

Torment Your Customers ? Source : Harvard Business Review - 2001-

Dear Stephen,

Your piece, "Torment Your Customers (They'll Love It)," in the October 2001 issue of HBR is amusing and brilliant. You hit on a major weakness in today's marketing, namely the lack of creativity. Too many products and ads draw a giant yawn.

The fault lies with marketing practitioners, not with marketing theory. Too many find it easier to do the safe thing, to copy what their competitors are doing.

There is nothing in marketing theory that precludes creativity. The heart of marketing is differentiation. The old salesperson's formula, AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action), calls for differentiation and would lead to the Blair Witch Project, Beanie Babies, Harry Potter, and Chrysler's PT Cruiser.

Modern marketing theory calls for identifying, creating, and delivering superior value to target customers. But customers differ greatly in what they consider value. Many would enjoy being on the receiving end of your TEASE strategies (tricksterism, entertainment, amplification, secrecy, and exclusivity). Others would be indifferent and, still others, offended. Your approach overlooks a basic concept in marketing, namely segmentation ("different strokes for different folks"). Consider the following limitations of your message:

- If marketers take your suggestions seriously, we will be deluged with trickster campaigns. The teases will lose their novelty, produce further cynicism about marketing, and back-fire on some companies' reputations.
- Your tactics do not amount to a strategy for a company interested in building long-term relationships with customers. You would have to design follow-on teases and "tortures." What P. T. Barnum caper would you try next to get the same customers back?
- Don't try these tactics in business-to-business settings. There's too much money at stake.
- Customers enjoy being entertained, less so being manipulated.

You blame my colleagues and me for making marketing into a "sober-sided discipline." Our aim is to introduce science and systems into what otherwise would be a shallow sideshow. Deciding to research customers; then segmenting, targeting, and positioning; and then fleshing out the four P's does not exclude creativity. You can bet that the success of Harley-Davidson, Charles Schwab, and Ritz-Carlton is based on sound marketing theory.

You attack the notion that we cater too much to customers. The reality is that customers are in short supply. And the great majority of customers want real attention, real dialogue, and real value for their money and not too much snake oil.

Philip Kotler - S. C. Johnson & Son Distinguished Professor of
International Marketing - Kellogg Graduate School of Management -
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[Play It Again, Phil.](#)

Of all the articles in all the journals in all the world, you walk into mine! And, while this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship, I'm afraid you'll have to check your paradigm at the door. You'll have to stop blaming marketing practitioners for the failure of marketing theory. We'll always have Praxis, I know, and your customer-centric marketing concept has its advantages. But its moment has passed. The APIC paradigm has got its exit visa. It's boarding the plane. And all the usual suspects you've rounded up--AIDA, differentiation, segmentation, targeting, positioning, and so on--don't amount to a hill of beans. Or should that be P's?

P's have their place, admittedly, as indeed does marketing theory. But what was once generic has become increasingly geriatric. Worse, it has started to believe its own publicity and masquerades under self-important monikers like "marketing science," "societal marketing," "cause-related marketing," and similar save-the-world pseudonyms. Little wonder that today's consumers--the No-Logoistas--despise marketing and all it stands for, despite marketers' declarations of undying love.

It's time, I believe, to get back to basics, to return to our retro roots, and to ask the simple question: What is marketing all about? Marketing, surely, is about selling stuff. No more, no less. And how do you go about selling stuff? You either chase after consumers or get them to chase after you. The APIC paradigm advocates chasing after consumers, essentially by meeting their every want and making life as easy as possible for them. I believe that customers should be encouraged to chase us instead. I believe we should build marketing mousetraps that are so attractive, so intriguing, so desirable that consumers will crawl over broken glass to munch our mozzarella.

Yes, tantalizing, teasing, and tormenting customers will eventually trigger a charms race, just as customer centricity gave rise to the grisly ganglions of CRM and "permission marketing" (aka Peeping Toms "R" Us). Yes, some segments are more TEASE-reactive than others, but the version of marketing I'm advocating doesn't demand segmentation. Come one, come all. Who cares what segment you hail from. It could increase the cynicism that people feel toward marketing. The consumer cynicism index might rise from 95% to 98%, right into the danger zone. Lucky we've got the APIC defibrillator on standby. Yes, markeTEASE is more appropriate in some situations than others--as is customer centricity--though I suspect B2B is more amenable to tormentation than you suggest.

I could go on. The key point, however, is that there is an alternative to the customer-centric paradigm. Sure, it means abandoning the Kotlerite model of marketing. But then again, you have abandoned it yourself, as your recent articles on "market driven to market driving" attest. (In the old days, lest we forget, market driving was called "sales-oriented.") Indeed, the ultimate irony is that the approach I'm advocating was previously posited by you, the marketing maestro yourself!

Thirty years ago, HBR published an amusing and brilliant article, co-authored by Philip Kotler. Called "Demarketing, Yes, Demarketing," it recommended doing all the things--limiting availability, delaying gratification, and so on--that I champion in "Torment Your Customers." The old ideas, as most retromarketers would surely agree, are always the best. Here's looking at you, Phil.

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