Broadening the Concept of Marketing—Too Far

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This is a rejoinder to “Broadening the Marketing Concept” which appeared in the January 1969 issue of the JOURNAL OF MARKETING. Exception is taken to the broad concept of marketing advanced in that article. Reflections on the social contributions of marketing in the previous article are criticized, and business enterprise’s social role for marketing affirmed.

The article by Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy in the January 1969 JOURNAL OF MARKETING is intriguing and imaginative. It also is based on premises which may lead to confusion regarding the essential nature of marketing. Further, it suggests a disparaging attitude toward the social benefits of our professional field. When such views are propounded by prominent authors, their uncritical acceptance seems likely. Therefore, one who vigorously (although respectfully) disagrees should voice his contrary opinions.

Concept or Definition

Kotler and Levy’s main thesis is that the “concept” of marketing is too limited because it excludes marketing in nonbusiness activities. They complain that marketing is “a narrowly defined business activity” whose nonbusiness usage has not been incorporated “in the body of marketing thought and theory.” They seem to be asking that marketing be redefined, but they do not offer any explicit, new definition of marketing. The definition and demarcation of a field of knowledge is a basic matter that should be given searching concern.

How should marketing’s definition be altered to satisfy their contentions? They contend that marketing affirms numerous “concepts” or “principles” (sic) which are applicable to a universal range of human activities or institutions, specifically including: political contests, police administration, employee recruitment, social welfare agencies, hospital services, education, labor unions, international relations, and organized religion. Thus, if the Heart Fund conducts a campaign to obtain contributions, it is engaging in marketing. If a clergyman is studying plans for his church’s services to parishioners or the community, he, too, is engaging in marketing.

If a definition were framed to meet the authors’ contentions, marketing no longer would be bounded in terms of either institutions or the ultimate purpose of its activities. If a task is performed, anywhere by anybody, that has some resemblance to a task performed in marketing, that would be marketing. Therefore, any institution that plans its services or future would be performing the marketing task of “product planning.” The clergyman who was pondering his church’s programs and had considered himself to be a theologian and spiritual leader turns out to be a marketer.

Before becoming so proprietary, it should be recognized that the marketing profession did not originate most of the concepts noted by the authors. For example, the authors indicate that the re-examination of “target groups, differential advantage, communication channels and messages” constitutes a marketing audit—wherever this is performed. However, it should be noted that political leaders and parties were conducting these activities thousands of years before marketing existed as a field of serious study. Marketers’ self-image may be plausibly inflated by claiming that political campaigns are just another part of marketing, but what progress is to be gained by such reasoning? If one has tried to explain to someone the nature of marketing, with the present limited definition, he will have found it difficult. Attenuate market-


ing's definition to make it almost universal, and it will wholly lose its identity.

When seeking to annex the territory hitherto claimed by other disciplines, one is engaging in a game two can play. Marketers are much indebted to sociologists for concepts, data, and methods. How would sociologists be regarded if they were claiming for themselves most of the “consumer behavior” area of marketing? The field of management, with equal logic, might lay claim to all of marketing management.

Proper Boundaries of Marketing

A manageable, intelligible and logical definition of marketing can be fashioned when its scope is bounded within those processes or activities whose ultimate result is a market transaction. Marketing is concerned with markets, of course, and markets must be characterized by buying-and-selling. When one closely examines the nature and goal orientation of a persuasive campaign outside of marketing, such as a membership campaign of a labor union (one of the authors’ examples), in contrast with the promotion of a marketed service (for example, life insurance), he is impressed with fundamental differences. By employing a firm, specific criterion in marketing’s definition—that of the ultimate purchase-and-sale of a product or service—the vagueness and open-endedness of Kotler and Levy’s “concept” is avoided.

This seems to rule most of the authors’ examples out of bounds. A church does not sell its religious and redemptive services. Political parties do not sell specific services (unless corruptly committing illegal acts). The Heart Fund does not sell donations: there is no established price or terms of sale, and the donor is given no specific quid pro quo. Thus, a particular act must be related to an eventual or intended offer to buy and/or sell a specified good or service—with the terms of sale specified between the parties—or that act is not a marketing act, regardless of its nature.

This does not exclude marketing from nonbusiness institutions. The Government Printing Office, the New Jersey Turnpike, and the Women’s Guild Bazaar at the church are all conducting marketing. Nor does this definition deter marketing specialists from rendering services to nonmarketing causes. The Advertising Council conspicuously provides the skill of marketers to nonmarketing causes. Individual marketers may lend their talents to United Fund drives, political campaigns, or church program planning; however, marketers quia marketers do not perform these activities by definition.

The Breadth of Marketing

Let us return to the authors’ contention that, in the currently accepted definition of marketing, it is a “narrowly defined business activity.” How can one view the enormous scope of marketing and consider it to be “narrowly defined”?

It is pertinent to point out the obvious, that marketing is performed by some three million business firms, in addition to many nonbusiness enterprises in the United States alone. Marketing is concerned, too, with every consumer who buys or barters for goods and services. The utter fascination of marketing lies in its endless diversity, its ubiquitous performance, and its seemingly countless variables and unsolved problems—when defined within the bounds of activities ultimately concerned with buy-and-sell transactions. If marketers ever approach the solution of its myriad problems and are bored with any monotony that they find in it, it will be time to complain about its “narrow” definition.

Why Apologize?

Kotler and Levy perhaps should be lauded since they are in company with other notables who have been declaring that marketing has not accomplished its societal goals. They are urging us to join those who are doing social good, and what could be more noble? They want us to justify ourselves by applying our “skills to an increasingly interesting range of social activity.” (Italics added)

Perhaps the motives underlying such declarations are that marketers have guilt feelings because profit-making business activities may not be socially beneficial. If such logic were followed, it could be determined that the Post Office Department is a “societal activity” and United Airlines is not. The former is (notoriously) a nonprofit institution, while the latter earns substantial profit in providing its services. Those who patronize both the Post Office and United Airlines, however, might opine that the latter renders a more efficient or extensive service to society.

Social welfare largely depends much more on the private enterprise system and its marketing activities than on nonprofit institutions. Approximately 90% of the United States gross national product is created and marketed by profit-seeking enterprise. Thus, such enterprise appears to be the mainstay of health, nutrition, and most other aspects of the affluent society. The marketing sys-

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tem works imperfectly at best, and there are pressing social needs which must be met with goods and services that are not bought and sold. All thinking men want to see the nonbusiness aspects of our society performed properly by other agencies when private or governmental businesses cannot or should not provide them. However, this is no reason to distort and attenuate the scope of “marketing” in order that we may see marketing participate where it does not.

The “we’re not yet societal” syndrome is becoming fashionable to an unfortunate degree. It would divert marketers from the stern and difficult dedications to identifying marketing problems and their solutions and from energetically promoting the recognition and practice of efficient, responsive marketing. Those who give unselfish dedication to laboring effectively in nonprofit and nonmarketing institutions are applauded and everyone is urged to spare whatever efforts are possible in aiding and supporting them. However, let us not apologize for being marketers in the real sense. In the understanding and improvement of the marketing system lies all the challenge that one could desire.

A New Form of Marketing Myopia: Rejoinder to Professor Luck

PHILIP KOTLER
and SIDNEY J. LEVY

The authors offer a rejoinder to Professor D. J. Luck’s comments regarding their article and present additional commentary supporting their position that marketing’s role in society should be expanded.

WE WELCOME Professor Luck’s comments on our paper on “Broadening the Concept of Marketing.” His decision to make a case for traditional marketing gives us an opportunity to offer additional reflections on both the essential and the changing nature of marketing.

Professor Luck criticizes our viewpoint for various reasons. He prefers to remain with the more traditional definition of marketing, one that insists on restricting marketing to business activities regardless of what similar functions may go on in nonbusiness organizations. He fears that marketing will lose its identity, possibly defeated by retaliatory responses from the fields of management or sociology. He maintains that there is enough to think about with a definition of marketing that is restricted to the criterion of an “ultimate purchase-and-sale of a product or service.” He suggests that an expanded definition is proposed to alleviate a guilt feeling of marketers about the profit motive. All this leads Professor Luck to conclude that marketers should not stray from marketing “in the real sense” to work with the rest of the universe, except for little favors to the church or the United Fund on the side.

First we must recognize that the scope, methods, and aims of any discipline are determined more by tradition than by anything intrinsic in the name. For example, economics is practiced primarily as a deductive science in contrast to most of the other social sciences. Secondly, every discipline periodically faces challenges to its traditional form from people within and outside who seek to make it more “relevant.” Thus, the deductive tradition in economics has been attacked repeatedly by institutionalists, psychologists, and empirically minded researchers. Thirdly, the members of the discipline will show responses to these challenges ranging from hostility, to sympathy, to open embrace. Whether a particular challenge is accepted depends on its ultimate contribution as a new perspective. Debate among the members of the discipline will hopefully clarify the issues, but other more fundamental factors will eventually determine the outcome.

According to Professor Luck, marketing has traditionally focused on “those processes or activities whose ultimate result is a market transaction.” This focus is in line with the widely understood meaning of the term and has the virtues of clarity, closure, and comfort. However, there are severe limitations associated with such a viewpoint. The first major limitation is that students of marketing will deny their expertise to the most rapidly growing institutional sectors of the society. The second major limitation is that business marketing per se will forego the enrichment that comes from examining the same processes practiced in other