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The big debate: Are the '4Ps of marketing' still relevant?

The relevance of the '4Ps of marketing' in today's digital world is a topic that continues to cause much discussion. Should marketers relinquish responsibility or retake control?

By [Jonathan Bacon](#) 9 Feb 2017 7:00 am



The famous '4Ps of marketing' are revered by some members of the profession, and scoffed at by others. Some see these fundamental tenets of classical marketing theory – referring to product, price, promotion and place – as the foundations upon which all sound marketing strategies are built. For others, they represent dusty old concepts that have failed to update to the modern, digital age.

Marketing Week was drawn to reconsider the 4Ps recently when analysing the [impact of post-Brexit inflationary pressures](#) in the UK and the role that marketers should play in setting prices. With inflation forecast to hit nearly 3% this year, marketers need to display [leadership](#) on pricing strategy and work collaboratively with other business stakeholders to offset the effects of price hikes on customers. Marketers who have bypassed more formal routes to training may lack this essential skill.

If anything, the attributes required of marketers are growing all the time. In 2015, the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) published a report on the '7Ps', adding people, process and physical evidence to the list. But at a time when marketing channels and consumer behaviours are changing at speed, should brands continue to pay heed to these formal concepts, or instead rewrite the rules of marketing for themselves?

The 4Ps of marketing

Have your say on the relevance of the 4Ps in today's marketing landscape:

Created by Marketing Week on February 7, 2017

 Does the marketing team in your business have primary control of the 4Ps - product, price, promotion and place?

Yes

No

| | |

1 / 4 

1,653 Votes

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No 'one size fits all' approach

Startup brands are often less likely to stick rigidly to the 4Ps. As they attempt to build an audience in a new or emerging consumer market, these companies may prefer improvisation and experimentation over carefully defined marketing theories.

Louise Pegg, head of marketing at peer-to-peer mortgage lender Landbay, says she is mindful of the 4Ps, but also keen to “follow what we believe to be the right thing for the right stage in our business development”. The company, founded in 2014, is conscious that it is operating in a relatively new industry and wants to evolve and adapt as the market does.

“This means that there is not necessarily a tried and tested method for what we are looking to achieve,” explains Pegg. “Every business is different and so strategies should be aligned with business goals, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach.”

It is increasingly hard to separate price and promotion. It is more appropriate to talk about value.

Matt Barwell, Britvic

She adds that while the fundamental principles of marketing have not necessarily changed, the way that marketers perform their jobs has altered drastically as a result of technological change. “These evolutions allow the customer to have a voice and a platform to share it,” she says.

“Marketing is no longer about what businesses want to tell their customers, it is about businesses listening to their customers and responding in a way that offers a meaningful solution to them.”

But it is not just small businesses that are reimagining the fundamentals of marketing. Matt Barwell, CMO at drinks group Britvic, which owns brands such as Robinsons, J2O and Tango, says the 4Ps have “evolved” and are “only relevant within an over-arching

marketing strategy". As a result, Britvic is redefining how it talks about the 4Ps by combining some with others and by adding new principles of its own.

"It is increasingly hard to separate price and promotion. It is more appropriate to talk about value, asking ourselves how we deliver amazing value to consumers through product, through experience and through a combination of price and promotion," says Barwell.

"We have also added a 'C' for communication as we feel that the communications lever is critical to unlocking growth and developing mental availability."

Britvic has also added two of its own 'Ps' in the form of purpose and penetration. The former helps the company ensure that all its activities are consistent, Barwell says, while the latter helps it to reach new customers. "Penetration is at the heart of all our strategies for growing our brands," he adds.

Ultimately, Barwell argues that a brand must determine its own aims and strategy before turning its attention to broader marketing principles. "Only then do we look at the whether the traditional 4Ps can be used as levers for growth."

Dangers of dismissing the 4Ps

Pete Markey, brand communications and marketing director at Aviva, is wary of attempts to dismiss the 4Ps or cast them as "unfashionable" in the digital age. He believes they remain "hugely relevant" because they show the extent to which marketing impacts on a business's performance.

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"In effect they say marketing isn't just the job of the marketing department," he notes. "You can have the best communications in the world but if your price or product is wrong, it's not going to work. Too often I see marketing teams that are asked to take something rubbish to market with a good advert. That's why the 4Ps are so relevant now, because they remind us that marketing is so much more than just advertising."

Markey argues that many brands are struggling because they have ignored the 4Ps in favour of chasing digital audiences. "It becomes about trying to make something go viral but you have to ask yourself why you are doing that. Who needs it? What's the point?" he says.

You have got to look at a lot of the really terrible marketing out there to see how much we have lost the plot on the 4Ps.

Pete Markey, Aviva

"I read an article recently about the fact that a lot of content that's distributed online is just garbage, so you have got to look at a lot of the really terrible marketing out there to see how much we have lost the plot on the 4Ps – we've forgotten them."

Despite his attachment to the 4Ps, Markey does not see much need to extend the list to seven, preferring instead the simplicity of a shorter set of principles. He argues that when all of the classical theory is stripped away, the 4Ps are essentially about understanding the wants and needs of customers, and how to extract value from that.

As a senior marketer with over 20 years of experience, Markey is concerned by what he sees as a lack of sufficient training in the 4Ps among the new generation of young marketers coming into the profession.

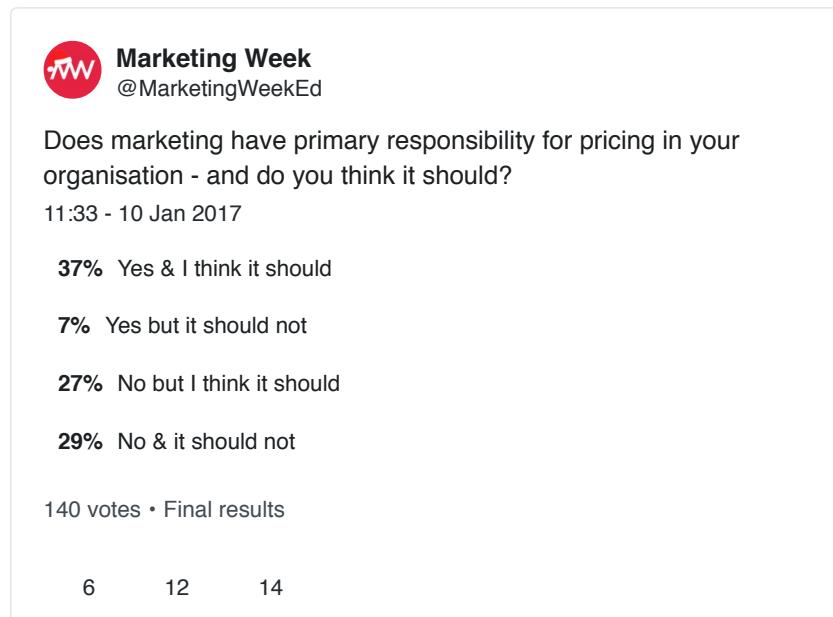
"I don't think it's their fault," he says. "I see a lot of brands hiring now on a skill set – be it [programmatic](#) or [their knowledge of] Adobe systems. Tech and digital are more

important than ever but you can't forget the [basics of marketing](#). We need to do more to raise the bar of marketing excellence and get the 4Ps back where they belong."

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Preparing for the future

So where do we go from here? Will the 4Ps endure as marketing leaders reassert these principles, or are they destined to disappear from boardroom conversations as 'digital natives' take over? A recent Marketing Week poll revealed that only 44% count one of the 4Ps – price – as part of their job mix. Meanwhile, 27% don't have control but believe they should, and nearly a third (29%) don't have primary responsibility for pricing and don't want it.



Sarah Lawrence, marketing director at gym and private hospital operator Nuffield Health, is respectful of the 4Ps, but also keen to reframe the way that marketers think about customer engagement. "We have to think much more about how we influence consumers through communities rather than the traditional approach of 'target audiences,'" she says.

"Consumers now interact and engage with products and services through multichannel, multi-platform searches and 'real' influencers such as 'insta-influencers'.

By being transparent she says bloggers have the ability to expose the good and bad in brands and their products and services. "This creates real challenges but also massive opportunity as technology such as AI and customer engagement platforms become more able to engage with consumers in a meaningful way," she adds.

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Lawrence argues that this new approach will help to ensure that marketing remains vital and relevant to businesses. "I do believe we have more influence and certainly a voice at the table that is heard [but only for] for those marketers that understand the complex nature of bringing companies and brands to the front of consumers' mind in a relevant and meaningful way," she says.

Similarly, wireless charging startup [Chargifi](#) – one of [Marketing Week's 100 Disruptive Brands](#) – is mindful of the need to closely track new technology, while staying true to marketing best practice. Founded in 2013, the business provides technology that allows people to charge their phones in public places over wireless internet connections.

CEO and co-founder Dan Bladen says the business was recently encouraged by the launch of Dell's first laptop incorporating wireless power, and is planning certain strategies on the basis that Apple may include wireless charging as a feature in the next iPhone. "Being responsive is one of our fundamental marketing principles," he explains. "If we're not up to date with advances in the industry and the wider news agenda, we can't recognise opportunities for expansion or promotion."

Despite this technology-oriented approach, Bladen believes the 4Ps "still offer a strong backbone to a marketing strategy". Combining responsive activity with an ongoing attachment to the fundamentals of marketing is likely to be a strategy that many brands will pursue as they seek to balance innovation with profitability and growth in the years ahead.

"The two 'Ps' we focus on most are product and placement – both are vitally important to the service we provide," says Bladen. "Chargifi spots bring free, convenient power to people where and when they need it most, so it's important they are available in venues with high footfall like coffee shops and restaurants. Promotion and price ensure we compete effectively."

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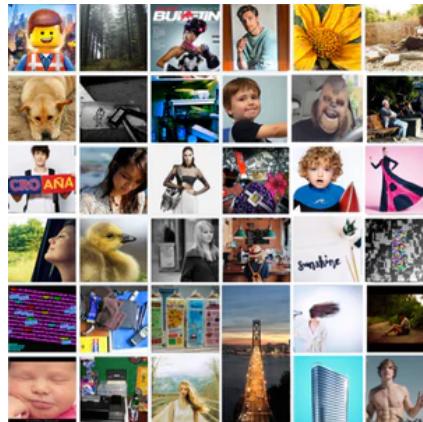
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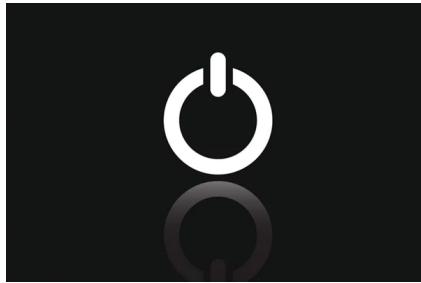
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