Why history in marketing? Historical research in marketing offers opportunities for charting our past and better understanding our present. The author formulates a suitable method for undertaking historical research in marketing. It relates the principles of history to the study of marketing.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN MARKETING

WILL historical research in marketing continue to be undertaken mainly by nonmarketing scholars? The question arises because marketing scholars have given little attention to this part of the discipline. More than 10 years have passed since the publication of the last major work in marketing history (Shapiro and Doody 1968), and business historians are wondering why the history of marketing has not interested marketing scholars (Hidy 1977, p. 19). Part of the void has been filled by business and economic historians who are making contributions to the marketing literature, but they are not writing marketing history. Such scholars have produced important works, such as the economic history of American wholesale middlemen in the nineteenth century (Porter and Livesay 1971). However, they do not do justice to marketing history in the way marketing scholars would.

Among the reasons advanced for the absence of historical research in marketing are the lack of appreciation of its importance and the lack of a method. The purpose of this article is to offer a rationale for such historical research and a method which can be applied in marketing. A brief sketch of the state of marketing history is presented as background.

Why Study Marketing History? Historical study adds a robust quality to a discipline. It enables scholars within the discipline, as well as society at large, to gain an understanding of its origins and its patterns of change. Such study relates a discipline to its own past and to other disciplines. Historical study helps to establish an identity for a discipline by providing some idea of where it is and what it is.

Historical research can also be used in the verification and synthesis of hypotheses, “the cumulative result being the promotion of theory” (Doody 1965, p. 557). It can be done at the micro level as in the case of market segmentation. The study of Josiah Wedgwood, the English porcelain manufacturer, provides new bases for understanding the origins of segmentation (McKendrick 1960). Historical research can also add to the development of macro theories such as proposed by Alderson (1965) and more recently by Bagozzi (1978). Cassady, in his studies of food retailing, argued this point. Historical studies of market behavior would provide a better understanding of how markets and competitors do behave than the current theories based on how they are supposed to behave (Cassady 1963).

Some Basic Issues Marketing history is defined by the content of marketing. Assume that marketing is the discipline which describes and explains the operation of markets in terms of all

Ronald Savitt is Professor, Department of Marketing and Economic Analysis, The University of Alberta.
prepurchase and postpurchase activities related to trans-
actions of ownership or use rights to any factor, good,
or service (Narver and Savitt 1971, p. 4). Historical
research in marketing is a narration of events through
time in which their sequence is described. The writing
of history requires the analysis and explanation of the
causes and consequences of events with particular con-
cern for change.

A historical study in marketing would focus on the
elements of want satisfaction, rather than on resource
allocation as in economics, or on spatial behavior as in
human geography. An illustrative hypothesis for a spe-
cific study might be:

In spite of increasing marketing abilities, merchant
wholesalers in foodstuffs in Great Britain declined in
importance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
because of improvements in the transportation system
which provided a closer relation between food produc-
ers and retailers.

Though the hypothesis includes concepts and ideas
from other disciplines, its central thrust is within
marketing. This is as it should be; however, research
from other disciplines is not to be ignored. It is to be
treated as complementary to the marketing issues. Good
historical analysis seeks to explore and analyze the
ininitely subtle relations between marketing events and
economic and geographic factors. Vance, a prominent
geographer who has studied wholesaling, makes this
point. He says that the geographer examines the eco-

demic landscape in terms of the components and the
activities that they serve, and the relations between and
among the physical and social elements that are present
(Vance 1970, p. 34). The marketing scholar, in con-
trast, must concentrate on the development of the
marketing system, the factors that affect it, and most
important, its management.

The Historical Perspective
An introduction to the concept of historical perspective
is required. It is defined in terms of description and
comparison.

Historical research and writing are basically descrip-
tive; they begin with the narration of events in a time
sequence. Such an exercise might encompass a recog-
nized historical period, for example, the industrial revo-
lution. Specific events are identified and described as to
particular characteristics. Analysis addresses the ques-
tions of explanation, relationship, and consequences of
the events.

Historical studies are generally not predictive although
the historian does become involved in a type of predic-
tion, sometimes called "retrodiction," in attempting to
work out what might have happened in the past. The
conclusions of historical study can form the basis of
prediction, to the extent that extrapolation to future
cases is desirable and realistic.

Historical studies are not deterministic in the sense
of an equilibrium model. Probable cause, rather than
deterministic cause, describes historical relationships.
Moreover, unlike quantitative analysis, historical analy-
sis does not contain the axiomatic development of math-
ematical theory in which inferences are certain, the
theorems are absolutely determined, the axioms are given,
and hence the results are deterministic (Harvey 1969, p.
232).

Comparison is also part of the historical perspective
although it is important to note that comparison is only
a method and not historical research itself. Events in a
single place can be compared through time, and events
at different places in space can be compared in the
context of chronological time—at the same time, for
example. The former approach is an instance of tradi-
tional, chronological historical research. The latter is no
less an example of historical study. A project which
examines department stores in a series of economies in
1980 would be part and parcel of historical research in
marketing if emphasis were given to the time-related
differences among them. What is required of the histo-
rian is recognition of the complexities in the meaning of
time. This important topic is beyond the scope of the
article; however, anyone undertaking historical studies
should become acquainted with the problems (Whitrow
1975).

Types of Marketing History and the
State of Historical Research
The historical dimension of the discipline consists of
two distinct but inextricably intertwined components.
One is the historical development of the doctrines or the
history of thought, the discipline's "intellectual histo-
ry." The second is the history of the discipline's con-
tent. The two feed upon one another. "It may be
oversimplification to contrast the body of theory in

economics—whatever its deficiencies—with the absence
of a corpus of marketing theory and the respective
significant correlations with the presence and absence of
a strong historically oriented literature, but there remains
a reasonable suspicion that these factors are not unrelated"
(Smalley 1964, p. 366).

There is a historical tradition in marketing, although
it is not as well developed as in economics. Work has
been undertaken in both components, although marketing
thought has been given more attention than marketing
content. The writings of Bartels (1976) and Schwartz
(1963) capture the core of the history of marketing
thought. Bartels concentrated on the development of
marketing thought by documenting major academic con-
tributions. His work is historical only to the extent that
it is chronological. He traced the development of concepts in a number of areas. The work is not analytical because he does not attempt to explain the circumstances that affected the topics. It is not comparative because he does not evaluate the relationships between various approaches to marketing, such as functionalism or the institutional approach. The readers gain few insights into the environmental conditions and intellectual forces that produced such marketing scholars as Wroe Alderson, Reavis Cox, E. T. Grether, David Revzan, and others. Marketers, unlike economists, know little about the forces that gave direction to their intellectual development (Gray 1931).

Only a few attempts have been made to produce marketing history. The major comprehensive work is the classic Milestones of Marketing, published in 1938, which documents progress in marketing to that date (Hotchkiss 1938). Readings in the History of American Marketing falls short of an actual history although it has served as an important stimulus for encouraging historical work (Shapiro and Doody 1968). Interestingly, marketing history has not been accorded a place in the study of the history of marketing thought. Bartels includes no entry for either "history" or "historical." In spite of his citing individuals who have contributed to marketing thought, he does not include their contributions to marketing history. For example, Frank M. Jones is acknowledged for his work in theory but not for marketing history (Jones 1937).

I do not mean to suggest that no work has been done in marketing history. The topics that have been addressed are advertising and distribution. In the former area the amount of study has led to the development of the Journal of Advertising History (Pollay 1977). In the latter, some work has been undertaken in retailing, most notably "the wheel of retailing" (Hollander 1963). More recent work by Goldman (1978) on the concept of "trading up" provides more hypotheses for historical study in retailing. Bucklin's comprehensive study of evolution in the distributive trades offers a broad framework for understanding growth and competition in retail and wholesale trade. Because of his reliance on economic analysis, the study is not historical in the sense developed in this article; however, it is rich in hypotheses for marketing history (Bucklin 1972).

Without condemning marketing scholars as neglectful, one can easily understand why, in general, marketing history has received little attention. As an applied discipline, marketing must cater to its client market of decision makers. Their concerns are directed toward, understandably, making better decisions in today's market. Looking backward to them is a luxury. Moreover, the discipline itself has had to absorb an ever-increasing set of new concepts and methods and then establish appropriate ways to apply them to the problems at hand.

Finally, the absence of historical methodology has also limited the opportunity to reflect upon the past.

To a great degree, marketing history is a victim of the endless flood of contemporary developments and the increasing specialization of academics (Shapiro 1964, p. 569).

Method for History in Marketing

The question: "What is the correct method for historical research?" is important and cannot be easily dismissed. All research should be based on the principles of the scientific method, although experimentation cannot be applied in history as it is applied in the biological and physical sciences or even in the social sciences. The fact that "historical experimentation" is impossible does not mean that historical research must be any less valid than research in those circumstances in which experimentation is used. Historical research must retain the objectivity of the scientific method, following its structure as closely as possible. The major principle is that historical research in marketing must conform in every way possible to experimental control as applied in the experimental method. It is beyond the scope of this article to argue how historical analysis might approach the structure of a well defined experiment (Marwick 1970, p. 105).

The Formulation of Historical Research

Figure 1 is a methodological diagram for historical research in marketing which includes the essence of the scientific method. The seven elements describe the sequential pattern of activities required to do historical research. They can be examined in the context of a specific project. Assume that a marketing scholar is interested in understanding the conditions which led to the development of fixed store retailing, namely, the transition from journeyman merchants to continuous selling at specific locations. The results of such a study could be used to understand the problems that must be faced in a developing economy, although they would have to be considered within the limitations of the predictive nature of history as previously discussed.

Activity 1. The beginning point for the researcher is to define his or her own perceptual experiences of the problem. These include, among other things, the researcher's beliefs about what has happened, perceptions about the conditions which lead to the changes, and assumptions about how the former relate to the problem at hand. This activity aims at understanding the nature and the amount of subjectivity held by the researcher which will have to be accounted for in the evaluation of the findings. Subjectivity is present in all historical research simply because of differences between the past and the present. This gap, much as the "gap"
of experimental error, must be acknowledged and accounted for.

Activity 2. The perceptual experiences are compared with the images of the real world as reported in the literature. This activity includes the preliminary investigation stage in which a literature search is undertaken to determine what is known about retail change of this type. In the case of marketing, the primitives, the basic functions, must be defined in a manner that allows comparison over time. For example, the contrast between fixed store retailing and journeyman merchants or periodic markets implies something about how storage and transportation functions are performed in the economy. Hence, the characteristics of the functions as well as the factors that influence them must be understood in terms of their effects on buyers and sellers, and the effects of buyers and sellers on them.

Activity 3. From that exercise will develop hypotheses which are to be verified. One hypothesis for historical investigation that has evolved from the images of the real world is:

A fixed location retailer will be established and will remain viable if the maximum range of a good exceeds the minimum range of a good, where the minimum range is defined as the distance from the fixed location incorporating sufficient demand to provide a profit and where the maximum range represents the maximum distance that buyers will travel to purchase that good (Hay and Beavon 1979, p. 27).

Within the formulation of the hypothesis, definitions of standards must be developed for the testing procedures, such as the meaning of “viable” and “profitable;” however, these do not differ from those employed in traditional research.

Activity 4. The research design to test the hypothesis will incorporate observation of examples of periodic markets as they operate in different environments, and surveys of the literature and individuals familiar with such markets as well as persons who possibly have seen the transition take place. The surveys will also examine materials that include descriptions of this type of transition over a variety of time periods. This activity is no different from the techniques used in traditional marketing research except in the types and sources of data found in historical research.

Activity 5. The sources of historical evidence differ from the traditional ones used in marketing research. Greater reliance is placed on archival materials, corporate records, and public and legal documents as well as business, economic, social, and urban histories. Artifact evidence including buildings and relics also is used.

Attention must be given to the distinction between primary and secondary sources as a means of minimizing the gap between the actor and the observer. Drawing a precise line between primary and secondary sources is difficult in historical research. Simply because a document is old does not mean that it is primary. On a spectrum from “purely primary data” to “purely secondary data” there is a greater overlap for historical data than for contemporary data. The marketing scholar can in part minimize this problem by attempting to view historical data as if he or she were a contemporary with them. This is no mean task and it requires that the researcher have some knowledge about the period of the study.

A researcher not only must understand his or her own subjectivity as previously described, but also must be prepared to understand the ways in which subjectivity can creep into primary data. Anyone who has examined legislative hearings will appreciate this problem. The verbal testimony of a witness as recorded in the hearings and the written testimony from which the oral statement is made often differ even though they are presented by the same person.

Being aware of the problems of such differences creates a degree of sensitivity which is necessary if correct statements about the validity of data are to be made. The historical researcher must closely question “official records” and “first-hand reports” in the same way that caution is exercised in accepting the information on completed mail questionnaires. In historical re-
search, the failure to do so may be more damaging to the extent that the conclusions will often be drawn from a smaller number of observations.

First-person accounts of periodic markets will have to be evaluated in terms of the background of the writer so as to minimize the biases. A sociologist will see periodic markets in a different way than will a marketer. Because many marketing events have been reported by people who are not marketers, extra care must be exercised in the evaluation of such reports even when they are primary sources. Primary data include personal account books and ledgers, such as those used in the study of Andrew Melrose, an Edinburgh grocer. In such documents are recorded the accounts with suppliers, customers, and agents as well as banking activities (Hoh-Cheung and Muir 1973, p. 37). For the case of periodic markets, diaries, day books, public records, and the remembrances of traders will form the nucleus of primary data.

Another source of primary data is corporate records. When these are made available to the marketing historian, they can provide minute details about the development of marketing programs and activities including perceptions about the marketing activities of other firms. Access to these materials is often restricted because many corporations have had poor relationships with historians in the past. Unfortunately, some business historians have used their studies of corporations to ridicule business practices or to support self-serving views (Williamson 1966, p. 26).

Public records and litigative proceedings also offer primary and secondary data, although they are often difficult to categorize clearly. The legal approach to the study of marketing, even though it is not well developed, provides insights into what practices are acceptable and insights into the evolving legal structure which surrounds marketing decision making. The failure of a contract to meet the test of legality through litigation provides much understanding about the ways in which marketing practices evolve, though it would be incorrect to accept the test of legality as a measure of the success or failure of a specific practice. A fairly extensive literature in industrial organization and in the law offers important secondary materials (McCurdy 1978).

The question of the validity of a piece of evidence is related to the distance between the event and the user who subsequently interprets the information. Validity, or acceptability, becomes an issue when the data are drawn from studies in closely related fields. This is a precaution to the researcher in marketing so that he or she will be keenly aware of the differences in purpose of various types of historical research. Drawing upon the business historians, who are often interested in individual business leaders, may lead the marketing scholar to bypass marketing concepts. The problem is not that a study of a business leader contains inaccurate information, but that the information may not lead to marketing insights. Business history studies such as "The Development of the Retail Grocery Trade in the Nineteenth Century" (Blackman 1967) and "Marketing Organization and Policy in the Cotton Trade" (Lee 1968) provide interesting insights into entrepreneurial activities but they do not analyze historical developments in marketing as would be done by the marketing historian. These studies are valuable, however, because they direct the researcher to primary and secondary data.

In general, traditional statistical sources will not be available for all of the periods of historical study. What data are available may be limited in scope and may stem from sources not known to the marketing historian. For example, church records often include a listing of the names of merchants in a parish and medical records may report occupation-linked injuries. To the extent that data series in the traditional reporting form for marketing are not available and to the extent that unusual forms are not known, the work of the marketing historian will be made more difficult. The situation will be like that of the economic historian, who because of the shortage of great volumes of statistics must either muddle along with other evidence or specialize in those areas where statistics are sufficient to employ sophisticated statistical techniques (Johnston 1941, p. 46). The statistical data that are found, such as census reports, taxation reports, and transport movement documents, must be carefully scrutinized to determine their relevance to marketing activities. They also must be tested for validity (Marburgh 1960).

**Hypothesis Verification and Theory Development**

**Activity 6.** The verification procedures are the equivalent of hypothesis testing. Verification is accomplished by comparison of qualitative factors which may or may not be associated by numerical values. The choice of the term "verification" is deliberate, to draw attention to the differences between hypothesis testing in historical research and hypothesis testing in marketing research. Most historical research involves the qualitative comparison of events over time or between different places without regard to either a known or a theoretical standard as is used in statistical inference. Unlike the test of the null hypothesis as in the case of a sample and a population, no precise process is available which allows for error estimation. Comparison itself is based on the ability of the researcher to describe a certain phenomenon in two time periods or in two areas. The process is often thwarted because of differences in the description of events. For example, in the description of periodic markets it would be important to know clearly whether they operated randomly in an area, that is, were peri-
odic in space, or whether they were periodic in time, that is, operated at the same place but at different times. Though these differences seem obvious, great care must be taken to ensure that the proper conditions are included. As a method, comparison is characterized by the isolation of similarities and differences and by the assessment of the factors which lead to change (Boddewyn 1966).

A second verification method, which has received great attention by economic historians, is the regressive method (Marwick 1970, p. 73). This method follows the general principles of statistical analysis; obviously, its use depends on the availability of significant quantities of data.

The regressive method involves the use of evidence drawn from one period which is extrapolated either backward or forward in time in order to understand the earlier or later period. "Climometrics," the name given the method in economic history, is an application of econometric methods to historical data. It incorporates prediction as discussed heretofore. Climometrics has been criticized along two lines. The lack of data limits the validity of some studies, and techniques have dominated some data to give to conclusions more weight than they might have under different conditions (McCloskey 1978, p. 28). Whether this approach will be useful in historical research in marketing is unknown, although it is reasonable to suspect that the dearth of data will limit its use.

For the hypothesis describing the conditions for fixed store retailing, verification would be undertaken by the comparison of the assembled data with the constructs of the hypothesis. The researcher must subjectively apply weights to the various pieces of evidence and then reach conclusions. Because of the absence of fixed standards, close attention must be paid to the specific factors that affect the acceptance or the rejection of the hypothesis. The end product of the verification process, regardless of the outcome, will be a set of conclusions which recognize, but do not necessarily endorse, alternative explanations. The precision of statistical relations which clearly link events will not be present in most cases.

Activity 7. Theory development arises from the testing of the hypothesis in several environments. The development of explanatory theory is a process in which the results of positive and negative findings are merged, as shown in Figure 1. Those hypotheses which are not verified and not accepted become the negative feedback loop and are reexamined in further investigations. Those which are accepted form the basis for theory. There is no magic number of tests which signals the point when theory development can begin. Clearly, more than one case would be required.

Historical research by itself is not likely to lead to the development of predictive theory. The evidence collected and the inferences drawn can serve as the platform on which theory is built. Theory emerges when an attempt is made to predict the outcome of events. "A purely descriptive or historical treatment of marketing would not be marketing theory" (Alderson 1965, p. 23).

CONCLUSIONS

Marketing history can show meaningful interconnections and parallels among different events. Its role will be to isolate and illustrate the changes that marketing and its respective institutions have made, the factors which have been influential in effecting change, and the consequences of change. Though some scholars might choose to study the history of a firm or a single practice, greater value will come from studying marketing's role in the broader economic and social context. The history of specific events has value in itself but even more value when placed within the larger framework. Thus, if the limitations of such studies are fully recognized, marketing history might provide one avenue for preparing for the future (Carson 1978).

Because of the lack of methodological precision in historical studies, some marketing scholars may ignore them. What is lacking, however, is a full understanding of the aims of historical research. Although the development of general theory is a desired consequence of such research, more limited goals must be accepted. This fact should not detract from the search for a better knowledge of marketing's past.

REFERENCES

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