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Double, double toil and trouble: on the equivocal magic of marketing

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Abstract Fifty years after the Ford report set business schools on the road to Big Science, the futility of that quest is becoming increasingly apparent. Management science is being blamed for the ills that are befalling the global economy. Although many academics maintain that the financial apocalypse is attributable to a “few bad apples”, the principles that underpin practitioners’ unethical behaviours must bear some responsibility. This paper argues that our scholarly shortcomings will not be overcome by “better” science but by abandoning Big Science for a worldview that is much closer to what managers actually do on a day-to-day basis. That worldview is essentially magical, ten key elements of which are outlined.

Keywords Management science, Marketing magic, Advertising incantations, Brand alchemy.

There’s a full-page ad in today’s edition of The Times. It’s in all the other national newspapers, as well. It consists of a “letter to the customers” of NatWest Bank, a subsidiary of the much-maligned RBS Group. Signed by CEO Paul Geddes, the letter assures worried customers that NatWest is fighting the recession on their behalf, that the welfare of credit-starved small businesspeople and home owners is uppermost in its mind and that, toxic debt and government bailouts notwithstanding, it is totally committed to helping first time buyers, householders in arrears and, as far as I can make out, Uncle Tom Cobley and all.

On reading the CEO’s tearstained letter, some people may be flabbergasted by NatWest’s effrontery, especially in light of the parent company’s financial shenanigans. Others no doubt wonder why their hard-earned savings are being spent on a national advertising campaign. One suspects, however, that most marketers

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will find themselves drawn to the first sentence of Gettes’ lachrymose lament. “At NatWest,” it states unequivocally, “we understand that helpful banking needs to be more than just a marketing line.” The emphasis is in the original.

After wryly noting that the bank’s marketing campaign commences with an attack on marketing—and having recovered from the insinuation that marketers, not bankers or politicians, are to blame for the world’s economic malaise—many of us may reasonably conclude that NatWest considers marketing to be a customer-gouging gimmick.¹ Unless, of course, the “just a marketing line” is itself just a marketing line in what, after all, is the first line of a marketing message. Is this a double, double, branding-bluff I see before me?

Faced with such CEO candour, marketing’s academic community will surely wonder where it all went wrong. Despite decades of declaring that marketing is a force for the good, that customer wellbeing is our calling’s raison d’être, that the marketing philosophy must permeate every organisation, for-profit or otherwise, it seems that “marketing” is still a term of abuse, a synonym for charlatanry, a word freighted with negative connotations. Rapacious capitalists and disingenuous marketers are Ps from the same pod, apparently.

Pausing briefly to shake our collective heads, more in sorrow than in anger, marketing academia is likely to retreat to its default defence. Namely, it’ll announce that Gettes’ representation of marketing is mistaken. The philosophy of marketing remains unsullied, we’ll counter. The problem rests with the practitioner not the profession, don’t you know. Just because one banker misunderstands marketing doesn’t mean that marketing per se is at fault. There may be a few bad apples in the barrel—just as there are in politics, medicine, journalism, teaching, the police—but they are the exception rather than the rule. The many, surely, shouldn’t be tainted by the iniquities of the few.

On mature reflection, though, we may well come to the unsettling conclusion that bad apples have been good for marketing. The “bad apples” excuse has served us well. It enables us to explain away all manner of misdeeds that many associate with marketers, everything from advertising unhealthy products and selling sweatshop produced trinkets to encouraging the unsustainable overconsumption that’s destroying our planet (Johansson 2004). Such actions are unconscionable, we’ll duly protest, but they have nothing to do with “proper” marketing! It’s just a few bad apples. Ask Paul Gettes. He can vouch for us.

An analogous defence, much beloved by academicians, is what I call the “implementation gambit”. It goes like this: if our principles, theories, concepts, models, frameworks and so forth fail to fulfil their promise in practice, the fault lies with pesky marketing managers, those who don’t or won’t implement our ideas properly.² The problem lies not with Relationship Marketing but the fact that you didn’t follow our carefully enumerated instructions! If customer delight isn’t delivering competitive advantage that’s because you didn’t deliver sufficient delight, now get out there and wow them! Listen mister, the marketing strategy would’ve worked perfectly if only you’d anticipated the implications of the subprime catastrophe, the

¹ Presumably, its past enthusiasm for Relationship Marketing was a bit of a gimmick too. At least we now know where we stand.

² A recent example of what I mean is found in Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009, p. 86). My aim here is not to name and shame, so I’ll be keeping marketing citations to a minimum. You know who you are!
derivatives debacle, the credit crunch, the on-going gales of creative destruction. Call yourself a marketer?

Speaking personally, I’ve always had a problem with the “implementation gambit”. I can see why we resort to it – or, similarly, shelter behind the “few bad apples” firewall – but I sometimes wonder if it’s a smart rhetorical move. What it boils down to, basically, is pinning the blame on the customer. We academics are not at fault, the marketing concept is not at fault, our textbooks and published articles are not at fault. The people who buy our concepts and ideas and scholarly insights are at fault because they don’t listen, they don’t do as they’re told, they don’t take their marketing medicine as instructed. Is it any wonder when things go wrong?

Blaming the customer does not sit well with a discipline that venerates customers. The customer, remember, is always right.3 Perhaps it’s time to practise what we preach or at least consider the possibility that our customers know best, that our ideas may be flawed or facile or, frankly, unimplementable. The fundamental problem with the modern marketing paradigm – marketing science, for want of a better descriptor – is that we can always make excuses when its failings are exposed. In keeping with Lakatos’s (1970) “methodology of scientific research programmes”, anomalous findings can easily be explained away, thereby preserving the central conceptual premise. Evidence that refutes the modern marketing philosophy, we retort, is either based on erroneous assumptions or inadequate research or improper implementation or an unanticipated alteration in environmental circumstances (or whatever our preferred get-out clause happens to be).

In stating the above, I’m not for a moment suggesting that marketing academics are disingenuous, deluded or indeed in denial. The root cause of our problem, I believe, is the marketing science mentality that pervades the discipline (Brown 1996). Although our ideas are not scientifically proven, as such, they are scientifically approved, so to speak. They are based on scientific methods and are thus imbued with a spurious authority that not only allows us to lord it over infuriatingly “unscientific” practitioners, but to erroneously assume that we know best. This is a worrisome state of affairs, to put it mildly, albeit one that is dismayingly widespread. In the half century since the Ford and Carnegie reports rebooted business education, the management science mindset has grown ever stronger. Perpetuated by decade after decade of doctoral programmes – even unto the third and fourth generation of publish or perishers – the premises of quantitative and qualitative marketing science are near enough unassailable. Granted, the iniquities of scientism are highlighted from time to time, but the belief system is so deeply internalised that criticism only makes science stronger. Headlong attack prompts headstrong defence.

Marketing science, in short, is a monoculture. As such, it is susceptible to degeneration, desertification, disease, drought.4 Surely not, I hear you say. The fecundity of our field is there for all to see. The plethora of journals, the depth of knowledge, the abundance of articles, the proliferating special interest groups, the ever-rising tide of professorships, degree programmes and executive education courses are testament to marketing’s plenitude, potency, productivity, power...

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3 Except, evidently, when it comes to our own customers, those students, executives and policymakers who purchase our theories and frameworks and managerial recommendations.

4 I’m not alone in this. The lamentations of leading marketing gurus (Sheth and Sisodia 2006), the sniping of critical theorists (Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008) and, not least, the necessity for special “crisis” issues of JCB suggest that all is not well, that the prevailing paradigm is becoming increasingly arid, barren, contaminated, diseased.
Not so! More doesn’t mean better. Evidence of abundance is not abundance of evidence. Most of our published articles, if we are totally honest with ourselves, are me-too, minor-twist variations on well-established marketing themes, using well-established methodologies, to prove well-established points.⁵ Ask yourself, is there a single marketing textbook that deviates significantly from Kotler’s forty-year-old template? Ask yourself, is there a single Peters-trained, walk-about manager who can’t do the 4Ps two-step? Ask yourself, is Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) much-lauded Service-dominant Logic really a breathtaking breakthrough for marketing scholarship (as its supporters proclaim) or old academic ideas in new and incomprehensible language (as its opponents aver)?

Ad hominem attacks are of course easy to launch. It is not hard to disparage marketing science, to portray it as impractical, self-referential, out-of-touch, a wasteland of unreadable writing and suchlike. Excoriation is fruitless, however. Every knock makes marketing science stronger, every blow is a boost. Like an orbiting planet, it can withstand meteor strike after meteor strike and while incoming comets can wipe out the occasional dinosaur, or alter climatic conditions by one or two degrees, they can’t deflect Planet Paradigm from its path. Some have attempted to escape our academic asteroid, most notably the interpretive research aeronauts of the mid-1980s (Hirschman 1989). But the attendant gravitational forces – forces of language, methodology, indoctrination, tradition, careerism – proved too powerful and they were sucked back from the outer space of scholarship, kicking and screaming.⁶

Marketing science may be the air that we breathe and indeed need for professional survival. However, it isn’t the only life support system that’s available to us. More than a century ago, the great Scottish anthropologist Sir James Frazer (1996) contended that human societies are characterised by three elemental worldviews: the scientific, the religious and the magical. These worldviews are sequential, he added, insofar as the magical perspective is found in the most underdeveloped regions, the religious is typical of partially developed societies and the scientific is confined to the most advanced nation states in the West.

No one subscribes to such views today. Apart from their unacceptably chauvinistic imperialism, Frazer’s typology overlooks the obvious fact that worldviews co-exist. The West may be predominantly scientific in outlook, but magical and religious perspectives are apparent in even the most “scientifically advanced” western societies. The old ways, the allegedly abandoned ways, have never really gone away. The rise of both religious fundamentalism and New Age neo-paganism bears witness to this eternal trend (Brown 1995).

The same is true of marketing. Although the scientific perspective predominates, the sacred narrative is not without its adherents (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Magic, moreover, is clearly discernible in the practices of marketers, be it TV ads featuring voodoo, Ouija and jiggery-pokery generally or celebrations like Halloween, which are magical money-spinners for all sorts of sorcerous paraphernalia (Brown 1995).

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⁵ This paragraph, I concede, is a version of the “bad apples” argument, in as much as it suggests that the cask of academic research is overflowing with conceptual-cum-empirical apples, all of which are inedible, not to say downright poisonous. Yes, “hypocrite” is my middle name.

⁶ In truth, the only thing worse than failing to attain escape velocity is to succeed, since the marketing escapees are thereafter alone in an inhospitable universe with no one to talk to while drifting slowly towards Planet Sociology or Planet Economics, which are even less welcoming than the world they left.
2008). Consumers too, I’ve discovered, consistently refer to marketplace phenomena in magical terms. Having personally interviewed thousands of shoppers down the years, I’m constantly struck by the supernatural language they incessantly employ. They refer to bars of chocolate that call out to them (“eat me”, “you know you want to”), shopping trolleys with minds of their own (or, as often as not, are possessed by evil spirits), beautiful designer brand outfits that glow numinously in shop windows (as if they had just been touched by a magic wand) and the nightmarish crush in crowded department stores that’s just like a horror movie, only much, much worse (they’d scream if they could but they can’t).

Now magic, like marketing, is a many splendored thing. Just as there are countless branches of marketing knowledge – Hackley (2008) notes 27 separate subfields, from internal marketing to international marketing – so too the enchanted universe is densely populated (Katz 2005). A very short short-list might include witchcraft, Satanism, paganism, astrology, cabbala, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, hermeticism, shamanism, spiritualism, mesmerism, palmistry, phrenology, theosophy, UFO-ology, homeopathy, Wicca, wyrd, feng shui, geomancy, gematria, scrying, Tarot and the stage/street magic practised by the Penn and Tellers, Siegfried and Roys, David Blaines and Derren Browns of this world. It is impossible, in a little essay like this, to explore the full range of magical practices and draw meaningful parallels with marketing activities, both academic and managerial. A brief sketch of ten salient themes can nonetheless provide food for thought. Be warned, though, poisoned apple pie is my signature dish...

**Spells and Incantations**: One of the most striking things about marketing practice is its love of spells and incantations. We call them slogans and catchphrases. They trip off the tongue. They are chanted constantly. Managers believe that if they are repeated often enough – and relentless repetition is central to magical ritual – they will bestow great wealth and good fortune on the organisation or brand responsible. Beanz Meanz Heinz. Finger Lickin Good. Drinka Pinta Milka Day. Clunk Click Every Trip. Kills All Known Germs. That’ll Do Nicely, Sir. Just Do It. I’m Lovin It. Be Like Mike. Marketing academics, admittedly, can be snippy about slogans. We work on the assumption that people who equate marketing with corny catchphrases are woefully ignorant of our discipline’s breadth and richness and achievements. Yet the fact of the matter is that a good slogan is worth its weight in gold. Practitioners devote enormous time and resources to catch-phraseology. The reason is simple. They’re magic.

**Symbology**: Even the most casual reader of supernatural literature, be it fairy stories or vampire yarns, cannot fail to notice the popularity of magical symbols: pentangles, pyramids, sefiroth, zodiacs, ouroboroses, the major arcana of the Tarot, et al. The same is true of marketing, only we call them logos. McDonald’s arches, Nike’s swoosh, Apple’s apple, Shell’s scallop, MBW’s roundel, Playboy’s bunny, Lacoste’s crocodile, Google’s candy-coloured homepage are more familiar to most people nowadays than the Titians, Rembrandts and Caravaggios that line the walls of the world’s foremost museums. Logos, like slogans, tend not to get the academic respect they deserve, for much the same reasons. But once again brand symbology is of enormous importance to practitioners. On occasion, indeed, magic and marketing symbology overlap, as in the celebrated cases of Procter and Gamble’s “satanic” trade mark, Citroën’s supposedly freemasonic chevrons and CBS television’s appropriation of the all-seeing eye.

**Animism**: Closely related to symbology and incantation, animism imbues inanimate companies, products or brands with anthropomorphic characteristics. Sometimes
these characteristics are evoked by the brand name, such as Puma, Dove, Red Bull, Wild Turkey; sometimes they are linked to brand personalities, à la Disney’s Mickey Mouse, Kellogg’s Tony the Tiger, Budweiser’s Clydesdale carhorses or Coke’s perennially parched polar bear; sometimes supernatural or otherworldly figures are pressed into marketing service, as in the cases of Mr. Muscle, Joe Camel, Michelin’s Bibendum, Pillsbury’s Doughboy, the irrepressibly Jolly Green Giant; and sometimes they involve recreations of “real” people. Betty Crocker, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, Ronald McDonald, Colonel Saunders and the Oxo family spring immediately to mind. From the “hybridic” cave art of Neolithic times, through the Greek, Roman and Egyptian gods, to the bestiary that is contemporary team sport (Denver Broncos, Leeds Rhinos, Sydney Swans), animism is a human constant, a primal magical urge that marketers exploit incessantly (Mark and Pearson 2001).7

**Divination:** If the cross is the central symbol of Christianity, the archetypal occult object is a crystal ball (Aveni 1996).8 Soothsaying, foretelling, augury, prophesy – call it what you will – is integral to the magical worldview. Business in general and marketing in particular is no different. Sales projections, marketing plans, strategic scenario forecasts and the sizeable retainer fees paid to futurists, trend spotters, cool hunters, et cetera are proof positive that prognostication is not confined to the palmistry tent at the circus or tremulous tealeaf readings in the drawing room. So commonplace is corporate runes-reading that it does not take second sight to see how strategic planners and their ilk will never be short of smoke-and-mirror work. Augury is always in fashion. It is the little black dress of business life. Having some sense of the future is of paramount importance to marketing practitioners, wildly inaccurate though such environmental entrails examinations turn out to be (Taleb 2008).

**Numerology:** It goes without saying that magic requires words of power: abracadabra, alakazaam, open sesame, half-price sale, free gift inside, everything must go. It also contains numbers of power, most notably lucky seven, unlucky thirteen, perfect ten, quintessential five and so forth. Once again, the same is true in marketing, where for example, thirteen is routinely removed from hotel floor numberings, a Boeing 666 is so not going to happen and our textbooks are filled with 3Cs, 4Ps, 7Ss and suchlike. As I have elsewhere argued, the prevalence of the triplet in marketing communications is also an echo of three’s archetypal significance (Brown 1996). Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of marketing’s numerological leanings, though, is found in our manifold management metrics and, even more so, the pages of our leading academic journals, which are festooned with formulae, engorged with equations, stuffed with inferential statistics. Regardless of the utility of such number-crunchings, our quantitative denotations carry qualitative connotations. They bespeak rigour, logic, dispassion, progress, science! They also whisper “magic” to students of gematria, but that’s our little secret...

**Alchemy:** Although alchemy is all about transformation, the legendary attempts to turn base metal into gold, the transformative process is increasingly understood in psychological rather than physical terms. The marketing concept is likewise presented as a corporate philosopher’s stone, something that turns the base metal of production

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7 Hybridic cave art refers to the fact that many of the figures in Palaeolithic paintings are mysterious human-animal hybrids (see Lewis-Williams 2002).

8 Some, of course, would contend that the archetypal magical object is the broomstick or the wand or indeed the top hat with bunny rabbits. Let’s not fall out over this. Magic is a broad church, as it were.
orientation into the 22-carat gold of customer-facing marketing orientation. If, furthermore, the rules are carefully and painstakingly followed – alchemy, like marketing, involves a multi-stage developmental process, devoid of short cuts and quick fixes – then everlasting organisational life is guaranteed. Following the golden rules is difficult, however (Brown 2008). Many fall by the wayside, as alchemists often did, though that didn’t stop their search for prima materia, much less the secret of eternal youth. Interestingly, the exponents of medieval alchemy were widely regarded as unscrupulous charlatans, untrustworthy tricksters, downright cheats. They were colloquially known as “puffers”. No parallel there, then!

Shamanism: The shaman is a key figure in the magical tradition (Drury 2003). Popularly portrayed as medicine men, shamans are people of extraordinary power and immense prestige. Often blessed with prodigious personal charisma, or mana, shamans perform traditional dances, participate in arcane rituals and preside over communal ceremonies that allow them to mediate between this world and the next, one state and another. It is no accident that management gurus are often described as witch doctors (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996). They perform much the same function within contemporary organisations as their counterparts do in tribal societies. Some management gurus go the whole hog and make use of shamanistic practices like fire walking, animal sacrifice, transcendental meditation and (presumably) peyote consumption. The essential point is that shamans are revered as repositories of great knowledge and insight. Their word, if not quite law, is treated with due respect. When Kotler calls, marketing answers. When Gladwell speaks, managers listen. When Baker says jump, academics ask how high.

Astrology: Of all the extant magical traditions, astrology has fallen into greatest disrepute. A fixture of daily newspapers worldwide, astrology is widely associated with fatuous, vaguely worded horoscopes – “your job is in jeopardy” (who’s isn’t?) or “dark days lie ahead” (you don’t say!). Although astrology is a form of divination, albeit one predicated on complex astronomical calculations based on birth date, time and order, it is better viewed as a means of segmentation. The twelve familiar star signs of Gemini, Taurus, Aries and the like, each of which is associated with a distinctive set of personal characteristics, are not dissimilar to the segments that marketers routinely calculate through occult statistical procedures (Turow 1997). Indeed, we often give them memorable names – yuppies, dinkies, bobos, chavs, etc. – and not only seek to identify their personal characteristics, brand preferences and more, but anticipate their future purchasing behaviour. Star types may be crude overgeneralisations. Are marketing’s crudely drawn segments any different?

Contiguous Magic: Whereas imitative magic derives its power from physical resemblance – rhino horn is assumed to be an aphrodisiac, Jaguars are fast, sleek, stealthy modes of transportation – contiguous magic is associated with juxtaposition. That is, being in the presence of a magical object, such as Stonehenge on midsummer morn. In marketing contexts, the magical object is often a celebrity. Celebrity endorsement is commonplace in marketing practice (Pringle 2004). Sports stars, movie stars, pop stars, television stars, fashion models, the entire spectrum of celebritude, are routinely recruited as brand spokespersons. In return for immodest remuneration, they graciously transfer a modicum of their personal magic onto the supplicant product or service. This process is not without its problems, admittedly, especially given the ever-present danger of celebrity meltdown and the constant ticking of fame’s fifteen minutes. However, a glance through any glossy magazine bears witness to the prevalence of this practice, though it is no less apparent in a corporate sense where star CEOs or politician-filled Boards of Directors similarly
function in accordance with the premises of contiguous magic. Their greatness rubs off on us.

**Necromancy:** A necromancer is not just another magician. Necromancers raise the dead. It follows that many of today’s marketers are necromancers in mufti, since retro marketing is all around. Old brands are being born anew. As I write, Spandau Ballet is reforming and the eighties are back. Seventies sci-fi series *Blake’s Seven* is set to grace our television screens once again. Richard Curtis’s latest feel-good movie is a *homage* to ’60s pirate radio, with book, CD and computer game tie-ins. The Fiat Nuova 500, a retro reinvention of the classic fifties car, is being garlanded with motoring awards, as will the new Citroen DS when it is launched in 2010. Comparisons, moreover, are constantly being drawn to the economic recessions of the past, the Great Depression in particular, with much-maligned Bernie Madoff, Fred Goodwin and Jimmy Cayne ostensibly playing the scapegoat parts of Charles Ponzi, Sam Insull and Ivar Kreuger. Even Karl Marx, long the Great Satan of western capitalism, is back in philosophical fashion. It seems that history repeats itself, the first time on Facebook, the second time in Second Life.

In addition to the foregoing perfect ten parallels, many more comparisons between magic and marketing can be made (Danesi 2006; Twitchell 1996). Designer labels are the equivalent of amulets or lucky charms, able to ward off the evil eye of social disapproval. Copycat or identikit products, such as the post-Starbucks efflorescence of upscale coffee shops, are as close to dead ringer doppelgangers as makes no difference. Crazes like Cabbage Patch Dolls, South Beach Diets, Ugg Boots, Wii consoles, “It” bags, “must-have” dresses, are not dissimilar to fetishes, insofar as our desire for them verges on idolatry. The hypnotic effects of television advertising, recreational shopping, computer gaming, on-line gambling, pornographic website surfing and so on are a form of mesmerism, notwithstanding the ambivalent evidence for and against subliminal influence. The free gifts, trial sizes, sample packs, gratuitous give-aways, logo-lashed collectibles, keepsakes, key-rings and suchlike are predicated on pretty much the same principle as love potions, one sip and we’re hooked. Supposedly.

Such comparisons could be continued almost indefinitely. The essential point is that just as marketing can be imagined as a science, so too it can be re-imagined as magic. The fabulous beasts that populate the marketing landscape, the enchanted forests that are full-line department stores, the consultancy juju that occurs during brand re-positioning exercises, or conjures up a suitable brand name in the first place, are proof positive that marketing practice is inherently magical. Marketing academics may beg to differ and continue their quixotic quest for the axioms, laws and universally applicable principles of the marketplace, but the ever-widening gulf between the ivory tower and the oak-panelled boardroom is a growing cause for concern. This gap won’t be plugged by concepts like Service-dominant Logic, a framework that posits profound philosophical differences between “service” and “services”, “operant” and “operand”, and misrepresents “use value” into the bargain. What practitioners make of such stuff doesn’t bear thinking about. (“Run that past me again. No, on second thoughts, don’t!”) Frankly, we’d be much better off presenting ourselves as management magi, wise men and women who mysteriously sprinkle

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9 Guinness, meanwhile, is advertising itself with a selection of its greatest TV hits, complete with date of the ad’s first broadcast. Hovis is running a pastiche of Ridley Scott’s celebrated “as good as it’s always been” commercial, itself a retro evocation of days of yore. The one hundredth anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic* is also looming on the horizon, like a giant iceberg of memorabilia. Necromantic marketing, in short, is very big business.
magic dust on otherwise unremarkable new products, promotional campaigns, strategic plans, you name it. It's more true to life, after all, than our current pose as white-coated laboratory workers.

Be that as it may, there's another aspect of the magical worldview that's particularly pertinent to the present discussion; namely, the oft-made distinction between black and white magic. This too is interpretable in marketing terms, inasmuch as marketing can be used for both good and evil. White marketing refers to socially responsible activities, as for example when marketing is used to better inform consumer choice or promote worthwhile causes such as fair trade, healthy eating, waste recycling, anti-smoking and breast cancer awareness. Black marketing involves the sale of unnecessary or unsafe or exploitative or wasteful products, or the invention of nonexistent ailments or anxieties or concerns, that marketers then relieve for a price: Restless Leg Syndrome; Female Sexual Dysfunction; Social Anxiety Disorder; Sports Utility Vehicles; Big Hairy Audacious Goals; Rubik's Cubes; Pet Rocks; Alcopops...

Clearly, this black/white distinction is broadly compatible with the bad apples argument outlined earlier and is thus neat and convenient for us. It's also a misrepresentation of magic. In practice, black and white are intertwined, interdependent, inseparable. Akin to yin and yang, the negative and positive poles of Chinese cosmology, you can't have one without the other. Marketing, likewise, brings negative consequences in its wake - overconsumption, resource depletion, shopping addiction, body image dimorphism and more (Johansson 2004). If we are to move forward as a field, we can't continue to claim that marketing simply gives customers what they want, or that it is ethically and morally neutral. We have to openly acknowledge that marketing creates the wants it serves and persuades people to want what we offer. Just as shiny new technologies, such as Google or MP3 files, can have negative consequences (see Tenner 1996), so too marketing is at least partially responsible for the iniquities we're accused of. We can't wash our hands of the responsibility or declare that it's all down to a few bad apples. All apples go rotten eventually.

This is not to suggest that marketing is the root cause of the world's ills. No fully-paid-up marketer would countenance such a scurrilous suggestion. It is nonetheless necessary to concede that bad things can accompany good marketing. Consider Harry Potter, a much-admired model of brand management and, in many ways, the epitome of marketing magic (Brown 2005). Some 450 million copies of J.K. Rowling's seven book series have been sold thus far, making Harry Potter the third biggest bestseller of all time after the Bible and Mao's Little Red Book. The blockbuster movies based upon the adventures of the boy wizard and his school chums at Hogwarts have garnered $4.5 billion at the worldwide box office. Not only does this make Harry Potter the most successful cinematic franchise ever, bigger even than Star Wars and James Bond, but with three movies still to be released, the final take is likely to top a staggering $7 billion. Each movie, furthermore, is accompanied by a tsunami of tie-in merchandise - a figure of $1 billion is constantly bandied about, though this smacks of the ballpark bullpen - and when the dedicated theme park opens later this year in

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10 As before, the argument goes like this: although marketing is predominantly a mode of white magic, it is plagued by unscrupulous sorcerers who do nasty things in marketing's name. Such Saurons of selling are few in number, fortunately, since most of us are followers of do-gooding Gandalf.

11 True, the broadening of the marketing concept and its alleged dominion over every imaginable sphere of activity makes it uniquely vulnerable to such imperialistic blowback.
Orlando, the tidal wave of keepsakes will undoubtedly surge to new heights (Gunelius 2008). Although the total value of the Harry Potter brand is inconsequential in the great corporate scheme of things, it is enormously impressive for a cultural product that sprang from the fertile imagination of a penniless single parent who wrote her spellbinding stories about a teenage wizard in a coffee shop in Edinburgh.

Much has been written about the marketing of Harry Potter, not least the exemplary pre-release publicity campaigns, which culminate with the midnight opening of bookstores and consumers’ mad rush to get hold of the magical product. Much has also been written about Potter multiplier effects: their incredible economic impact on the cultural industries; their powerful pedagogic consequences on teenage reading habits; their wider social influence on the English language, children’s names, boarding school enrolments, the popularity of owls as pets, etc. All things considered, most would agree that the Harry Potter phenomenon is “a good thing”. Its creator’s sense of corporate social responsibility, made manifest in generous donations to worthy causes, is especially commendable. Rowling’s litany of literary awards, honorary degrees, good citizen citations and acts of official recognition bear witness to the scale of Brand Potter’s achievement (Brown 2005).

Be that as it may, there is a dark side to Harry Potter. Apart from Christian fundamentalists’ admitted extreme argument that the boy wizard promotes Satanism and devil worship, and notwithstanding the carping of literary critics who contend that Harry Potter has actually done very little to promote literacy, the phenomenon’s impact on the book business is not an unalloyed triumph. Yes, the sheer number of books sold has rocketed (such is the demand that Harry Potters are often displayed on rough wooden pallets, like multipacks of baked beans). Yes, the teenage fiction genre has been immeasurably invigorated (thanks in no small measure to publishers’ on-going search for the next Harry Potter). Yes, the management of major book releases has been transformed (into spectacular events on a par with big-budget movie premieres). But the stiffer than stiff competition for the Harry Potter dollar has led to ever-steeper discounting, which has proved ruinous for traditional independent booksellers. When the final volume was released in paperback, for instance, the British subsidiary of Wal-Mart sold it at £1, substantially less than cost. Many independent retailers either acquired their stock from the price-slashing superstores, thereby disrupting established channels of distribution, or refused to stock the profit-less book at all, thereby alienating their regular customers. Harry Potter may have done wonders for reading but he has also done untold damage to the book trade. Such is capitalism, some might say, but the crucial point is that even a feel good brand like Harry Potter can have negative marketing consequences. The magic of marketing is neither good nor bad, it is both black and white. We can’t have one without the other. Academics who pin the blame on bad apples or inadequate implementation would do well to reflect on this fact.

We would also do well to reflect on the fact that it is fifty years since the Ford and Carnegie reports on management education. As Khurana (2007) argues in his critical history of business schools, the reports precipitated a profound round of changes

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12 This may seem like an exaggeration but, thanks largely to the Potter phenomenon, grocery supermarkets have entered the sector in a big way, cherry-picking the fastest-selling titles and reducing the prices to levels that small bookshops simply can’t match. Publishers, likewise, have increasingly adopted a blockbuster mentality, discarding mid-list authors and concentrating their resources on “brand name” authors who might deliver the huge sales that the process increasingly depends upon (Brown 2006).
that resonate to this day. The pragmatic, practical, hands-on approach that prevailed prior to the shake-up was replaced with an emphasis on management science. “In contrast to the old model of business training,” Khurana (2007, pp. 271-2) contends, “this new science would allow managers to make decisions solely on analytic and rational grounds without recourse to fuzzy notions such as intuition or judgment... Grounded in the behavioural sciences (particularly economics), the new management science could best be taught to students, both reports maintained, through a rigorous immersion in quantitative analysis and concepts from decision theory... The hoped for result was a more dispassionate and rational manager whose decision making was not clouded by experience or sentiment but driven by hard facts and cold logic.”

Half a century after the great reform, management science is in a sorry state. Its principles, particularly agency theory, are at least partly responsible for the catastrophic mess that capitalism now wallows in. However, far from accepting their share of the blame – notwithstanding the prevalence of MBAs among the upper echelons of the financial institutions that got us into trouble – business schools continue to cleave to the “bad apples” escape clause (Walker 2009). They tell us that management science has been misused. They proclaim that the principles have been improperly implemented. They assure us that with a few judicious adjustments, such as compulsory modules about business ethics, the apple orchard will bloom again, its bounteous harvest heavy on the MBA bough. To say that this is wishful thinking hardly does justice to the extent of B-school self-delusion. And they have the gall to laugh at magic?

Many of the elder statesmen of marketing scholarship were Ford Foundation Fellows, charged with transforming our students from sloppy solipsists into shiny scientists. Most would concede that they succeeded. Their success has come at a heavy price, though. Practitioners look elsewhere for insight and guidance. Crusading journalists like Naomi Klein and Michael Moore provide the critique that academics don’t. The superabundant supernaturalism of the marketplace has been turned into a dry-as-dust desert of unreadable articles and tiresome textbooks. Parched students and starving practitioners stagger from waterhole to waterhole, distastefully sipping our brackish brew or nibbling nauseously on our weevil-filled hardtack, because there is nothing else available at present.

But wait, there’s an oasis on the horizon. It’s shimmering in the heat haze: lush, verdant, enchanting...Whoops, it’s only a mirage, a dream, an onerific glimpse of marketing Elysium where students are sated, practitioners are appreciative and academics have stopped scraping the barrel of science.13

Methought I hear a voice cry, “Sleep no more!”

REFERENCES


13 As I finish writing this article, in the afterglow of the G20 summit, the newspapers are full of PM Gordon Brown’s supposed “new world order”, a $1.1 trillion scheme to sort out the macroeconomic meltdown. The words “new world order”, however, are like red rags to the bulls of conspiracy theory (McConnachie and Tudge 2005). Watch this space, as they say...
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