COMMENTARY

Science, serendipity and the contemporary marketing condition

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this commentary is to summarise developments in the science of serendipity and urge marketers to pay more attention to the incorrigible incalculability of commercial life.
Design/methodology/approach – Explains how luck is a crucial component of business success and argues, citing examples of Shelby D. Hunt and Ted Levitt, among others, that it is perhaps time to abandon our fixation with customer focus and start taking serendipity seriously
Findings – Fortune, clearly, favours the brand. Indeed, the history of management in general and marketing in particular reveals that serendipity plays a significant part in the commercial equation.
Originality/value – Highlights the latter day advances in the science of serendipity.
Keywords Marketing, Marketing theory
Paper type Viewpoint

I should be so lucky

The foremost philosopher of marketing science owes much to a serendipititous incident. As he recounts in a recent autobiographical essay, Shelby D. Hunt studied for his PhD at Michigan State University, where he took a course on marketing theory (Hunt, 2001). Much as he enjoyed the course, taught by Buddy LaLonde, SDH found it somewhat frustrating. The class discussions, he felt, kept going round in circles and frequently ended in stalemate, largely because “students often seemed to be ‘talking past’ one another rather than engaging in truly productive interaction” (Hunt, 2001, p. 117).

One night, at a bridge party thrown by a new neighbour, SDH discussed his difficulties with another doctoral student from the philosophy department. Despite his lack of familiarity with marketing thought, the neophyte philosopher immediately grasped the issues at stake and was able to resolve ostensibly irresolvable conceptual problems. Inspired by this Damascene moment, SDH started studying philosophy seriously, the works of Carl Hempel, Richard Rudner and Ernest Nagel in particular. When he moved to the University of Wisconsin, what’s more, he developed a marketing theory course of his own. This formed the basis of his groundbreaking textbook, Marketing Theory: Conceptual Foundations of Research in Marketing (currently in its fourth incarnation) and inspired him to write his much-cited, award-winning JM article, “The nature and scope of marketing” (Hunt, 1976a, b).

It thus seems that if it weren’t for that serendipitous meeting with a MSU philosophy student, SDH may have devoted his career to the subject of his doctoral
thesis, channels of distribution, and the marketing discipline may have developed in an entirely different direction. Who knows?

To be sure, chance encounters, accidental occurrences and sheer good fortune loom large in business life. Everyone is familiar with the fortuitous stories of Velcro, Corn Flakes, Band Aids, Post-it Notes and Nike’s waffle sole, to say nothing of Teflon, Kevlar, dynamite, artificial dyes, polyurethane and penicillin (Roberts, 1989). But they’re only a tiny proportion of the providential total. From Ivory soap to Tide detergent, Procter & Gamble lucked out again and again (Dyer et al., 2004). Harley Davidson’s latter-day renaissance was three parts fluke to one part foresight (Holt, 2004). McDonald’s fast food empire was founded on a whim, when milkshake-shaker supremo Ray Kroc paid a visit to the San Bernadino roadside stand that ordered eight of his machines (Love, 1987). The idea for America’s foremost dysfunctional family came out of the blue to Matt Groening, as he sat in the outer office of acclaimed TV producer James L. Brooks, and it took all of five minutes to invent The Simpsons we know and love (Turner, 2004). The cornucopian Ekofisk oilfield was discovered, not by painstaking geological analyses or thanks to sophisticated geographical information systems, but simply because Phillips Petroleum happened to have a rig in the area at the time (Haigh, 2004). The shape of twenty-first-century information technology owes much to Steve Jobs’ reluctant visit to Xerox’s PARC laboratory in 1979, where he saw the future in the form of a graphical user interface and a curious pointing device with three buttons called a mouse (Malone, 1999). Pfizer, furthermore, was searching for an angina alleviant when it discovered the ithyphallic side-effects of Viagra and duly earned the undying gratitude of innumerable erectile tribulation victims, countless brewer’s droop sufferers and serried ranks of stand-up comedians (Loe, 2004).

Fortune, clearly, favours the brand. Indeed, the history of management in general and marketing in particular reveals that serendipity plays a significant part in the commercial equation (Bernstein, 1998; Taleb, 2004). As John Speden Lewis, the founder of the eponymous department stores, rightly observed, “It would surely be manifestly absurd to suggest that mere luck is not a very great factor in the making of enormous fortunes” (quoted in Haigh, 2004, p.125).

**Hard luck**

Fortuna may be the god of businesspeople, those who have to make the sale, move the metal or mind the store, but she doesn’t get a look in conceptually. Marketing academicians, by and large, act as if luck doesn’t exist. Our meticulous models, rigorous frameworks and primordial principles are predicated on analysis, planning and control, as are our courses, textbooks and degree programmes. We internees of the ivory tower reside in a nearly Newtonian universe. Everything is explicable, or potentially explicable. Laws are immutable, or will be one day. Clockwork concepts prevail. Deterministic, arrow-strewn flow diagrams are our trademark. If luck exists at all, it lurks among the pestilential “uncontrollables” of the external environment. It rarely features in our dictionaries, A to Zs, or inventories of FAQs. Marketing science, so it seems, has little or no truck with serendipity, let alone the everyday accidental occurrences of the real world.

The irony, of course, is that physical scientists readily acknowledge that we live in a world of uncertainty, indeterminacy and discontinuity. Whether it be the chance mutations of evolutionary theory, the peek-a-boo behaviour of quantum particles, or
those singularly inconsiderate butterflies who flutter their wings in the Amazon basin and cause hurricanes in Hong Kong, unpredictability is the watchword of our serendipitous times (Watts, 2003).

In fairness, many marketing scholars have wrestled with complexity theory, reflected on fractals and pondered the implications of Godel’s incompleteness theorem. Scenario planning and analogous forms of futurism are also worthy of note, as are game theory, Baysian inference, contingency planning and the plangent precepts of probability theory. But for all this probabilistic prowess, our concepts hardly capture the sheer capriciousness of commercial life (Davidson, 2002; Peabody, 2005). When it comes to lucky breaks, such as Dom Perignon’s invention of champagne or Frank Winfield Woolworth’s flash of five-n-dime genius or Bill Gates’s moment of Altair-induced inspiration in Harvard Yard, our models don’t begin to do justice to the intrinsic arbitrariness of business. As Nicholas Rescher, a philosopher of life’s “brilliant randomness”, cogently notes:

> Luck is a rogue force that prevents human life from being fully domesticated to rational management. Its foothold on the world stage is secure by the power of chance, chaos, and choice. Luck and her cousins, fate and fortune, make it somewhere between difficult and impossible to manage our lives successfully simply through planning and design. Things in this world can always take an unexpected turn; as the quip has it, “Life is what happens when you’re not making plans” (Rescher, 1995, p.12).

**Feelin’ lucky, punk?**

Faced with the incorrigible incalculability of chance, many marketing researchers might be inclined to respond with a resounding, “so what?” If good fortune cannot be predicted or legislated for, let alone managed, then there is not much that can be done about it, short of wishing on a star, looking for four-leaf clovers, avoiding entanglements with black cats and rubbing our compendious collection of amputated rabbit appendages (Bechtel and Stains, 1997).

This reaction, understandable though it is, overlooks latter-day advances in the science of serendipity. It is increasingly recognised that, far from being uncontrollable, luck can be caught, corralled, coached, created (Summers and Watson, 2005). It really is possible to make your own luck (Rovira and Trı́as deBes, 2004). Richard Wiseman’s (2004) experimental studies of “lucky” and “unlucky” individuals – and, interestingly, organisations – reveal that there is an element of self-fulfilment about good fortune. Good luck reproduces itself, bad luck is bedevilled by inbreeding. Those who believe they are lucky and act on that belief frequently find that their luck increases, whereas those who consider themselves unlucky and assume that the worst is going to happen, often find that it does (Kanter, 2004). Accordingly, Wiseman (2004) encourages his clients to expect good fortune, exploit the luck factor and “learn to be lucky”.

Clearly, there is a self-help, NLP, can-do cast to this line of thought, which some people find ludicrous at best and lunatic at worst. It’s too close to Deepak Chopra, Spencer Johnson, Ya-Ya Sisterhood territory for comfort, much less serious scholarly consideration. Yet “new-agey” forms of auto-suggestion have distinguished antecedents. They date from the Mind Cure movement of the mid-nineteenth century; earned their intellectual stripes at the start of the twentieth century, thanks to the endorsement of Pragmatist philosopher William James; reached their populist pinnacle in the 1950s, when Dale Carnegie was exhorting put-upon salespeople to...
smile, smile, smile; and are still going strong thanks to the money-spinning corporate ministrations of Stephen Covey, Kenneth Blanchard, Anthony Robbins and their evangelical ilk (Brown, 2001).

The longevity of this line of thinking is unremarkable, since self-help is an elemental aspect of the American character (and marketing is nothing if not American). What is remarkable is the well-established fact that it works. As numerous studies by sociologists, anthropologists and epidemiologists show, auto-suggestion is efficacious (Moerman, 2002). The placebo effect proves that people really do get better if they believe they’ve been given a cure. People really do curl up and die when they fall foul of the sorcerer’s evil eye. People really can think themselves thin or make their own luck, implausible though this process appears to conventionally-minded marketing scientists.

Indeed, it is arguable that marketing itself is a form of corporate mind cure, chicken soup for the company soul (Brown, 2001). The important thing to appreciate about much-buzzed boardroom bromides – be it benchmarking, reengineering, TQM, CRM, six sigma or what have you – is that the nuts and bolts of the procedure are less important than belief in its potency, the conviction that it will do exactly what it says on the tin. Marketing, in other words, works. But only if marketers believe that it works. The trappings of marketing, 4Ps, 3Cs, STP, SWOT, etc, are ineffective unless accompanied by certitude that marketing makes things better.

The problem marketing faces in our cynical, sceptical, neo-nihilistic times is that no one really believes in it anymore. It has lost its magical aura. It has become a commodity. It is shop soiled. It is ubiquitous, institutionalised, ossified, thanks to identikit textbooks, cloned degree programmes and me-too, incremental-advance, angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin articles in leading academic journals. It is suffering, furthermore, from all sorts of alleged mid-life crises and, if not exactly on its deathbed, our discipline is looking decidedly green around the gills (see Holbrook and Hulbert, 2002; McCole, 2004).

Marketing, in brief, needs to be shaken out of its torpor. It needs a bolt from the blue, a shot in the arm, a dose of intellectual Viagra, a lucky break or two.

The luck of the Levitt
Fortunately, the science of serendipity literature has another trick up its sleeve. “Chance”, as Louis Pasteur famously quipped (to an audience of businesspeople, appropriately), “favours the prepared mind”. That is, those whose training, reading, research, experience et cetera enables them to appreciate the significance of serendipitous occurrences. The discovery of penicillin, or vulcanised rubber, or X-rays, may have been accidental, but had Alexander Fleming, Charles Goodyear or Wilhelm Röntgen not recognised the significance of the aelatory event, the happy accident would have been overlooked or dismissed as inconsequential:

The natural tendency of the unprepared mind is to discard the unusual. It is dismissed because not wanted – it does not conform to the preconceived plan. The unusual and unexpected may be significant and perhaps have to wait for a blunderer – on a journey of adventure in quest of discovery (Merton and Barber 2004, p.179).

“Unexpected” is the key word here, because it is often the anomalous event, the unanticipated result, the idiosyncratic outlier, the incongruous finding, the chance
conversation, that provides the passport to the Kingdom of Good Fortune. Instead of ignoring the unexpected anomaly, as practitioners of “normal science” are socialised to do, the misfits of “revolutionary science” seize on the deviant development and show how it subverts the established paradigm. That, according to Thomas S. Kuhn, the most-cited scholar of the twentieth century, is how science progresses (Merton and Barber, 2004). Marketing science included, presumably.

It is 45 years since Ted Levitt (1960, p. 45) codified the modern marketing concept, when he roundly denounced organisations that are “product-oriented instead of customer-oriented”. Almost half a century on from “Marketing myopia”, customer orientation occupies pride of place in our conceptual display cabinet. Companies are urged to become ever more customer-centric. Managers are trained to exceed customer expectations. Marketing organisations are engaged in a sort of charms race, where each tries to outdo the other in their commitment to customer welfare and each synonym is more superlative than the one before. Satisfaction has been superseded by delight, which has been trumped by rapture, which will be eclipsed by ecstasy. Can jouissance be far away? Is that an orgasmatron I see before me?

No, it’s an anomaly. There is a problem with marketing’s customer-centric obsession. The anomaly is that marketing success can be achieved without a scintilla of customer orientation. The latter-day triumph of, say, Michael O’Leary’s Ryanair, Steve Jobs’ Apple and Larry Ellison’s Oracle indicates that eschewing customer centricity can pay dividends. True, the success of these organisations may lead many to infer that they are, in fact, customer orientated, despite their like-it-or-lump-it rhetoric and behaviour. After all, if they weren’t meeting customer needs, at some level or other, they wouldn’t be successful. Right?

Wrong. This success-equals-satisfaction inference is fallacious (Brown, 2003). It is a specious argument, a case of affirming the consequent, since it assumes what it purports to prove. Success may well be a consequence of customer orientation – indeed, it often is – but is it always a consequence of customer orientation? If it isn’t, then customer orientation can’t be inferred from evidence of commercial success. Something else may be causing it: lack of alternatives, competitor ineptitude, merchandise shortages, sheer good fortune.

Perhaps it’s time to abandon our fixation with customer focus and start taking serendipity seriously. As luck would have it, the starting point for this “contingent marketing concept” is the same as the contemporary marketing concept, Ted Levitt’s immortal “Marketing myopia”. The article is best remembered for its customer centric contentions but it also contained detailed analyses of the oil industry, which showed that chance, happenstance and happy accident shaped every stage of the iconic industry’s development. In 1960, marketing chose one path, the customer centric path, the path that some now deem a dead end. We ignored the other, unpredictable path at the time of Ted’s timeless article and, while it is impossible to retrace our steps, we can at least pick up the serendipitous trail. You never know, we might get lucky.

References


