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What Is Marketing? A Comment on “Marketing Is...”

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INTRODUCTION

The question raised (and answered) by Hunt (1992b) is one that has been asked many times over many years. As suggested in his article, there are different perspectives that can be taken in answering the question, “what is marketing?” Hunt states quite clearly that his intention is to present a philosophy of for the marketing discipline. His philosophy is summarized as “Marketing is a university discipline that aspires to be a professional discipline that has responsibilities (a) to society... (b) to students... (c) to market practice... and (d) to the academy...” (Hunt 1992b, p. 310). It is within this summary statement that the present comment will address some issues.

Although there are a few places in his article where Hunt (1992b) alludes to philosophy of science issues regarding scientific realism versus relativism/constructionism, for the most part further confrontation is avoided. Such a confrontation has been aired elsewhere (Hunt 1990, 1992a; Peter 1992; Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). My comment will stay away from the debate as well, for reasons that include: (1) I am not expert in the area, and (2) taking a line from Woody Allen in a recent movie, “I do not know enough to be incompetent.”

I now turn to the reactions I had when reading Hunt’s (1992b) article. For the most part, the article is interesting and informative. Indeed, the discussion of a philosophy of for the marketing discipline is very good. In some ways, however, in attempting to answer the broad question asked, the article raises additional questions without often even recognizing their existence. Some might even consider the philosophy espoused to be incomplete. My purpose is not to end up with the “usual” academic comment wherein the author finds fault, often on very minor issues, and then proceeds to present “new” ideas and show how smart he/she is. This is not to say that all comments in marketing journals are of this type because such is not the case. Rather, I hope to extend some of the ideas presented by Hunt (1992b) and to point to where I think additional questions have been asked—implicitly—or should be asked.

MARKETING IS A UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINE

Hunt’s argument is built on the metaphor of a business organization. He states that “Marketing is a discipline that is housed within colleges or schools of business, which are themselves housed within universities” (p. 301). Universities are viewed as being in the knowledge business since they warehouse, retail, and manufacture knowledge. What follows then is a short history of higher education that includes a discussion of the business of a university—in the sense of Levitt’s (1960) marketing myopia.

A discipline can be defined as “a branch of knowledge or of teaching,” and the term disciplinary can be defined as “of pertaining to a specific field of academic study” (The American Heritage Dictionary 1985). Unfortunately, Hunt does not define what the discipline, as he sees it, consists of—i.e., what the specific field of study includes. Apparently, marketing is marketing is marketing! All who read marketing journals should know what the discipline is about. Presumably, the definition of the American Marketing Association is sufficient:

Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives (Bennett 1988, p. 115).

I have no quarrel with this definition nor with Hunt’s implied acceptance of it. However, is this sufficient for defining the discipline? It has been argued that marketing must be regarded not simply as a practice, but as a
conception—i.e., a concept of a practice (Bartels 1962a, p. 5). Another way of looking at this is to recognize that marketing has two sides to it: (1) it is a philosophy, an attitude, a perspective, or a management orientation that stresses the importance of customer satisfaction, and (2) it is a set of activities used to implement this philosophy (Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel 1992, p. 4).

Closely related to this double-faceted aspect of marketing is that there may be dimensions to marketing that go beyond the relatively "simplest" characterization above. For example, some 30 years ago Bartels (1962b) identified the following as relevant dimensions by which marketing thought can be measured:

1. The Intellectual Dimension, indicating the extent of its development along scientific and philosophic lines.
2. The Temporal Dimension, indicating its relationship to the times in which it has evolved.
3. The Spatial Dimension, indicating the character of its universality.
4. The Interdisciplinary Dimension, indicating its correlation with other social sciences.
5. The Ethical Dimension, indicating its co-ordinancy with ethical and spiritual concepts in human thought.
6. The Spiritual Dimension, indicating the extent to which the development of marketing thought coincides with the spiritual forces unfolding in the world.

Bartels pointed out that the dimensional character of marketing thought had been considered very little to that point. Following this line of thought I think we can safely say that it has not been considered much since that time, although there has been some interest in the interdisciplinary and ethical dimensions. All too much emphasis seems to have been placed on how to view the discipline and how to study problems (i.e., on the philosophy of science) at the expense of considering what the content of the discipline is. The time has come to stop worrying so much about what is the "best" or "proper" approach to marketing knowledge creation and start creating more!

All this seems to be consistent with the evolution of business education during the past 35 years. Hunt discusses the role played by the influential Gordon and Howell (1959) and Pierson (1959) reports on the liberalization of business education. Following the business-oriented metaphor Hunt talks of the increase in marketing due to education producing a superior academic product and the decline in standards and quality of education by our competitors in other disciplines. Did higher education in business, including marketing, overreact? Probably not at the time. But, it seems clear that changes made in the 1960s and 1970s are no longer valid and that we see movement away from such heavily liberalized business education. Our customers—however defined—seem to want a different product, however defined. Are we, in what Hunt calls the Academy, ready to provide it? Unfortunately, we cannot provide a meaningful answer as we have not yet really agreed on such fundamental matters as what is our product, who is (are) our customer(s), how is the marketplace defined, etc. For example, by applying the business metaphor further we can think of there being different knowledge products—a product line, if you will, of knowledge that has depth rather than width. These products will have different customers, and I will address these issues later. Let me now turn to the matter of what kind of university discipline marketing is.

MARKETING IS AN APPLIED, PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE

Hunt (1992b) states that many people believe marketing is both an applied discipline and a professional discipline. Such a view is not new, nor is it radical. In short, many in the discipline would agree. Hunt does not agree with this viewpoint. The term "applied" is commonly associated with consulting research and this is not the only type research that marketing academics should be doing. Rather than already being a professional discipline, Hunt argues that marketing is at a point where it aspires to be such a discipline. Where the differences arise would be over the type of research academics should be doing. Within the context of the Three Dichotomies Model (Hunt 1976), six types of possible research questions are identified, ranging from specific problem-solving/consulting research to questions about how better research can be done. Hunt rightly—at least I agree with him—argues that the marketing discipline and marketing academics should not limit research to any one type. Rather, all six types fall within the "jurisdiction" of the discipline of marketing.

A similar view is held by Learner and Phillips (1991). Their ideas are based on the idea that problem-driven research is characterized by two goals: (1) to solve a management problem at hand, and (2) to use what is learned, thereby to enrich and advance science. Learner and Phillips (1991) further argue that problem-driven research can facilitate the progress of marketing science. There is no shortage of real-world problems, and these problems can drive progress in science if tackled by problem-driven researchers. Table I shows the contrast between problem-driven research and "applications."

Again, the issue of products, customers, clients, etc. is raised without adequate closure. I find myself in agreement with Hunt about society and its needs being the ultimate client for a truly professional discipline. For marketing, the ultimate need is "society's need for high quality products and services that are reasonably priced, responsibly promoted, and conveniently available" (Hunt 1992b, p. 306). I think this statement is perhaps too simplistic and goes beyond the role that marketing plays in a society. It appears that Hunt is talking of "good," "proper," or "profitable" marketing, not marketing's functions in a society. Perhaps there is a confounding of normative and positive viewpoints.

MARKETING AS A SET OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Using the professional discipline view of what marketing is, Hunt proceeds to look at marketing as a set of respon-
TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Problem-Oriented</th>
<th>Applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Theory/Methodology</td>
<td>Real-world problem spurs development of new methodology and/or theory.</td>
<td>No new theory or methodology is generated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Problem</td>
<td>Real-world problem is solved.</td>
<td>Real-world problem is solved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalizability</td>
<td>Generalizable. Parallels can be drawn to problems in other fields.</td>
<td>Few or no parallels to other fields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to Completion</td>
<td>Takes longer.</td>
<td>Usually fast and straightforward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Company</td>
<td>Manager with problem becomes part of scientific process. Manager becomes “champion” or “change agent,” mediating the implementation of the project and the feedback of results.</td>
<td>Solution is “dropped on” the company (although implementation may be handled sensitively).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>Leads to more and deeper research.</td>
<td>When it’s over, it’s over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Science and Practice</td>
<td>Tighter integration of science and practice results in faster commercial progress.</td>
<td>Chance encounter of scientist and manager results in inefficient interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Process</td>
<td>Iterative process involving problem definition, model, prototyping, etc. comprises “scientific method” for the management sciences.</td>
<td>One-way process, useful only when problem is well-defined and solution method well-tested—both prior to the application.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


abilities, duties, or obligations to different constituencies. These include society, students, practice, and ourselves (i.e., the Academy or academics from all university disciplines). Hunt has broadly identified the stakeholders for the marketing discipline. Again, I find myself in agreement with the major points he makes but . . .

One additional issue needs to be aired regarding the manufacturing of knowledge and what this means to marketing’s responsibilities to the Academy. Hunt points out that manufacturing is done by research. Within the marketing discipline, there has evolved a situation regarding the dissemination of this research by publication which I call “in search of the perfect article.” By this I mean that marketing journals subject submitted papers to rigorous reviews by peers—a desirable practice—but this review process has gone too far. It is not uncommon to have authors make numerous revisions before a paper is accepted for publication (and even rejected). It seems the journals are seeking articles so “perfect” they will not be questioned by readers. The end result is that an increasing number of papers are being questioned only by a small number of peers (i.e., the reviewers) and not the Academy. Thus, an important aspect of knowledge manufacturing—that due to open questioning—is being lost, with the members of the Academy being the big losers.

The concluding section of Hunt’s article supposedly addresses consequences (teleological philosophy) as contrasted to the discussion that focused on responsibilities, obligations, and duties (deontological philosophy). It is this last section, which views marketing in the context of a socioeconomic ladder, that I find to be the weakest part of Hunt’s article. It is not clear just what the relevance of the discussion is. Hunt states that he is providing a utilitarian argument, which is teleologically based, for his philosophy of the marketing discipline. There must be a reason why I have failed to see what Hunt is trying to say and why it is important. Since I am interested in the topic, I hope the reason is that I do not know enough, rather than the alternative.

CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from all this? Have the relevant questions been answered? Have the relevant questions been asked? Following in Hunt’s footsteps, the answers to these two major questions are for each of us to provide for ourselves. From the perspective of marketing as a university discipline that is both applied—in the sense of “borrowing” from other disciplines such as psychology—and aspiring to be professional in nature, what is its product and whom is its customer or consumer? This is important to all of us who are members of the Academy. Let me suggest some alternatives. I think it safe to say that, very broadly, our product is education (or knowledge, in Hunt’s terms). Given this, we can identify alternative customers:

1. The student in a university program or in a management/executive education program
2. An “employing” organization (e.g., business firm, government, non-profit organization)
3. Society
4. The educator himself/herself

This categorization is essentially the same as that suggested by Hunt. However, we need to explore further the relationship between product and customer. This definitely is a relevant matter, since our product—education—should be developed to fit our customers’ needs (yet, the “needs” of the potential customers may be, and often are, in conflict with each other). In looking at educational program development or knowledge generation and delivery, etc., it is difficult to pinpoint the answer. One interpretation of what is going on is as follows:

(a) We appear to operate on the implicit premise that the student is our customer. Yet, we educate him or her on the basis of what he or she will need in the future—or, what we think he or she will
need—rather than on the basis of what this customer says is his or her need.

(b) In doing this, however, we are implicitly stating that the "employing," or potentially employing, organization is the customer. Thus, our product is not education, but a manufactured student, packaged and ready to be sold on the open market. This is as true for the student participating in a management development program as it is for the "regular" university student, and it applies to undergraduate- and graduate-level education programs.

(c) What all this means is that those in the Academy face a dilemma caused by what may be viewed as multiple products and customers. Given the time lag, we are interpreting what students will need. Yet, we do not ask them what they want. The assumption is made, again implicitly, that they do not know what kind of an education they need or what kind of knowledge they want. The same may be said for employing organizations as well.

So, where does this leave us? It seems to me that we are back where we started and are looking at the question, "What Is Marketing?" However, we are now at a different level of understanding. Do we know what marketing is? Each of us has our own answer. This is as it should be!

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NOTE

1 One view of this is given in Munsinger and Albaum (1976).

REFERENCES


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Gerald Albaum is Professor of Marketing, University of Oregon and Senior Research Fellow at the IC² Institute, University of Texas at Austin. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research interests include research methodology and international business/marketing. He is the author or co-author of numerous monographs and books, including the widely-used texts Research for Marketing Decisions, and International Marketing and Export Management. Dr. Albaum is a prolific contributor to marketing and business journals including the Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Market Research Society, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Psychological Reports, and the Journal of Global Marketing. Dr. Albaum has been a visiting professor and has given seminars at numerous universities in Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Turkey, and Finland.