

The Machiavellian Turn in Marketing Strategy: An Academic Review of The 23 Laws of Marketing

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of a Machiavellian framework within contemporary marketing strategy, drawing on insights from Hadrian Stone's *The 23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die*. While the classic works of Ries and Trout emphasized immutable principles of positioning, the current environment of fragmented attention, accelerated information flows, and heightened consumer skepticism necessitates a different lens. This review situates *The 23 Laws of Marketing* as both a continuation and departure from the traditional canon. Through comparative analysis, it identifies how the text reframes strategic marketing as a practice of perception management, symbolic authority, and psychological leverage. The paper argues that this “Machiavellian turn” in marketing represents not a rejection of prior laws, but their evolution into a more adaptive, context-driven framework for the digital age.

Introduction

Since the publication of *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* by Al Ries and Jack Trout in 1993, the field of strategic marketing has been anchored by the notion of universal, enduring principles. Their framework offered clarity at a time when brands were primarily competing within broadcast-driven ecosystems, and when positioning was largely determined by control over distribution and messaging. These “immutable laws” provided the intellectual foundation for marketers navigating the pre-digital age.

However, the marketing landscape has since transformed. Globalized commerce, social media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and the rise of digital-first consumer behavior have eroded the stability that once underpinned Ries and Trout’s assertions. Immutable principles, while still influential, appear increasingly insufficient to capture the dynamics of contemporary influence.

It is within this shifting context that Hadrian Stone’s *The 23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die* emerges. Stone reframes strategic marketing through a Machiavellian lens, where power, perception, and psychological leverage take precedence over static “laws.” This evolution reflects the necessity of fluidity and adaptability in an environment defined by rapid information cycles and heightened consumer skepticism. The present paper introduces this framework as an academic object of study, situating it within both historical tradition and modern strategic necessity.

Literature Review

The foundational contributions of Al Ries and Jack Trout, particularly *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* (1981) and *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* (1993), established a vocabulary that shaped late twentieth-century strategic thinking. Their central claim; that marketing outcomes are determined less by product quality and more by the perception constructed in the consumer's mind, redefined competition. Positioning became not only a tool, but a doctrine, guiding how firms crafted identity in crowded markets.

In parallel, Philip Kotler's *Principles of Marketing* offered a more systematic framework, emphasizing segmentation, targeting, and the broader integration of marketing into managerial science. Kotler's work remains a cornerstone of academic instruction, though it has often been critiqued for prioritizing managerial control in environments that are no longer as stable or predictable.

More recent theorists and practitioners have highlighted the disruptive influence of digital platforms. Scholars such as Byron Sharp (*How Brands Grow*, 2010) and Scott Galloway (*The Four*, 2017) stress network effects, algorithmic ecosystems, and brand ubiquity across digital channels. These perspectives extend the field but remain tied to measurable growth metrics and platform optimization.

Stone's *The 23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die* enters this discourse by reframing strategic marketing through a Machiavellian orientation. Unlike the immutable framing of Ries and Trout, Stone emphasizes adaptability, strategic manipulation of perception, and the calculated use of narrative dominance. This shift signals a departure from managerial or tactical logics toward a philosophy of marketing as the pursuit of power in the consumer imagination.

Methodology / Approach

This paper employs a comparative and conceptual methodology. The comparative dimension situates *The 23 Laws of Marketing* within the established tradition of Ries and Trout's *22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, while also contrasting it with subsequent contributions from Kotler, Sharp, and others. The purpose of this comparison is not only to highlight continuities but also to identify where Stone's work represents a departure. A Machiavellian turn toward power-centered strategy.

The conceptual dimension draws on textual analysis of Stone's *23 laws*, categorizing them according to dominant themes such as perception management, narrative construction, and competitive positioning. Each law is examined both in isolation and in relation to the larger strategic framework it produces.

Finally, the paper approaches these texts not simply as managerial guides, but as cultural artifacts that embody specific worldviews of competition and survival. The analysis proceeds with the assumption that marketing discourse shapes, rather than merely reflects, the structures of modern economic life.

Analysis: The Machiavellian Turn

Ries and Trout's *22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* (1993) positioned marketing as a discipline bound by perception, category leadership, and strategic simplicity. Their framework reflected the mass-media era in which visibility was primarily shaped by advertising dominance, linear brand hierarchies, and the limits of consumer choice. Laws such as the "Law of Leadership" and the "Law of Perception" established the foundation for marketers to understand that winning the mind of the consumer mattered more than objective product superiority.

Stone's *The 23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die* (2025) advances this foundation by introducing what can be described as a Machiavellian turn in marketing strategy. While Ries and Trout framed marketing laws as external constraints to which brands must adapt, Stone treats these laws as instruments of power that can be wielded. For example, where Ries and Trout emphasized the immutability of perception, Stone's *Law 2: Control Perception or Perish* argues that perception is not fixed but malleable, open to deliberate manipulation by the strategist who can craft compelling illusions.

Similarly, Ries and Trout's "Law of the Category" urged brands to create or dominate new categories when unable to lead existing ones. Stone extends this logic with *Law 7: Create Enemies to Forge Loyalty*, positing that rivalry itself can be manufactured to consolidate allegiance. This reflects a shift from passive positioning to active psychological orchestration, where consumer identity is forged through conflict as much as through alignment.

Another key divergence is seen in how the two texts conceptualize status. Ries and Trout largely addressed hierarchy in terms of market share and brand ranking. Stone, by contrast, articulates *Law 10: Sell Status, Not Products*, a principle that acknowledges the centrality of symbolic consumption in digital culture. Here, the act of purchase transcends utility and becomes a performance of identity, an insight more aligned with twenty-first century social media economies than with the broadcast-driven context of the early 1990s.

In this way, the Machiavellian turn is not merely rhetorical. It reflects a broader evolution in marketing thought: from describing immutable constraints to prescribing deliberate strategies of perception control, rivalry creation, and identity manipulation. Stone's framework therefore represents both continuity with and departure from Ries and Trout. Continuity in recognizing the supremacy of perception, and departure in elevating manipulation from an implicit reality to an explicit law.

Discussion: Implications for Marketing Strategy

The contrast between *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* and *The 23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die* signals more than an authorial update; it reflects a paradigmatic shift in how marketing is theorized and practiced. Ries and Trout's framework was prescriptive, offering "immutable" guidance rooted in perception management during the rise of mass media and globalized branding. Their work framed marketing as a discipline of positioning within established competitive hierarchies.

Stone's intervention reframes the discipline in distinctly Machiavellian terms. Rather than prescribing immutable boundaries, *the 23 Laws* emphasize power, conflict, and psychological leverage. The implication is that marketing cannot be understood as a set of fixed commandments but as a field of maneuver, one where perception is weaponized, alliances are temporary, and the creation of enemies is as valuable as the cultivation of loyalty. By casting marketing as a form of strategic statecraft rather than mere brand positioning, Stone situates the discipline within a broader tradition of political and psychological theory.

For practitioners, this reframing carries significant implications. In an environment dominated by algorithmic feeds, fragmented audiences, and rapid cycles of attention, fixed rules are insufficient. *The 23 Laws* provide a flexible, if unforgiving, framework that acknowledges volatility as a constant. For academics, the work challenges the assumption that marketing principles are universal or timeless, instead proposing that they are contingent upon power-

-relations and psychological manipulation. The Machiavellian turn therefore broadens the scope of marketing scholarship, encouraging comparative inquiry between marketing, political theory, and even military strategy.

Ultimately, the implications are clear: marketing in the digital era is less about adhering to immutable laws and more about mastering the dynamics of perception, conflict, and influence. Stone's contribution invites both scholars and practitioners to abandon the safety of commandments etched in stone and embrace a more fluid, adversarial, and strategic conception of the field.

Conclusion

The progression from Ries and Trout's *22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* to Stone's *23 Laws of Marketing: Master Them or Die* reflects a decisive reorientation in marketing thought. The former provided clarity and structure at a time when brands sought order in increasingly crowded markets. Its emphasis on positioning, perception, and category ownership offered marketers a compass during the broadcast era.

Stone's intervention, however, is not merely additive. It transforms the framework itself. By introducing a Machiavellian lens, the *23 Laws* reconceptualize marketing as a discipline inseparable from power, conflict, and psychological control. This shift mirrors broader changes in the digital economy, where the speed of information, the volatility of attention, and the weaponization of perception demand strategies that are both adaptive and ruthless.

For scholars, this work raises new questions: Can marketing laws ever be truly immutable, or must they be reinterpreted with each technological and cultural epoch? For practitioners, it demands a reconsideration of strategy; not as a fixed set of rules but as a perpetual contest of influence.

In bridging classical marketing doctrine with a darker, more strategic paradigm, Stone's *23 Laws* extend the field beyond its traditional boundaries. The implication is clear: marketing no longer belongs only to the realm of persuasion; it belongs equally to the realms of politics, psychology, and power.

Authors Note

This paper does not claim to deliver a definitive or universal framework. Instead, it positions *The 23 Laws of Marketing* as a continuation of the intellectual lineage forged by Ries & Trout, Kotler, and others who shaped the field. Its purpose is to invite further exploration into how power, perception, and influence drive modern strategy in ways that earlier paradigms could not fully anticipate.

As with any evolving discipline, marketing is best understood through debate and refinement. Scholars, entrepreneurs, and practitioners alike are encouraged to engage with, critique, and expand upon the arguments presented here. The intent is not closure, but contribution. Adding another layer to the dialogue on how marketing laws adapt to the demands of an ever-changing digital world.

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