

Conceptual foundations of marketing and marketing theory

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Provides a review of the nature of marketing. In order to explicate this work, presents marketing as a concept, management philosophy and organizational function. Acknowledges the contribution of key authors in the field, such as Alderson, Bagozzi, Houston, Hunt and Sheth, and pays attention to the nature of developments in marketing. Provides illustration to the evolution of marketing as a discipline with specific regard to the theoretical foundations of the subject matter. Draws various conclusions and makes certain implications as to the future of marketing.

Introduction

One of the classic management myths of recent history is that marketing involves nothing more than advertising. Furthermore, the marketing director of a medium-sized engineering firm recently told me of his profession, "...we're only peddlars and there's not more much to it than that!" Incidentally, since that illuminating discussion, his firm has been turned over to receivership. However, in attempting to clarify what is meant by the term marketing, many questions have been raised, some of which have been addressed by members of the profession and others that have remained unanswered because of their potential complexity. This article will attempt to illustrate a contemporary understanding of the term and a particularly useful framework with which to format the discussion will be to comment, in turn, on the concept, philosophy and function of marketing. For this purpose, the concept will be expressed as the means of operating within an organizational philosophy, the philosophy will be regarded as the medium which governs organizational life and the function will be referred to as the implementation reality and the form in which the concept is conspicuous in organizational behaviour[1,2]. The article will then address issues that underly the development of the marketing discipline and provide the foundation to marketing theory. Finally, a number of conclusions are made which indicate areas of future development for the discipline.

The marketing concept

The health of the marketing discipline is manifest in its constant desire and willingness to review and question the domain of marketing[3-6] and this form of evolution has been sustained for several decades. For example, during the 1960s, the marketing concept was proclaimed as the saviour of companies[7], the 1970s saw it being challenged because it was unresponsive to greater societal issues[8-10], while during the 1980s it caused discontent by over-segmenting markets[11] and overstating the value of

consumers' expressed needs[12,13].

Responses to such indictments of the marketing concept have been many and varied. To date, the marketing concept has been broadened[14,15], deepened[16], extended[17], redefined[18] and repositioned[2]. By implication, the marketing concept has attracted an abundance of definitions.

While there is some evidence of intellectual progress towards achieving an accepted definition of marketing[19-23], further developments are constrained owing to the difficulty of determining the precise inclusiveness of the term. That is, as the nature and scope of marketing has expanded, little attention has been given to explaining the boundaries within which the concept is applicable. For instance, some of the definitions which prevail are narrow in their form[24], while others have so much latitude in their nomenclature that they are notably generic and offer no real foundation for conceptualizing marketing. Even though it is difficult to reconcile these and other distinct viewpoints, Raymond and Barksdale[1] provide a definition of the marketing concept which is applied in nature. They have purported that,

...the marketing concept [provides] a single prescription for running a business successfully. The consumer must be recognised and accepted as the focal point for all business activities, and knowledge of customer needs and wants should be the starting point for all major business decisions[1, p. 42].

This applied management emphasis is echoed in McGee and Spiro's[25] work which has stated that the marketing concept was intended to help marketers manage and coordinate their thinking about specific marketing questions. In formulating their definition they considered that the marketing concept involved the,

...specific techniques by which one seeks to identify and satisfy consumer needs. The concept involves what is commonly referred to as the marketing mix, the marketing tools a manager combines in a specific way to deal with a specific marketing situation[25, p. 41].

This compares favourably with the American Marketing Association's (AMA) view. The

AMA updated their definition of the marketing concept after an exhaustive debate. The definition now reads:

Marketing is the process of planning and exacting the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchange and satisfy organizational objectives[26, p. 1].

These definitions are useful to the manager because they enable him/her to articulate the essence of marketing in the organizational setting. This is contrasted with the somewhat esoteric definitions found in the teaching literature in marketing. For instance, Houston [13, p. 85] considered that:

The marketing concept is a managerial prescription relating to the attainment of an entity's goals...The marketing concept states that an entity achieves its own exchange determined goals most efficiently through a thorough understanding of potential exchange partners and their needs and wants, through a thorough understanding of the costs associated with satisfying those needs and wants, and then designing, producing, and offering products in light of this understanding.

A similar viewpoint has been expressed by Kotler[27, p. 10] who has described the marketing concept as,

...a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering, and exchanging products of value with others.

Even though many of these readings provide conceptually pure, well-grounded definitions of the marketing concept, they have been heavily criticized for their abstraction and limited practical value[21]. Indeed, this has been suggested as the basis for many misinterpretations of marketing in organizations[28] and has initiated some of the criticism surrounding the marketing concept.

The number of definitions of the marketing concept are probably equalled, if not surpassed, by the number of criticisms it attracts. Nevertheless, for the most part, these criticisms can be distilled down to four main critical themes. First, historical evidence suggests that marketing has been portrayed as the most crucial management perspective within the firm[13,29]. Second, many examples of poor implementation abound[30-33] indicating a divorce between the rhetoric of the marketing concept and the reality of marketing practice. Third, the marketing concept does not sufficiently recognize the responsibility of the organization to society[27], the consumer[2,25] or the human resources within the firm[34]. Finally, an exaggerated emphasis on the marketing

concept within organizations has been blamed for a decline in productivity, competitiveness and the ability to successfully innovate[12,35,37].

In summary, despite the multiplicity of definitions for the marketing concept, it is clearly something which concerns the relationship between producers and consumers[17,38]. Furthermore, the notion of an exchange relationship is central to understanding the foundation of the marketing concept[39-41]. Consequently, a clear axiom of marketing centres on exchanges of value between producers and consumers for the purpose of satisfying human needs and wants[27].

The marketing philosophy

It has been argued by many management writers that the implementation of the marketing concept in organizations requires the maintenance of a particular managerial philosophy or orientation[42-46]. Nevertheless, most organizations exhibit a host of conflicting philosophies which provide problems for the implementation of such a concept[47].

In contemporary readings, the marketing philosophy is usually presented as one of a number of managerial philosophies which constantly compete for visibility within the organization. Table I exhibits a number of these more prominent managerial philosophies and illustrates some attitudes that are typically associated with each.

The cost philosophy is generally considered short-termist and is a disinvestment approach commonly used as a strategy of retrenchment[48]. The product philosophy is reflected in organizations which have aggressive research and development programmes[2]. The production philosophy is concerned with capacity creation and volume production[28]. While this approach does require the identification and development of markets, manufacturing and production issues assume much greater significance in decision making[38]. The sales philosophy engages an organization to seek out customers aggressively and persuade them to consume existing offerings[13]. The erratic philosophy is the term used to characterize an organization that is unable to plan its activities owing to the turbulence and complexity of environmental circumstances[49]. The marketing philosophy focuses directly on three key issues of customer orientation, integrated organizational effort and profit direction[25]. First, customer orientation is derived through generating knowledge of the

Table I
Prominent managerial philosophies

Type of philosophy	Typical associated attitude
Cost philosophy	"The only way to improve our profits is to reduce our marketing and production costs"
Product philosophy	"The quality of our product sells itself and customers will always need our products"
Production philosophy	"The more we make the more profitable it becomes. So let's get out there and make the customers buy"
Sales philosophy	"We place a major emphasis on selling and promotion efforts to ensure sales"
Erratic philosophy	"You just cannot plan ahead in this industry, nobody knows what's going to happen from one day to the next"
Marketing philosophy	"We place a major emphasis on the analysis of target market needs and wants and deliver the desired satisfactions more efficiently and effectively than competitors"
Societal marketing philosophy	"We place a major emphasis on the analysis of target market needs and wants and deliver the desired satisfactions more efficiently and effectively than competitors in such a way that it preserves or enhances the consumer's or society's wellbeing"

Source: Compiled from [27, 49, 50]

customer through an understanding of market needs and wants, and taking necessary actions to respond to the demands of target customers. Second, integrated effort refers to total organizational unity in attempting to achieve marketing purposes successfully. Finally, profit direction is intended to focus the attention of the organization on achieving profit rather than simply sales volume. The societal marketing philosophy is an augmented form of the marketing philosophy and has its origins in questioning the legitimacy and acceptability of the marketing philosophy [51]. The societal marketing philosophy calls for a balance between three considerations of company profits, consumer want satisfaction and public interest [27]. Provided these three policy areas find an equilibrium, the organization is said to have adopted and implemented the societal marketing concept.

Even though the normative prescriptions of the marketing philosophy have been subject to some criticism [52–54], most of the controversy surrounding marketing can be targeted at the actual practice or rather "malpractice" [38, p. 11] of marketing. To this end, this discussion will proceed with an examination of the function of marketing.

The marketing function

In addition to being a concept and a philosophy, marketing is an organizational function [30, 55]. The extent of implementation of the marketing concept depends on a host of

variables such as the organizational structure and the demands of internal operations. However, a number of writers have documented research studies in this area and attempted to operationalize and measure the "degree of implementation of the marketing concept" [56, p. 92] construct. Some of these studies were carried out a considerable time ago [57–61], while others are of more recent origin [31, 62–66]. These studies were conducted across many different industries and surveyed firms of different sizes with the general finding that the marketing concept had been adopted, to a certain extent, and marketing responsibilities expanded to accord marketing with the position of recognized functional status within the organization. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in accepting these findings in that the "degree of implementation of the marketing concept" [56, p. 92] construct is multidimensional which provides complex measurement problems [67]. Furthermore, many of the empirical conclusions in this area are contingent in nature and, therefore, limited to specific industries or organizational circumstances.

To summarize, there are formidable arguments to suggest that organizations should recognize the potential of marketing and thereby seek ways to implement the marketing concept in their own settings. To do so should provide benefits to the organization itself in the achievement of its goals and customers in the form of greater levels of satisfaction. For a detailed discussion of current thinking on the topic of market orientation, a

pragmatic review has been provided by Harris[68] in a recent issue of this journal.

Development of the marketing discipline

It has been argued that the genesis of the marketing discipline can be sourced to the beginning of the twentieth century[69]. Until that time, economic theory had provided explanations of decision-making activity and guidelines for business and government actions. However, as a result of changing economic circumstances the direct demand-supply relationship was complicated by increasingly sophisticated channels of distribution and wholesalers who were exerting greater influence in their transactions[70]. It has been further contended that the role of marketing within the firm formally developed during the early 1950s[1,71] as a result of the post-war conditions of scarcity[25]. In short, firms began to realize that it was in their interests to focus their efforts on the satisfaction of the needs, wants and desires of particular customer segments. In the mid-1950s, marketing had become the keystone philosophy of business[1,72] which was reflected in contemporary management opinion at that time and emphasized by Drucker[73, p. 37] who claimed that:

There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a satisfied customer. It is the customer who determines what the business is.

Although the 1950s witnessed the development of marketing, it was the mid-1960s that saw the pinnacle of its acceptance[25,74]. However, marketing began to lose its organizational recognition during the 1970s for a number of reasons, one of which Clayclump[72] considered to be management's disillusionment with the contribution of marketing to profit making. In addition, Wind and Robertson[75] believed another indicator to point to the demise of marketing was that production and sales orientations typically dominated organizational decision making. Nonetheless, it remained that new explanations of marketplace activities were needed and this formed the basis for the evolution of the marketing discipline.

Early writings on marketing were mainly descriptive and it was not until the 1940s that the discipline received recognized theoretical attention by researchers. The most significant contributions in this area at that time were provided by Alderson and Cox[76] and Bartels[77], who debated the position of marketing as a scientific discipline. The development of marketing thought was not at all

rapid and, in 1964, Halbert[78] provided a damning indictment of the status of marketing. He concluded that marketing had no defensible theory on the basis of logical consistency, experimental rigour or adequate philosophical grounding. Indeed, theoretical developments were so limited that somewhat later, Bartels[77, p. 73] suggested that there was an "identity crisis" in marketing. Thereafter, a trend towards the examination of marketing theory emerged which provided a resurgence of interest in developing the foundations of the academic discipline[79].

The last two decades have witnessed numerous contributions to the field which now form the basis of contemporary marketing theory. Writers have approached this field of examination from several perspectives. For example, some see marketing theory in terms of its scientific content[80-83], managerial perspective[73, 84-86] and meta-theoretical foundations[87-90]. Despite this significant research attention, numerous opportunities still exist within the marketing discipline for generating new theories and providing a substantial contribution to knowledge[91]. This has been further emphasized by Howard *et al.*[79] who suggested that, in order to gain greater recognition, the marketing discipline must now generate an exemplary body of theory which:

...provides not only a continued interest in ...fundamental theory questions, but a *raison d'être* for the current increase in scholarly attention being given to marketing[79, p. 15].

Theory in marketing

In order to understand what constitutes theory and what is currently acceptable as such, some discussion needs to be given to the nature of scientific inquiry. Historically, it was considered that the role of science was to convert "*doxa*" (what is believed to be true) into "*episteme*" (what is known to be true)[83, p. 86]. However, this suggests that contentions can somehow be proven. The contemporary philosophical view tends to suggest that knowledge is not infallible but, moreover, tends to be conditional on particular circumstances. Arguably, one of the foremost commentators on the philosophy of science, in present times, is Dubin. His opinion of what constitutes a sound theory building approach is described, in two parts, as follows[92, pp. 7-8]:

A theoretical model starts with variables or (1) units whose interactions constitute the subject matter of attention. The model then specifies the manner in which these units interact with each other as (2) the laws of

interaction...Since theoretical models are generally of limited portions of the world, the limits as (3) boundaries must be set forth within which the theory is expected to hold. Most theoretical models are presumed to represent a complex portion of the real world, part of whose complexity is revealed by the fact that there are various (4) system states each of which the units interact differently with each other...The theorist is [then] in a position to derive conclusions that represent logical and true deductions about the model in operation or the (5) propositions of the model.

However, the early stages of theory building represent conceptual aspects, whereas the final two reflect the empirical part of the research activity. It follows, therefore, that:

Should there be any desire to determine whether the model does, in fact, represent the real world, then each term in each proposition whose test is sought needs to be converted into (6) an empirical indicator... The next operation is to substitute the appropriate empirical indicators in the propositional statement to generate a testable (7) hypothesis. The research operation consists of measuring the values on the empirical indicators of the hypotheses to determine whether the theoretically predicted values are achieved or approximated in the research test[92, p. 8].

Therefore, theory building can be considered to be a disciplined, systematic and rigorous approach to formulating and testing models of knowledge. Furthermore, Dubin's[92] seven-stage sequence, outlined above, is believed to be a generic framework for theory building and one which is not solely applicable to social science disciplines.

In considering the specific role of theory building in marketing, Hunt[93] has extensively reviewed definitions of theory[89,94-96] and recognized some broad underlying common themes in various writings. He subsequently defined the scope of marketing theory as follows:

A theory is a systematically related set of statements, including some lawlike generalisations, that are empirically testable. The purpose of theory is to increase scientific understanding through a systematised structure capable of both explaining and predicting phenomenon[93, p. 228].

Accordingly, marketing theory has three components: systematically related themes, lawlike generalizations and empirical testability. The first two of these components are fundamental criteria for any scientific explanation. That is, phenomena cannot be viewed in isolation and must be considered within the framework of broader and interconnected variables. The justification

for the final component of empirical testability is explained by Hunt[93, p. 243] in that, ...any systematised structure which is not empirically testable will suffer from explanatory and predictive impotence.

Therefore, in order to claim some form of inference from a model, the theory must possess an empirical grounding. A review of most well-regarded marketing journals indicates the wealth and proliferation of research in the area. In fact, the nature of marketing theories are now so diverse that it could be suggested that the discipline has become fragmented. This fragmentation could mean that marketing is now only a generic label applied to a multitude of topics ranging from consumer behaviour to intra-organizational dimensions of marketing. However, this author prefers to believe that such a divergence in interests reflects the richness and colour of marketing, and demonstrates the breadth of contemporary understanding in the discipline.

Conclusions

It is reasonable to claim that marketing has achieved the position of, "... legitimate scholarly discipline" [91, p. 183] and is respected by academics and practitioners in the fields of management, economics, psychology, sociology and other social science professions. The nature of marketing and what it is seen to represent has been changed and adapted to conform with the requirements of the relevant decade. The 1990s will, no doubt, be regarded as the decade of relationship marketing[97] and, as we welcome the new millennium, opportunities offered by advances in information technology will surely take the application of marketing to even greater heights. Furthermore, the generic nature of marketing illustrates that challenges stand to be met from introducing the concept to non-traditional contexts such as professional services, political environments and allied areas of public administration.

The heritage that marketing can claim suggests that the profession is in a strong position to consolidate its status as a valuable organizational resource and a discipline which can enjoy established maturity. Furthermore, as emerging themes continue to be developed in both the practice and theory of marketing, it remains that such innovations are likely to maintain the position of marketing as a key discipline for the management student and as an item of crucial importance on the boardroom agenda.

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Application questions

1 Is marketing a profession?

2 Taking this paper as an overview and review of the field, analyse, criticize and put into the conceptual frameworks presented, your organization's marketing efforts.