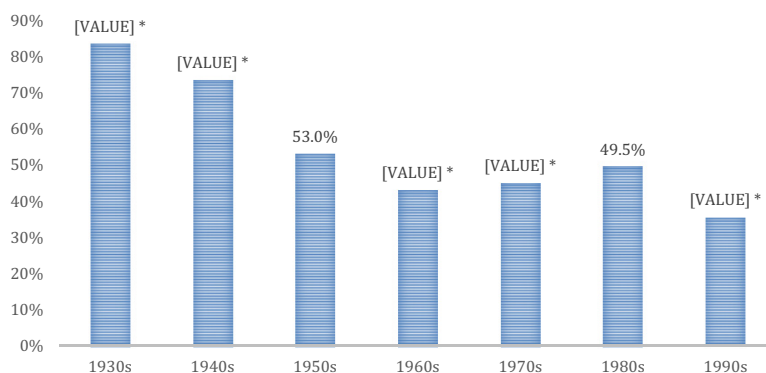

Figure 2.
Percentages of cartoons containing both a buyer and a seller, by decade ($p = 0.000$)

Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; * indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071

Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; * indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071

Figure 3.
Percentages of cartoons set in a store or at an outdoor store, by decade ($p = 0.000$)

Given that the percentage of cartoons set within a store showed a decrease over the decades, where were the marketing activities taking place instead? Overall, the portrayals of marketing were moving outside of the store and into the world at large, including individuals' homes. (See Table IV, Percentages of cartoons set outside of stores.)

As shown in Table IV, the trend for most of these non-store locations shows growth for the first two or three decades of the study, flattening out at that point. The one location that was fairly flat, and not statistically significant, over the full range of decades was "out of doors in a city setting", although this location was portrayed in fewer than 5 per cent of cartoons over the entire period. The number of cartoons set in or around the home peaked in the 1950s, a time when door-to-door selling had become somewhat of an institution with regular visits by the Avon lady and the Fuller Brush man.

And what kind of marketing was going on in these locations? Clearly some buying and selling was still taking place, but to a large extent, portrayals of advertising and promotion began to take the place of some of the transactional marketing. The growth in portrayals of advertising over the decades is shown in Figure 4. In the 1930s, only 11 per cent of cartoons showed advertising. That percentage grew to 16 per cent in the 1940s and 33 per cent in 1950s. The percentage of cartoons showing advertisements continued to grow in the subsequent decades, although more slowly, topping out at 39 per cent in the 1990s. This

	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Overall
Just outside store ($p = 0.000$)	4.5*	7.0**	10.5	8.0	18.0*	17.0**	15.0	11.4
Business or service office ($p = 0.016$)	2.5**	4.0	8.5	8.5	7.5	4.5	10.0**	6.5
Home, yard or doorstep ($p = 0.000$)	4.5*	7.0*	15.0	21.0*	17.0	13.0	17.5	11.3
Out of doors – in city ($p = 0.852$)	3.0	5.0	4.5	5.5	3.5	3.5	5.0	4.3
Out of doors – outside city ($p = 0.000$)	1.0*	1.5**	3.5	9.0*	4.0	8.0**	8.5**	5.1

Notes: **Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05 in relation to other decades; *indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071 in relation to other decades

Table IV.
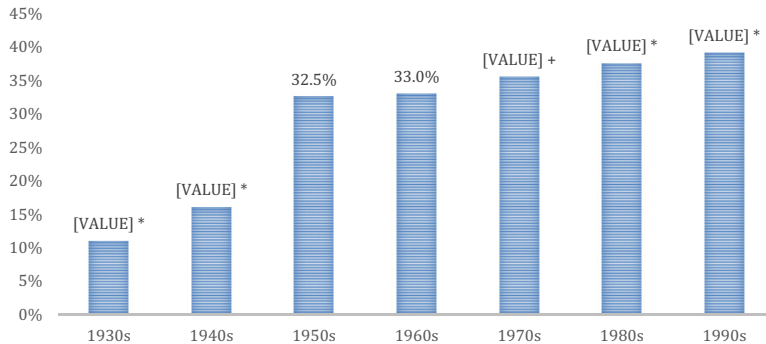Percentages of cartoons set outside of stores, by decade and overall

Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage
at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; * indicates statistically significant difference
from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071

growth appears to reflect, in part, the growing number of outlets available for advertising,
such as the growth of customer access to television in the 1950s and 1960s. Also, television,
having moving visuals and sound, probably brought greater customer attention to
advertising generally.

Beyond the emergence of television and other new advertising media, however, the
growth in advertising portrayals also suggests a greater abundance of marketing messages
in the environment. Table V shows the pattern of portrayals of various advertising media
over the decades. The ad media that are most significant, and that grow and remain strong
throughout the period, are ads outside of the store, such as in a store window, and other
outdoor advertising. The suggestion is a landscape more saturated with advertising
messages. For example, a cartoon portrays a financial company trying to induce customers
to make purchases on credit during the holidays. The sign in the company's store window
reads: "Be Merry Now. Pay Later" (November 27, 1971).

All in all, the trends in marketing activities portrayed show a shift from the store-based
transaction to a broader view of marketing that takes place both inside and outside the store.
The communication aspect of marketing remains paramount, but that communication can
now be taking place in the home or in the office or in the street. Marketing shifts from
something that has its set-aside time and place to something more ubiquitous.

	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Overall
Outside store ($p = 0.000$)	3.0*	4.5**	8.5	6.5	13.5*	13.0**	10.0	8.4
Various outdoor ($p = 0.308$)	4.5	6.5	7.0	10.0	7.5	9.5	10.0	7.9
Television ($p = 0.000$)	0.0*	0.0*	8.0*	7.0**	5.5	6.0	2.0	4.1
Print ($p = 0.001$)	1.0**	1.0**	2.0	4.0	3.5	3.5	8.0*	3.3
Indoor or in-store ($p = 0.835$)	2.0	2.5	4.5	4.0	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.3

Notes: **Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of
0.05 in relation to other decades; *indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the
adjusted alpha level of 0.0071 in relation to other decades

*Shifts in the meaning of marketing in the life of the customer (*RQ3*)*

As marketing portrayals shifted from a transactional focus to a more universal presence, it seems that marketing began to be shown as playing a larger role in the lives of customers. What started out as a periodic task, shopping and buying things, became a part of the everyday personal life of the consumer. As noted earlier, as the number of marketing portrayals set within stores declined, one of the settings that saw growth was in the home, yard or doorstep. Figure 5 shows that this growth was particularly strong from the 1930s to the 1960s. Clearly, the home is a much more personal setting for marketing activity than the store.

The social aspects of shopping, as portrayed by buyers in families or other groups, also show a shift from shopping as a more utilitarian activity to a more social and hedonic activity. Looking only at cartoons that include a buyer, Figure 6 indicates what percentage of those cartoons show a couple or family. The growth of family and couple portrayals is steep from the 1930s through the 1950s, after which the curve flattens out, even dropping a bit in the 1980s and 1990s. The data suggest that buying, or shopping, became a more of a shared
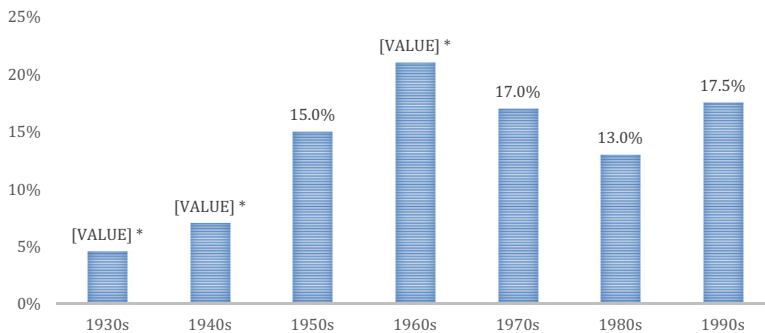
Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; * indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071
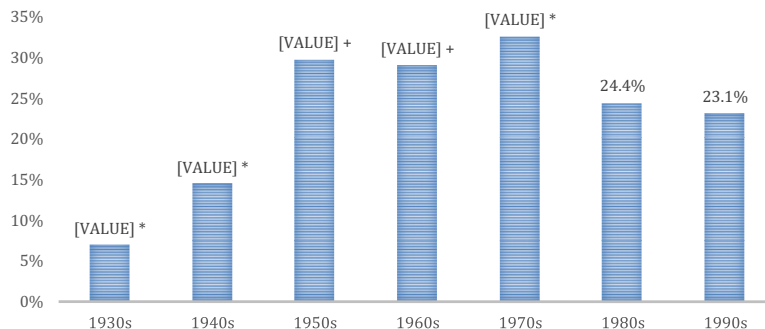
Figure 5.
Percentages of cartoons set at the home, yard or doorstep, by decade ($p = 0.000$).

Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; *indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071

Figure 6.
Percentages of cartoons with buyers that portray a couple or family, by decade ($p = 0.000$)

experience after the earlier years. The drop in the past two decades may, at least in part, be due to many of those coded as "buyers" being ad viewers, who are more likely to be solitary than people who are shopping.

Marketing taking on a more personal role in the lives of consumers can also be seen in the shifts in percentages of cartoons that contain brand names and in which customers are using marketing language. In an example of a customer using a brand slogan, a grinning man stumbles through the front door of his home and says to his scowling wife, "I was drinking the one beer to have when you're having more than one", clearly quoting the Schaefer Beer slogan and jingle of the time (February 15, 1964).

Table VI indicates that the incidence of cartoons that name a company, store or brand increased significantly from the 1930s into the 1960s after which the proportion flattened out over the remaining decades. Bastos and Levy (2012) describe how the concept of brands took on much greater importance during and following the Second World War, which is reflected in the findings here. From the mid to later part of the century, brands continued to become more significant to customers, in terms of being considered as personalities that people could relate to (Fournier, 1998) and filling roles as part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). The incidence of brand, store or company names that could be described as silly, funny, clever or strange remained quite low until it exploded in the 1970s through 1990s, providing further evidence of this expanded intimacy with brands.

Similarly, the proportion of cartoons that included instances of marketing slogans, jingles or jargon in the mouths of non-marketers jumped in the 1960s, as illustrated in Table VI. This seems to mark, as well, the shift from marketing as something outside of people, or foisted upon people, to marketing as an integral part of people's lives and identities. While television advertising was not known for providing highly informational messages to customers, it did succeed in creating a shared cultural touchstone and increased consumer fluency with a large number of brands (Krugman, 1965; Resnik and Stern, 1977).

Finally, the fact that people might be interested in how marketing is created shows an interest in marketing that goes beyond meeting personal needs for products.

In line with the fact that New York is the home of the advertising powerhouses of Madison Avenue, 3.8 per cent of the cartoons portray advertising ideas being pitched or developed. However, while the differences among decades are not statistically significant on the whole, the incidence of these portrayals was low in the 1930s, showing steady growth into the 1960's. Peak years were the 1960s and the 1990s, as illustrated in Figure 7.

Discussion

This paper is fundamentally about how marketing is experienced by outsiders to the profession. This question is addressed by studying cartoons published in a prominent weekly magazine during the latter 70 years of the twentieth century and may not generalize to other data sets. That being said, this magazine, *The New Yorker*, established itself very early on as "the most vigorous voice in American print humor" (Lee, 2000, p. 11), and its iconic cartoons have been republished in various anthologies. In his memoir, which includes many of his own and others' cartoons from *The New Yorker*, *New Yorker* cartoon editor Mankoff (2014, p. 45) explains that his initial interest in publishing in *The New Yorker* was because it "was and is the Everest of magazine cartooning".

A random sampling of cartoons was examined in terms of what was humorous in the cartoons and how marketing was portrayed generally. While these cartoonists should not be seen as voicing the observations of all individuals outside of marketing, they still represent an important and influential body of commenters on marketing.

Decade	Percentages of cartoons naming brands ($p = 0.000$)	Percentages of cartoons that include silly, funny, clever or strange brand names ($p = 0.000$)	Percentages of cartoons where non-marketers spout the language of marketing or marketers ($p = 0.000$)
1930s	10.5*	1.0	1.0**
1940s	18.0	1.0	0.5*
1950s	18.0	0.5**	2.0
1960s	26.0	1.0	9.5*
1970s	30.5*	3.5	5.5
1980s	23.0	4.0	4.5
1990s	24.5	7.5*	6.5
Overall	21.5	2.6	4.2

Notes: ** Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the nominal alpha level of 0.05 in relation to other decades; * indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071 in relation to other decades

Table VI.
Percentages of cartoons with named brands, funny brand names and non-marketers spouting marketing language, by decade and overall
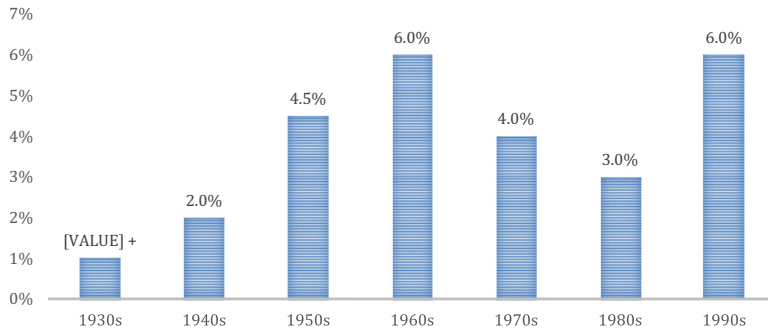
Notes: + Indicates statistically significant difference from expected percentage
at the nominal alpha level of 0.05; * indicates statistically significant difference
from expected percentage at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0071

The first question addressed in the analysis here regards what elements of marketing are seen as humorous. The literature as a whole suggests that people do not hold marketing and marketers in a particularly positive light. This, in turn, would lead to an expectation that bad behavior on the part of marketers might be an attractive source of humor for cartoonists. Is this, indeed, the case, and if not, then where is the humor in marketing?

The findings here do not show a very large proportion of marketing-related cartoons where the marketer is misbehaving. Over the seven decades of the study, only 3.7 per cent of cartoons portrayed marketers engaging in activities that appeared to be unethical or illegal. Further, only 4.6 per cent of cartoons show situations where customers were upset. While there are no particular standards to compare these numbers with, they do not feel particularly high for a field that rates fairly low in terms of consumer respect. Even at their peaks in the 1950s, the proportion of cartoons showing marketers acting unethically was only 7.5 per cent and the proportion of cartoons showing customers being upset in a marketing situation was at only 8.0 per cent. In other decades, however, the percentages of cartoons showing marketers engaged in adversarial and unethical behaviors toward customers are as low as 2.0 and 1.5 per cent, respectively.

One could argue that the apparent shortage of cartoons showing marketers or marketing as adversarial or unethical is because such cartoons would not fit norms of humor. A current theory of humor describes effective humor as portraying an instance of benign violation (McGraw and Warren, 2010). Perhaps instances of marketers irritating or taking advantage of customers could be seen as a violation, but not a *benign* violation and, therefore, not funny. Nevertheless, the cartoons do not show a complete absence of bad behavior by marketers. Rather, marketer misdeeds, while present, do not constitute a predominant source of marketing-related humor.

So where does the humor come from in the cartoons? Primarily it comes from marketers or customers saying silly or clever things, most often in the context of face-to-face interactions between buyers and sellers. In the early decades, sellers are more likely to be the funny ones, while the source of humor is more evenly split between sellers and buyers in the later decades. This shift suggests a more empowered consumer following the consumer rights movement of the mid-decade and the historical growth of theoretical perceptions of marketers and customers as partners or co-creators of value (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Regardless of whether the buyer or seller

is the funny one in the cartoon, however, the humor in face-to-face marketing interactions is probably not a great deal unlike the humor portrayed in cartoons involving other, non-marketing human interactions. In other words, the findings suggest that marketing activities appear to be simply another part of life where funny things can happen, without a great deal of value judgment from outside observers in most cases. While a fair number of cartoons find humor in advertisements and products, these occur much less frequently than cartoons where people supply the humorous element.

Beyond the humor elements of the cartoons, however, changes can be observed over the course of the early middle to late twentieth century with regard to what parts of marketing are observed by the cartoonists. In the early years, the context of marketing is generally a face-to-face transaction between a buyer and a seller. Typically, in the cartoons this transaction is taking place in a retail store setting, but regardless of the setting, the presence of face-to-face selling reflects the model for much of the buying and selling taking place for millennia prior to 1930.

While portrayals of buyers and sellers meeting up to transact exchanges never disappear from the cartoon data, a dramatic shift takes place in the early decades, particularly from the 1940s to the 1950s in the number of cartoons that include advertising in the place of sales transactions. This shift is undoubtedly due, at least in part, to the beginning of widespread television ownership and watching, which afforded marketers a new medium for disseminating messages. The advertising jingle kept messages in consumers' heads and on their lips and increased the accessibility of brands names (Krugman, 1965). The cartoonists who are portraying marketing-related activities are reflecting the growth of marketing outside of the buyer–seller meeting. They also parallel marketing theory's move away from a selling focus to a customer focus (Kotler, 1972; Levitt, 1960). In essence, marketing was moving from the domain of the store to the world in general, from an activity that is constrained by time and place to an activity that is schedule-free and ubiquitous. In fact, after the 1940s, a much higher proportion of cartoons were set in or around the home of the consumer, with the marketing often taking the form of advertising.

Beyond marking a new era in marketing communications, the 1950s, coming, as they did, at the end of a world war, also showed a new era of consuming behavior. The utilitarian consumption of the depression-era 1930s and war-torn 1940s gave way to an era of more hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Buyers were much more likely to be portrayed in pairs or families, illustrating the social aspects of shopping and consuming.

As marketing grew from the store to the larger world outside of that setting, consumers also began to experience marketing as part of their everyday lives. The rapid growth of the naming of brands in cartoons in the 1960s and 1970s suggests an increased connection between customers and the products they are purchasing. Further, the increased proportion of those named brands that are portrayed as funny or clever in the 1970s, 1980s and especially 1990s suggests an even more directed marketing and consumer focus on the brand aspect of products, as suggested by Bastos and Levy (2012).

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the growing connectedness of customers to marketers can found in the proportion of cartoons in which non-marketers are employing marketing language, jargon or slogans. While this proportion jumps and peaks in the 1960s, coinciding with the growth of television with its visuals and sounds, it continues to be much more prevalent in the latter half of the period than in the earlier half. The language of marketers is seen as having become incorporated into the language of the public. A corresponding increase in portrayals of the developing and pitching of marketing messages in the last third of the century shows a growing interest in the marketing process. Thus, as marketers build relationships and connections with customers, customers appear to be a part of that world,

rather than apart from it. Engagement in the processes of marketing are seen to be taking on a more meaningful part of customers' lives.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

The data used in this research stem from a single source – cartoons from *The New Yorker*. While *The New Yorker* has been an important and influential publication for many years, and it is particularly renowned for its cartoons, essentially, this research is a look at marketing through the eyes and pens of cartoonists for this one periodical, and it is unclear the extent to which these results generalize to other contexts. How would these portrayals compare with other portrayals from the same period? Further research may look at other periodicals that regularly publish cartoons to see how those cartoons compare. Periodicals that publish this type of "gag cartoon" include *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barrons*, *The Harvard Business Review* and *Reader's Digest*. Some of these are business-related publications, however, which could cause them to have a different perspective on business than a publication for a more general audience. Beyond cartoons, a host of other literary sources could be examined, including books, films, plays and magazine articles.

The cartoons studied here are also undoubtedly influenced by *The New Yorker*'s audience. While it began as a magazine for New Yorkers, and has always had a significant proportion of locals as readers, it quickly became a national magazine with a prosperous, ambitious readership (Yagoda, 2001). Therefore, although the cartoons portray a gamut of human characters and situations, there continues to be an overall urban and upper-middle- to upper-class bent. That being said, it is axiomatic that any study of literary artifacts will tend to be studying products of a literary class of individuals.

Examination of outsider marketing portrayals from other time periods could also be productive. The twentieth century produced an explosion of marketing thought and new practices. However, the period since the end of that century has also brought significant changes to marketing. In the 1990's, for example, the internet and its influence was only in its infancy. How are outsider portrayals of marketing changing in light of the advances in social media and digital marketing?

Finally, *The New Yorker* provides a particularly US-centered perspective on marketing. Future research might address whether comparable shifts in marketing portrayals might be evident in other countries and marketplaces around the world.

Conclusion

Marketing theory and practice are continuously evolving, both from the perspective of marketers and the perspective of customers. The study presented here investigates that evolution in the USA during the important decades from 1930 through 1999 using portrayals of marketing in cartoons printed in *The New Yorker* magazine. As such, the study provides an important outsider perspective on marketing and addresses the question of what observers of marketing were seeing over that period.

Through the eyes and pens of these observers, we see a shift in marketing from an activity that is largely set at a place of commercial business to an activity that pervades life in general. Marketing moves from the store to the surrounding environment to the home and life of the customer. Eventually it lands in the very hearts and minds of customers as they learn to speak the language of marketing.

What was not found in the cartoon portrayals of marketing was a great deal of negativity. Rather, the cartoonists generally showed marketing as a fun, though sometimes silly or bizarre, part of everyday life.

Note
1. www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx

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Appendix

Complete list of items coded in the cartoons:

- the year of the cartoon;
- the gender of the cartoonist;
- whether one or more male sellers/spokespersons/marketers play a role in the cartoon;
- whether one or more female sellers/spokespersons/marketers played a role in the cartoon;
- whether one or more male buyers/customers/shoppers/ad targets play a role;
- whether one or more female buyers/customers/shoppers/ad targets play a role;
- whether a seller/advertiser/spokesperson/marketer is or says something silly, funny, clever or strange;
- whether a buyer/customer/shopper/ad target is or says something silly, funny, clever or strange;
- whether someone playing a role in the cartoon appears to be part of a couple or family with someone else in the cartoon;
- whether any child plays a meaningful role;
- whether an advertisement appears in the cartoon, and, if so, in what medium;
- whether an ad is silly, funny, clever or strange;
- whether an ad appears in an unusual or clever way or place;
- the setting of the cartoon;
- the main type of product addressed, if any;
- whether an ad idea is being pitched;
- whether a product is silly, funny, clever or strange;

- whether gift-giving is addressed;
- whether a brand/store/company name is mentioned, either real or fabricated;
- whether a brand/store/company name is silly, funny, clever or strange;
- whether price is a meaningful element;
- whether discounts, sales or rebates are shown or mentioned;
- whether marketing slogans or jargon are used or referenced, other than by the marketer;

- whether anthropomorphism is on display;
- whether a political candidate is being marketed;
- whether telemarketing is taking place or mentioned;
- whether conflict between marketer and customer is displayed or a customer seems angry or upset; and
- whether the marketer is engaging in unethical or illegal activity.

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