

A Dangerous Divergence: Marketing and Society

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In Wilkie and Moore's (2003) landmark article, they point out an important and troubling development in Era IV (1980–present) of marketing scholarship, namely, a major decline in “mainstream” interest in issues that pertain to marketing and society. Instead, there has been a “ghettoization” of scholarship in this vital area in both journals and conferences, and though a small and hardy group of researchers continue to press on, the vast majority of their colleagues blithely ignore societal imperatives.

Marketing is a vital and highly visible institution in free market societies around the world. However, it is suffering from significant problems with each of its major constituents; that is, there is a lack of respect within the corporation and a lack of trust by consumers. Taken together, these two major deficiencies have placed marketing in society's doghouse as a shallow, wasteful, and polluting influence.

Many marketing scholars' ignorance of larger societal issues has already had serious consequences for the marketing profession. Increasingly, marketing practices are out of sync with today's consumers. A study by Yankelovich in 2004 (Smith, Clurman, and Wood 2005) found that many consumers have moved from simply ignoring marketing to actively resisting and, in some cases, fighting it. More than 60% of respondents believe that marketing and advertising are “out of control,” and 70% try to tune out as much marketing and advertising as possible. Approximately half of the respondents said that the quantity of marketing and advertising negatively affects their experience of everyday life. These negative attitudes are much stronger than are those that Bauer and Greyser (1968) report in their study for the American Association of Advertising Agencies. Bauer and Greyser estimate that 15% of consumers are “serious resisters” of advertising, whereas Yankelovich's 2004 research finds that 60% of the population are serious resisters, and approximately 70% are interested in products that help them skip, block, or opt out of marketing and advertising. It appears that marketing practices have become worse as products have become better. Surprisingly, Yankelovich's research shows that few marketing executives understand the rising hostility that consumers have toward the ways that marketing is conducted (Smith, Clurman, and Wood 2005).

A recent study on the image of marketing conducted at Bentley College and Emory University found that 62% of consumer respondents had a negative attitude toward marketing, 28% were neutral, and only 10% had a positive atti-

tude. Some of the positives that marketing is associated with include creativity, fun, humorous advertising, and attractive people, but these positive connotations are swamped by the negatives, such as telemarketing, lies, deception, deceit, annoyance, and manipulation (Sheth and Sisodia 2005).

Why is this happening? We believe that it is because marketing has become excessively driven by a managerial agenda and has lost sight of its fundamental mission, namely, to represent the customer's interest to the company.

Managers or Customers?

Wilkie and Moore (2003, p. 132) describe how the present era of marketing scholarship has been characterized by the strong dominance of the managerial perspective, which holds that “the major purpose for academic work is to enhance the effectiveness of managers' marketing decisions.”

In many ways, this is as it should be; after all, it is ultimately marketing managers who pay academics' salaries by hiring their students. However, a crucial question arises as to the definition of the term “effectiveness” in this context. Is it synonymous with the maximization of sales and profitability, or does it imply decisions that are simultaneously in customers' as well as the company's best long-term interests? We submit that only the latter perspective represents a worthy and sustainable delineation of what should be relevant to marketing academics.

If academics aim to overtly advance the short-term, bottom-line interests of managers and companies, a great disservice is done. Academics become complicit in the myriad ways that modern marketing practice often runs counter to marketing's first principle: The definition of success begins with doing right by the customer and ends with the achievement of a healthy bottom line.

Marketing's *raison d'être* is eminently noble; it alone has the power to align the interests of corporations and their customers directly (and, by extension, society as a whole). It can be the civilizing influence on the brute force of capitalism, but on the whole, the reality of how marketing has been practiced has abrogated its responsibility toward customers and has become the handmaiden of short-term corporate interests. No wonder that it has lost trust with consumers.

The power of market forces and that of marketing to shape virtually every aspect of a society's mores, attitudes, and culture should not be underestimated. Used wisely and with restraint, marketing can harness and channel the vast energies of the free market system for the good of consumers, corporations, and society as a whole. Used recklessly, it can cause significant harm to all those entities. Thus, marketing is like a potent drug with potentially serious side effects, but in reality, there are no main effects and no side effects; these are just convenient labels applied to connote which effects are observed and measured and which

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effects are ignored. Today, the side effects of marketing—noise pollution, customer irritation, excessive consumption, unhealthy lifestyles—tend to overwhelm the intended main effects.

The Next Era in Marketing Scholarship?

It is a fair criticism of the academic marketing discipline to say that it has not had the impact on business practice that accounting, finance, and operations have had. We believe that the reason for this is that marketing has abandoned its unique role in the world—as the voice of the customer—and has remained just another business function.

As marketing academics, whose interests do we serve, and whose interests should we serve? This is not merely an “academic” question; it goes to the heart of what makes marketing relevant to a corporation and worthwhile to society. It is clear that for the most part, we have been trained to serve the interests of marketing managers. Most of our efforts are aimed at helping marketing managers make better decisions. The extent to which we have succeeded in doing so is open to debate, but the proposition that this is what we have been driven by is not.

This must change. Marketing should be less about representing the company to the customer and more about representing the customer to the company. Unfortunately, the latter perspective has been getting short shrift in both corporate boards and journal editorial boards. We believe that the primary aspect of marketing academics should be to serve the interests of customers first and managers second. In practical terms, this means that instead of figuring out how marketing managers can create products that maximize profits for them, we should study the process of creating products and marketing programs that deliver high levels of “real” value to customers. Instead of studying which advertising tactic is most likely to, in essence, “trick” a customer into trying a product, we should focus on what kinds of communications are useful and valuable to a customer and which ones are simply irritating or misleading.

Such a perspective does not do marketing managers a disservice or help customers take undue advantage of companies. If we believe that the path to enduring business success must without fail go through the intermediate stage of sustained customer contentment, this is simply the best way to achieve a higher level of business success.

By donning the “customer-perspective hat” more or less permanently, marketing academics can go a long way to make marketing a positive force that enhances the consumers’ quality of life. Research efforts should be aimed at measuring the degree of the customers’ resentment at exploitative pricing and promotional tactics and the spillover it has on the company’s other affairs. We should be pointing the way toward enlightened marketing practices (analogous to “sustainable economic development,” which aims to safeguard the physical environment while permitting vigorous economic activity). The “environment” that should be safeguarded is the rapidly depleting pool of goodwill that consumers possess toward most companies. Marketing’s equivalent of “global warming” is rising customer cynicism. The “ozone layer” of mutual trust between customers and marketers has steadily been burned away as a

result of the marketing profession’s many small and large abuses over the decades. Marketing managers are too close to the battle lines to understand this problem in its full dimensions. They are too consumed with daily hand-to-hand combat with their competitors and even, it often seems, with their customers.

Editors of some marketing journals urge academics to include a section in their articles under the heading “Managerial Implications.” Perhaps editors should also require a section tilted “Customer Implications.” Of course, it could be argued that this should be implicit under “Managerial Implications”; after all, good marketing managers are supposed to align customer and company interests.

After 25 years of Era IV, with its dominant managerial perspective, we believe that a next era of marketing scholarship is upon us. We describe this as the Era of Enlightenment in which marketing scholars seek to balance the interests of companies, customers, and society as well as align them in synergistic (i.e., mutually reinforcing) ways. This era will also be characterized by a greater inflow of marketing knowledge and insight from other countries into the United States, reversing the traditional flow of ideas.

Refocusing on Societal Interests

Mainstream marketing ignores societal concerns to its great peril. Marketing and society have been moving on increasingly divergent paths, and this will result in escalating conflict and criticism of marketing as a profession and a discipline. To remedy this, we must examine the role of marketing from three stakeholder perspectives: (1) policymakers, (2) academics, and (3) practitioners. Such a holistic view is important, because a piecemeal solution will not suffice.

Policymakers

Neither legislation nor regulation seems to be working well to curb abusive marketing practices. Most laws that pertain to marketing practices are seldom enforced; others are enforced only when lawsuits are filed. Marketing policy making is currently reactive and driven by political agendas. Legislation and regulations are ad hoc and issue driven. Agencies are led by political appointees rather than by marketing experts.

Instead of resisting all government regulations and scrutiny, as is the instinctive reaction of most companies, the marketing profession should support well-thought-out regulations that eliminate shoddy practices and thus are to the advantage of companies that practice “good” marketing. Marketing academics and practitioners should work hand-in-hand with the government to ensure that marketing policy making is purposeful and forward looking and has a scientific rather than political orientation.

We advocate the establishment of a National Academy of Marketing similar in reputation to National Academy of Science, National Endowment for Arts, and National Institutes of Health. We should aim to make marketing more relevant to society by encouraging nonprofit marketing, nation branding, and citizen relationship marketing. We should also invest in developing a primary and secondary education

curriculum that socializes good marketing approaches and practices. Most important, we must require the mandatory certification and recertification of marketing practitioners. It is high time that marketing is treated as a full-fledged profession on par with, for example, the accounting and medical professions.

Academics

In addition to adopting explicitly more of a customer perspective as we discussed previously, marketing academics should undertake funded, programmatic, and newsworthy research rather than highly specialized, esoteric, and ad hoc research. Even important research in marketing is not considered newsworthy. Other practicing professional disciplines do a far superior job generating newsworthy research. The day an important article is published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* or *Journal of the American Medical Association*, it gets national and global attention.

A peer review process for research proposals for external funding should be established. The biggest potential funders in this country are corporations. At Pillsbury and General Mills, the most exciting work on consumer behavior is not being done by marketing but rather by research and development scientists in what they call the “kitchens.” Procter & Gamble has 150 doctoral-level employees, many times more than most university science departments. Nokia and Motorola excel at understanding what their customers desire. Researchers at these companies are focused on understanding consumers as users, unlike academic marketing, which tends to focus on consumers as buyers.

There should be more postdoctoral programs to initiate programmatic research, as is common in medicine and engineering. Doctoral graduates have no experience managing programmatic research. To encourage such a long-term perspective, the tenure clock should be lengthened to at least ten years. Finally, editorial boards and editors of leading journals must insist on a high degree of societal relevance in addition to scientific rigor. This will make research more newsworthy and relevant to the needs of consumers, companies, and society.

Practitioners

Currently, marketing is measured by its impact on the profit-and-loss statement and not on the balance sheet. It is also organized largely to support sales at many companies. Together, these two factors cause marketing to be driven primarily by short-term agendas.

We believe that the best way to change this and force marketing to adopt a long-term perspective is to change it from a line function that is primarily concentrated at the business unit level to a corporate staff function. Corporate

staff functions, such as finance, information technology, legal, and human resource management, are each managed from a compliance and strategic perspective, and marketing should be no exception. There should be a board-level standing committee that oversees marketing, similar to the audit, compensation, and governance committees. The head of corporate marketing should be called the chief customer officer to minimize internal perception and image problems about marketing and should report directly to the chief executive officer. It is important that marketing is given both capital expenditure and operating-expenditure budgeting responsibilities and authority, similar to the information technology function. Corporate marketing’s responsibilities should include branding, key account management, and business development. Because many marketing activities are outsourced, there should be greater focus on how best to manage outside suppliers, such as market research, advertising agencies, and public relations firms.

Conclusion

The public image of marketing, along with its professional reputation, has never been at a lower ebb; thus, the need for a new approach to marketing within marketing departments, across corporations, and in society at large has never been more keenly felt. The interests of marketing and society are not, nor should they be, fundamentally at odds. Practiced with wisdom and restraint, marketing stimulates economic growth and aligns corporate activity with customer needs in mutually beneficial ways. If marketing continues on its present path, it will waste more resources, alienate more customers, and invite sweeping and emotionally reactive governmental restrictions (such as the recent “Do not call” legislation). Marketing academics can play an important role in steering marketing back toward a socially beneficial role.

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