Science has always been marketed, from 18th-century coffeehouse demos of Newton's ideas to today's TikTok explainers

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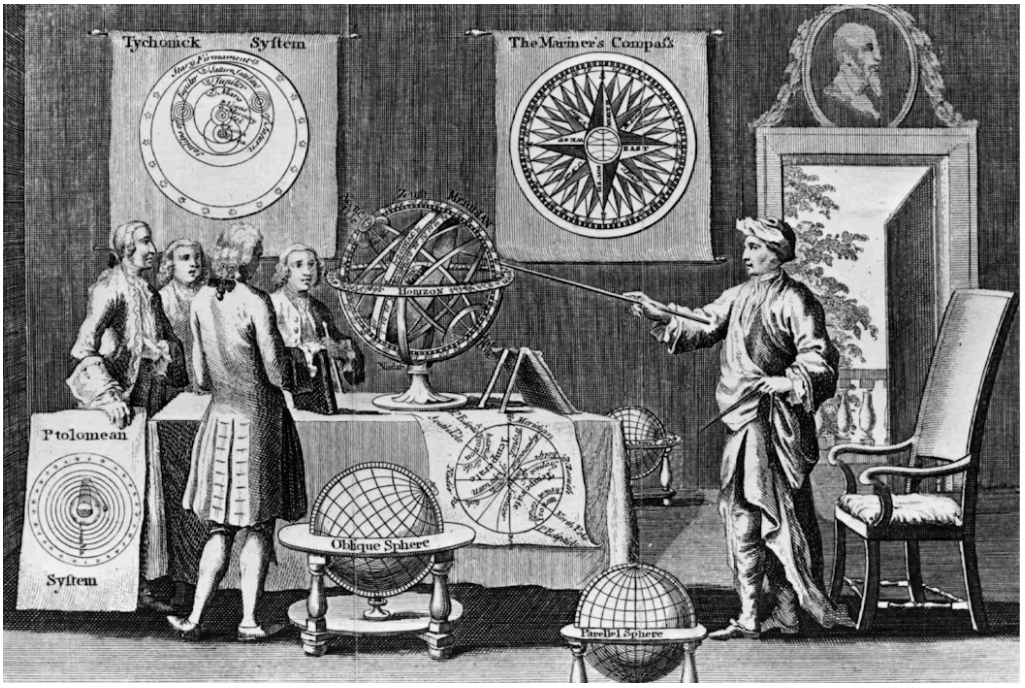

For science ideas to catch on, they had to be promoted.

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People often see science as a world apart: cool, rational and untouched by persuasion or performance. In this view, scientists simply discover truth, and truth speaks for itself.

But history tells a different story. Scientific theories do not simply reveal themselves; they compete for attention, credibility and uptake. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once suggested that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market," a line that helped popularize the metaphor of a "marketplace of ideas."

In this view, science is not outside the market, but inside a public arena where claims vie for audiences, resources and belief – and where power, persuasion and social position shape which ideas are heard, trusted or forgotten.

As a marketing scholar trained in economic sociology, I study how institutions that are supposedly above or apart from market logics – such as science, religion, medicine and education – use marketing tools to sustain credibility and build or keep moral authority.

When I tell people that one of the areas I study is the marketing of science, they are often surprised at the concept. Yet persuasion is an integral part of the scientific process.

From Isaac Newton's followers and their coffeehouse demonstrations of physics wonders to today's TED Talks and TikTok explainers, scientists have long relied on storytelling and demonstration to make invisible truths visible. For scientific theories to supplant other plausible theories, to challenge existing theories and win acceptance, they must be correct – but they must also be convincing.

People didn't need to read Isaac Newton's indecipherable Latin or understand his incomprehensible mathematics; they could just watch the live demonstrations, as in this depiction of an 18th-century nighttime scientific lecture on pneumatics.

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The original science influencers

In the early 1700s, Isaac Newton's followers turned abstract theory into public performance and cultural fashion.

At the time, Cartesian philosophy dominated intellectual life. Newton's 1687 book "Principia Mathematica" proposed a new worldview of gravity, optics and motion, but the mathematics was so dense that few could grasp it.

Although Newton himself was a recluse, a circle of zealous Newtonian men of science, described by historians as devoted disciples and even evangelists for Newton's natural philosophy, took his new theories on the road. These itinerant lecturers performed experiments and spectaculars in London coffeehouses and aristocratic salons, demonstrating Newtonian physics. They sold tickets, pamphlets and even branded scientific instruments so audiences could reproduce these marvels at home.

Historian of science Jeff Wigelsworth showed that Newton's evangelizers built what today might be called a brand: experiences, artifacts and emotions that linked scientific authority to Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, and to their own personalities.

My own research finds that these men of science also used a suite of early marketing activities. Besides developing products to sell to promote Newtonian science, they came up with promotions that targeted different audiences, adjusted their pricing and used varied distribution strategies.

Along with their pure entertainment value, these public demonstrations were integrally entwined with Newtonian scientific viewpoints and helped these ideas gain popularity and legitimacy in public life.

As in our own time, where one's stance on various scientific debates often signals one's political ideology or religious beliefs, aligning in support of Newton's theories over, say, René Descartes' or Gottfried Wilhelm Liebniz's in discussion and by practice also came to indicate a certain stance on theology and politics, and to be Newtonian became a social signal of a desirable style and social status.

Particular ideas can gain currency as more people hear about them and sign on as believers.

Joseph Wright of Derby/Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

From coffeehouses to TikTok

Three centuries later, the marketing of science is more visible, and more complicated, than ever.

Scientists can now promote their work on social media platforms like Bluesky, YouTube and TikTok, crafting personal brands and cultivating audiences. Influencer-scientists use storytelling, humor and design to reach millions. If scientists don't do this themselves, their proponents, just like Newton's disciples, may do it for them.

I call this process the marketization of moral authority: when historically sacred or ostensibly impartial institutions such as science, religion and education increasingly organize themselves as markets, adopting promotional, pricing and product logics to secure their legitimacy, authority, appeal and funding.

None of this effort is inherently bad. As in Newton's time, effective marketing communications can make complex work accessible and even inspiring. It can publicize and defend important theoretical and practical findings in a competitive, skeptical world.

But it raises questions.

Today's scientists may spend time making videos and other content for social media.

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Value of recognizing that science gets marketed

You might wonder why anyone beyond academia should care whether science is marketed. After all, every field uses communication and outreach.

It matters because science is one of the few institutions people still rely on to anchor truth claims in evidence. And when the boundary between scientific fact and promotion blurs, it becomes easy to confuse confidence with credibility, or charisma with responsible consensus.

Scientific rhetoric can easily be co-opted. Think of wellness influencers using "quantum" jargon to sell supplements; AI companies invoking neuroscience to legitimatize untested technologies; charlatans mimicking the language of peer review to sow doubt.

But awareness is a form of protection. When you recognize that scientific authority can be built through persuasion, you become more discerning consumers of it. Faced with a message involving science, you can consider:

- Who is framing this message, and why?
- What evidence supports it? Is this evidence vetted and validated by rigorous studies?
- Is it appealing to emotion or identity, rather than objective logic?
  This process can help you become more scientifically literate.

Science has never been the pristine, market-free ideal many imagine. It has always lived – sometimes uneasily – within a marketplace of ideas, competing for belief, attention and authority.

Recognizing that reality humanizes science and reminds us that truth must be discovered, communicated and, ultimately, accepted.

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