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Stephen Brown
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What is This?
Theodore Levitt: the ultimate writing machine

Stephen Brown
University of Ulster, UK

Abstract. Professor Theodore Levitt is widely regarded as the Poet Laureate of the marketing academy. His seminal, occasionally controversial, articles owe as much to their racy writing style as to their provocative content. Although the content of Levitt’s publications have been debated at length, his style has attracted much less academic attention. Academics, however, are writers. They publish or perish. Placing compelling words on a page is a core scholarly competence. This article examines the great guru’s published work from a literary perspective. It specifies his signature stylistic device, shows how it pervades his manifold publications and, in the belief that everyone can learn from Levitt, reveals the inner workings of the ultimate writing machine.

Key Words • literary criticism • marketing myopia • Theodore Levitt • writing marketing

The business executive should realize that the highest form of achievement is always art, never science, and that business leadership is an art worthy of its own respect and the public’s plaudits.

Levitt (1963: 224)

It is 15 years since Barbara Stern married marketing thought and literary criticism, thanks to a landmark article in the Journal of Consumer Research (Stern, 1989), and in that time ‘lit-crit’ has made many significant strides. Although it is less high profile than, say, ethnography, grounded theory or phenomenology, literary theory is one of the driving forces of the ‘postmodern turn’ in marketing and consumer research (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Sherry, 1991). Every conceivable school of literary theory has been applied to marketing phenomena, from New Criticism to New Historicism (e.g. Brown et al., 2001; Scott, 1993, 1994; Stern, 1993, 1995, 1996), and every conceivable marketing phenomenon has been given the lit-crit treatment – ads, brands, shopping centres and consumption festivals, to name but a few (Heilbrunn, 1996; Macarlan and Stevens, 1998; Stern, 1991, 1994, 1995).
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Literary criticism, clearly, has revolutionized marketing thought. But when marketing's lit-crit corpus is examined in detail, there is a striking omission, an omission that is almost ironic in its egregiousness: namely, the lack of literary analyses of the marketing literature. Metaphorical marketing 'texts', like advertisements and servicescapes, have been studied many times over. However, literal marketing texts, such as the writings of prominent academics and researchers, have attracted much less attention.

There are, no doubt, many deep-seated reasons for this neglect, most notably marketing's pragmatic imperative (Aherne, 1998). There are, what is more, several noteworthy exceptions to the rule, such as Stern's (1990) early study of Ernest Dichter and Thompson's (1993) deconstruction of the Hunt/Anderson contradictions (see also Brown, 2002; O'Reilly, 2000; Shankar et al., 2001). Yet, despite the ready availability of the lit-crit toolkit, literary analyses of the marketing literature are conspicuous by their absence. This absence, indeed, is all the more surprising when one considers what academics actually do. Although most marketing scholars like to think of themselves as pursuers of truth, masters of data gathering, exponents of the scientific method and, as the very existence of this journal attests, depositors in the repository of marketing thought, the simple fact of the matter is that they are scribes, scribblers, literary types (Brown, 1996). They write for a living. They publish or perish. Their careers are advanced, their employability is enhanced, and their professional standing is predicated on the written word. Whether we like it or not, articles, books, reports, dissertations, case studies, chapters, monographs, working papers, and analogous ephemera, are the principal output of the marketing academy (Brown, 2004).

If writing is what marketing academics do, then it seems eminently sensible to think about how it is done and those who do it well. The present article, therefore, adopts a literary approach to marketing's foremost literatus, Professor Theodore Levitt, with a view to extracting meaningful writing lessons that can be employed by the wider academic community. It begins with a brief introduction to Ted Levitt's life and work; follows that with an explanation of that sagacious scholar's signature literary device; turns to a consideration of six key themes that characterize his compendious corpus; continues with a close reading of 'Marketing Myopia', the titanic theorist's trademark article; and concludes with the somewhat counterintuitive contention that Levitt's peerless prose succeeds because it breaks all manner of 'good writing' guidelines. The article, in keeping with its interpretive approach, does not claim to be the final word on the legend's lauded literary style. But, by using the tools and techniques of literary theory, it attempts to identify, and learn from, the tricks of Ted's textual trade.

In Ted we trust

Although marketing is not short of outstanding scholars—Phil Kotler, Wroe Alderson, Shelby Hunt and many more besides—Professor Theodore Levitt is perhaps the leading academic authority of the century just past. Recipient of the John
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Hancock Award, the George Gallup Award, the Charles Coolidge Parlin Award and the Paul D. Converse Award, among many others, he has had more articles published in Harvard Business Review (HBR) than any other management guru, winning four best-paper awards along the way (Kennedy, 1991). His nine books are bona fide best-sellers, The Marketing Imagination and Thinking About Management in particular (Crainer, 2000). He is widely regarded as the father of the modern marketing concept, thanks to his seminal 1960 paper, ‘Marketing Myopia’ (itself the best-selling HBR reprint of all time). And, he is one of only two marketing scholars – alongside Philip Kotler – routinely referred to in the copious ‘Great Business Gurus’ guidebooks (e.g. Clutterbuck and Crainer, 1990; Crainer, 1995, 1998; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). Theodore Levitt, Kennedy (1991: 80) rightly observes, has ‘made marketing his own’. For many, he is the ‘field’s foremost thinker... the voice, the personification, the embodiment of marketing’ (Brown, 2001: 24).

But what is the secret of his success? Obviously, it is not originality, since he freely admits that his ideas are neither new nor his own (Levitt, 1975). It is not conceptual firepower, since his contentions have been dissected and dismissed by self-appointed officers of the academic thought police (cf. Ahern, 1995; Marion, 1993; Mintzberg, 1994). It is not sheer volume of output, since Theodore Levitt has published comparatively little compared to, say, Philip Kotler, who is six years his junior, for good measure (Brown, 2002). It is not nepotism or patronage or the Harvard connection, since his background is closer to blue collar than Boston Brahmin (German immigrant, rural upbringing, degree from Ohio State, taught at North Dakota before his 1959 move to HBS). It is not that he enjoyed first-mover advantage, since the modern marketing concept was articulated several years before he burst on to the scene (Ahern, 1995). It is not extensive front-line marketing experience, since Levitt is not a marketer by training and was educated, in fact, in the liberal arts and economics, coupled with an eclectic dash of ‘astronomy, geology, physics, philosophy, literature and, of course, the social sciences’ (Bartels, 1988: 269).

Levitt’s academic eminence, rather, is almost entirely attributable to his sheer writing talent. Almost every commentator on the great man refers to his remarkable ability to place sumptuous words on the page. Bartels’s (1988: 268) magisterial History of Marketing Thought, for example, attributes his reputation to ‘spirit’, ‘style’ and ‘a mastery of the well-turned phrase’. A Harvard anthology highlights Ted’s ‘vivid language’, as well as the ‘forceful’, ‘challenging’ prose that is neither ‘laced lustre’ nor ‘flaccid’ (Levitt, 1992a). Another notes that he is ‘sparkling and erudite’, and yet another adds ‘incisive and eloquent’ to the lustrous literary list (Levitt, 1983, 1991a). Even those who are dismissive of his ideas – and there are many in that category – openly acknowledge that what Levitt allegedly lacks in intellectual insight he more than compensates in prosodic prowess (e.g. Ahern, 1995; Mitchell, 2003; Quelch, 2003; Tomkics, 2003a, 2003b). Indeed, the scholarly sage himself maintains that style is his substance. When reflecting on the prodigious impact of ‘Marketing Myopia’, for example, he attributed its success to the way it was written.
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But why the enormous popularity of what was actually such a simple preexisting idea? Why its appeal throughout the world to resolutely restrained scholars, implacably temperate managers and high government officials, all accustomed to balanced and thoughtful calculation? Is it that concrete examples, joined to illustrate a simple idea and presented with some attention to literacy, communicate better than massive analytical reasoning that reads as though it were translated from the German? Is it that provocative assertions are more memorable and persuasive than restrained and balanced explanations, no matter who the audience? Is it that the character of the message is as much the message as its content? (Levitt, 1975: 23)

Show me the antimony

If there is a single literary concept that captures the essence of Theodore Levitt, that concept is antimony. Antimony is the formal term for contrasting ideas, images, insights or interpretations that continue to make sense even though they contradict one another (Childers and Hentzi, 1995; Gray, 1992). Part of the oxymoron family, alongside antithesis and paradox, antinomies are common in the poems of, say, John Donne (‘Death, thou shalt die’), John Milton (‘the darkness visible’), William Blake (‘a Heaven in Hell’s despair’) and William Wordsworth (‘The stationary blasts of waterfalls’).

Antimony, however, is not confined to the stirring stanzas of the poetic pantheon. An excellent, marketing-related example of antinomous reasoning is found in The Savage Girl, a recent novel by Alex Shakar (2001). Set in a market research agency, Tomorrow Inc., the book affords all sorts of creative insights into 21st-century consumer culture, perhaps the most striking of which pertain to ‘paradessence’. This is the paradoxical ‘promise’, ‘offer’, ‘value’, ‘deliverable’, ‘USP’ — whatever you want to call it — that lies at the heart of all successful products and brands. Hence, ice cream combines innocence and eroticism, theme parks provide terror and reassurance, Levi’s jeans meld youth and heritage, Nike sneakers integrate athleticism and relaxation. Starbucks stands for expensive coffee and a cheap treat.

Professor Levitt is the Savage Girl of marketing scholarship, insomniac as his approach is fundamentally paradessential. Just as great brands are built on antinomies, so too Levitt’s literary style rests on a congeries of incongruities, an oxymoronic inferno. His marketing mode, to borrow the title of one of his best-known anthologies, consists of a series of contradictory conceptual conceits including Ustructured Structure, Repetition and Difference, Excess and Austerity, Cultured Commerce, Metaphor/Metonymy, Sacred/Profane.

Appropriately, Levitt himself seems to recognize this paradoxical prosodic propensity, since his writing is full of quixotic quips, quotes, quarks and quibbles. He observes that ‘we are all continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems’. He announces that marketing requires ‘the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist’. He opines that ‘when people don’t want to come, nothing in the world will stop them’. He intimates that management is ‘not about doing things right but doing the right
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things'. He notes that 'forecasting is difficult, especially with respect to the future'. He postulates that 'not everything that can be learned can be taught'. And, when all is said and done, he claims that 'after all is said and done, mostly all that's done is said'.

Unstructured structure

To be sure, Levitt's congenital contrarianism is not confined to snappy aphorisms, inventive one-liners and ironic inversions like 'Innovative Imitation', 'Fast History', 'the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence', or 'you can observe a lot by watching'. The basic structure of his publications runs counter to generic academic conventions. He resolutely refuses to follow the paradigmatic scholarly narrative of stolid Introduction, followed by Literature Review, followed by Methodology, followed by Findings, followed by Implications, followed by Further Research, followed by tentative Conclusions (Aberne, 1997).

So unorthodox indeed is the great guru's approach that a casual reader might conclude there's no overarching structure at all. The majority of his papers flit from topic to topic, often at a very rapid pace; there aren't any results being reported, as a rule, though exemplars and mini case studies abound; the section heading 'signposts' are reliably unreliable, since they rarely refer to what the ensuing section actually contains; and, when the individual essays are anthologized, as Levitt's articles invariably are, the resulting volume is itself given only the most perfunctory formal organization.

Yet for all the ostensible disorder, Levitt's articles are rigidly structured. Very rigidly structured. Rigidly structured to the point of formulaic. The formula, however, owes little to the conventions of social science scholarship (Agger, 1989). Its Wellsprings, rather, are those of the short story, or the literary essay, or Tom Wolfe's (1975) 'new journalism', which famously applied fictional modes of writing to weighty factual matters. And, reluctant as I am to reveal Levitt's trade secrets, his writing formula involves seven sequential steps:

1. A succinct, striking, stop-right-there opening statement, one that runs counter to conventional wisdom or the management fad of the moment ('Advertising works', 'Greed is boring', 'Never leave well enough alone', 'There is no such thing as a commodity').
2. An elegant elaboration of the initial attention-grabber, tastefully interlarded with exceptions, qualifications, and minor rhetorical retreats, which are unfailingly signalled by trusty interjections like 'to be sure', 'obviously' and, of course, 'of course'.
3. A series of vivid case studies drawn from a variety of manufacturing and service sectors, involving a judicious mix of household names (such as Sears), little-known organizations (e.g. Hooker Chemicals), and long-forgotten favourites (cf. American Wind Engines).
4. An autobiographical anecdote, or imagined conversation, or expropriated aphorism, or 'unscientific' survey of executives, or some other method of
signalling his man-of-the-people credentials ("When my son broke a finger in a hockey game, I went with him to the hospital where . . .")

5 An ironic sideswipe at one or more of the manifold, money-grubbing miscreants who blow smoke where the corporate sun don't shine – motivation researchers, management gurus, rogue economists, pontificating pundits et al. ("sweaty evangelists", "devout acquirers", "imprecise and artless").

6 A checklist; or two, or three, or more; sometimes numbered, often bullet-pointed, always semi-colon separated; swiftly followed by a critique of those who listlessly rely on checklists ("ritualized substitutes for thought and substance").

7 An imperiously emphatic, decidedly dogmatic, tantamount to pedantic conclusion, which may not actually include the economist's acronym of choice, QED, but certainly implies it ("All else is mere administration", "All other truths on this subject are merely derivative", "All distortion is, finally, disabling").

In addition to the seemingly unstructured sequence of Levitt's seemingly unstructured essays, antinomies are apparent at the individual sentence level. That is to say, whereas the articles themselves are front-loaded – they start off with a bang and steadily dissipate, in standard journalistic fashion – the individual sentences are back-loaded. The syntactical stress usually falls at the end. They finish with a slap in the face, occasionally a boom-boom punch line, or a culminating, climactic couplet presaged by the emphatic adverb 'even'.

It touches and transforms everything – rapidly, convulsively, and conclusively, even the practice of management itself. (Levitt, 1991b: 72)

It condones self-interest, but not its tempestuous or perverse expressions – such as grasping acquisitiveness, sleaziness, charlatanism, deceit or even inordinate narcissism. (Levitt, 1991c: 38)

We like more and better versions of all the tantalizing things with which life can be filled – whether these are clothes, automatic dishwashers, European vacations, theater tickets, bountiful wigs, or even chocolate-covered caterpillars. (Levitt, 1990a: 324)

With its hint of surprise, and tincture of twist in the tail, 'even' is a signature Levitt word, one he employs repeatedly. Excessively, even. In one classic crescendo, he even uses even in three successive sentences:

Suddenly, in the world's urban places the demand springs for ethnic fast food: pizza, hamburgers, sushi, frankfurters, Greek salad, Chinese egg rolls, pita bread, croissants, tapas, curry, bagels, chili, doughnuts, French fries, and even Sacher torte. Everybody who can get them wants them, regardless of national residence, origin, religion, tradition, or even taboos. Suddenly everybody everywhere simultaneously occupies each of these product-market segments – often several on a given day, even at a given eating occasion. (Levitt, 1992b: 31)

Repetition and difference

'Even' isn't Levitt's only iterative tic. On the contrary, he has a substantial stockpile of stock expressions that he plunders with impunity. "What's new?", "Familiarity breeds", 'Customer creating value satisfactions', 'The solution to a
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problem changes the problem', 'Not everything that is possible is probable', 'What has to happen for that to happen?' and many, many more regularly rear their rhetorical heads – like pop-up ads of prose – throughout his icon's not inconsiderable output. His all-time favourite, of course, is 'the purpose of marketing is to get and keep a customer', which makes an appearance at some point in the vast majority of his publications. It is the academic equivalent of a comedian's catchphrase, a goldsmith's hallmark, a corporate mission statement, a time-grooved advertising slogan.

In addition to the periodic appearance of aged yet agreeable aphorisms, Levitt is a leading exponent of the radish school of writing. Everything that can be repeated, is repeated. He regularly republishes his papers and assembles them in anthologies, which are themselves periodically reissued. He repeatedly returns, like a marketing metronome, to same repertoire of case studies and corporate exemplars (Dupont and IBM are especially popular). Unable to refrain from refrains, he repeatedly repeats words within and between sentences ('good intentions are not good enough', 'many will choose choice', 'some promises promise more than others', 'regularly remind customers what they're regularly getting', 'next sale, next product, next idea, next success'), as well as in section headings and paper titles ('Business to Business Business', 'Creating Customers for Customers', 'New Roads to Newness', 'The Problem of Defining the Problem', 'The Lumbering Lumber Business').

Alliteration, analogously, is another authorial affectation, an anaphoric aesthetic attribute that appears again and again and again ('surging success', 'vast variety', 'dramatically dissimilar and disproportionate', 'producing properly promising packaging', 'conservatizing consequences of conventional corporate canons'). His ditogy, indeed, even extends to pleonastic tautologies, the use of unnecessary extra words for effect, emphasis, enforcement, etc. ('resolute constancy', 'sweeping gale', 'immemorial genes', 'the compact car is a basically non-American, un-American anti-American, a-American contrivance'). Akin to Anakin adverts of legend, they hammer home this master's marketing message, hard sell style.

Levitt, however, is no Rosser Reeves of research, a cautionary example of how the poet becomes prosaic through relentless repetition. He varies his pitch. He rewrites and/or retitles previously published papers and/or anthologies. He roasts old chestnuts, sharpens blunt saws, and reworks hackneyed expressions ('clothes may not make a man, but they help make the sale'). He twists, twirls and twists threadbare text into homespun Harvardian homilies ('good things have good reasons for enduring', 'not all forms of self-interest are equal'). At various points in his corpus, for example, he declares that people don't buy 'things', they buy 'solutions', 'expectations', 'promises', 'benefits', 'problem solvers', 'peace of mind'. What started as 'inaction is the only inexhaustible form of political energy', morphed into 'inaction is the only inexhaustible form of executive energy' and ended up as 'the only thing that's automatic is inertia'. Likewise, an alliterative line 'the cale of custom is crumbling' is polished into the much more impressive 'breaking the cale of tradition'. Whereas most of us would stick with
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‘cutting’ cake or ‘breaking’ bread, the commonplace boilerplate platitudes, Levitt mixes both baking cliches into a delectable textual confection with a savoury internal rhyme (break/cake).

This cake breaker’s rhetorical resonance, in other words, depends as much on difference as repetition. Much of Levitt’s reputation, if truth be told, rests on his remarkable ability to identify hitherto unsuspected differences, while making that difference meaningful to manifold readers. Thus he draws attention to and elaborates on the ‘difference’ between data and information, decision and choice, deed and word, rationality and rationalization, possibilities and probabilities, good greed and bad greed and, naturally, differences and distinctions. After all ‘when similarities abound, differences are crucial’, notwithstanding the fact that people ‘respond differently to different forms of differentiation’!

This difference identifying facility, furthermore, applies to Levitt himself. Just as he argues that there is no such thing as a commodity product – everything can be differentiated – so too he distances himself from two-a-penny purveyors of how-to, me-too, dilute-to-taste corporate solutions. As a self-styled outsider, the lone gunslinger of gurudom, he differentiates himself by railing against the prevailing management orthodoxy. He makes the case for constancy when change is the catchphrase du jour. He stresses the importance of imitation when innovation is the word on everyone’s lips. He champions the second in command when leadership is being lauded. He articulates the advantages of large firms when small business is all the rage. He challenges the cult of creativity when creative is the accolade of choice. He sings the praises of slowness when the chorus is chanting con brio.

The upshot, inevitably, is that Levitt’s oeuvre leaves an indelible impression of indecision, insofar as he variously argues for and against vision, pro and anti segmentation, in favour of futurism and resolutely opposed to trend spotting, in support of custom and resistant to routine, in agreement with ‘youthification’ and disparaging about young blood (to mention but a few). Such contortions, however, must be set against the consistency of his overall marketing message, the constant recycling of favourite themes and catchphrases, and the fact that as an antinomian non pariel, he can comfortably cleave to several contrasting positions at once and make a virtue out of vacillation. Like Whitman, he happily contradicts himself. Like Emerson, he skates swiftly over thin ice. Like Washington, he cannot tell a lie, especially when he can get away with a whopper.

Excess and austerity

Whoppers, in many ways, are what Levitt’s all about. Not only does he make bold claims and outrageous assertions – claims and assertions which seem eminently reasonable when read yet utterly preposterous on reflection – but he does so in extraordinarily vivid prose, prose that if not exactly purple contains more than a smidgen of mauve:

They can look at gloriously glossy pictures of elegant rooms in distant resort hotels, set by the shimmering sea. (Levitt, 1986a: 96)
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In Brazil thousands of eager migrants from the preindustrial Bahian wilderness swarm daily into the exploding coastal cities, quickly to install television sets in crowded corrugated-iron huts before which, next to battered Volkswagens, they make sacrificial candlelight offerings of fruit and fresh-killed chickens to the Macambu spirits. (Levitt, 1992c: 40)

The role of the global corporation is to orchestrate commercially the irresistible vectors of technology and globalization into benign benefits for all the globe’s inhabitants. It is a role created not by fate or nature or God, but by the necessity of open commerce itself, a necessity that compels action in which only the fit and the brave prosper and survive. (Levitt, 1986b: 37–8)

As the above passages indicate, the exhilarating sweep of Levitt’s exuberant writing is almost entirely attributable to adjectival abundance and adverbial overkill. It sometimes seems that every noun comes complete with an aureole of adjectives and every verb surmounted by a cairn of accompanying adverbs. Or, as he himself puts it, in an aphorism attributed to the late great piano-playing showman, Liberace, ‘too much of a good thing is just the right amount’.

In the year 1900 the American Wind Engine and Pump Company was a magnificently thriving enterprise, its majestic windmills stood like powerful giants astride the farms of America’s vast prairies. (Levitt, 1969b: 255)

The world’s aspirations now level simultaneously outward and upward, with increasingly larger portions of its population greedily wanting the modernity to which they are so constantly exposed. (Levitt, 1986b: 21)

No explanation of America’s enormous economic achievements is so spurious as the one that attributes them simply to the munificence of its natural resources, the vastness of its geography, the enormity of its markets, the balanced equitableness of its climate, the salubrious absence of preexisting social barriers, and the facilitating absence of restrictive laws (Levitt, 1969c: 102)

To be sure, Levitt’s logorrhea doesn’t stop with adjectives a-go-go and adverbs ever after. He’s also very partial to paronomasia (‘Parkinson’s Flaw’, ‘Ergo, Air Cargo’, ‘The Volume is the Message’), assonance (‘elastic metric’, ‘segment migrants’, ‘midset fringe’, ‘defer out of fear’), antitheses (‘low-cost production or high-yield selling’, ‘costs have the same natural tendency to rise as rocks have to fall’), interrogatives (‘Will it last? Will it work? Will it fit?’) and, for want of a better word, gerundivization (‘Pluralization’, ‘Chryslerization’, ‘Tangibilization’, ‘Bureaucratization’, ‘Cosmopolitanization’, ‘Proletarianization’). The outcome of this linguistic excess is that Levitt’s writing conveys the impression of enormous energy, urgency, dynamism and zeal. These are personal qualities the prodigious Professor specifically extols in marketing executives and that his peerless prose perfectly, perpetually, persuasively, perspicaciously performs. He practises what he preaches:

Ideas are rarely converted into action unless proselytized with zeal, carried with passion, sustained by conviction, and fortified by faith. They need authentic champions. Above all, ideas need people who are doers, not talkers. (Levitt, 1991d: 44)

Yet, for all his racy writing, piquant phrase-making and what can only be described as lexiconartistry, Levitt isn’t just a terminal tub-thumper or purple prose

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grower. There is a strangely parsimonious side to his literary style, an intriguingly ascetic aspect to his aesthetic that takes inordinate pleasure, as previously noted, in pedantic hair-splitting and coinage of epigrams ('leaders produce consent, others seek consensus', 'we decline in energy as we advance in years'). They say that inside every maximalist there's a minimalist trying to get out and this marketing magus is a perfect case in point. His adjectival embroidery and adverbial effervescence is adroitly publicized by a less-is-more ethos. One of his most frequently recycled catchphrases is 'a good thing is not improved by its multiplication' and variations thereof. He repeats it so often, in fact, that a bit less less-is-more sloganizing might have more impact. A good maxim is not improved by its multiplication.

Now, Theodore Levitt is no Oscar Wilde, let alone La Rochefoucauld, though he did once publish an inventory of own-brand aphorism (Levitt, 1991d). Nevertheless, there is definitely a diminutive side to this epigrammatist's makeup. His papers get shorter and shorter through time, albeit what they lack in length they compensate for in compression. The prose becomes more and more catchphrase-laden and, although he never quite descends to self-caricature, his writing is increasingly Levittish, Levittoid, Levittonian. Indeed, just as he is ready, willing and able to compose sentences that are almost Faulknerian in their inextricability - 200-word behemoths are a regular occurrence - so too there's more than a touch of Hemingway about Papa Ted. Very short sentences. Are not unusual. Two words. Or less. Period.

Levitt's ultimate aim, it sometimes seems, is to synthesize everything there is to be said about business into a single all-embracing statement or slogan, what he calls 'the simple essence of things'. The closest he comes is his much-chanted marketing mantra of getting and keeping customers, but other one-liners have a gnomic, Zen-like, almost Orphic sense of simultaneously stating the obvious and unveiling a universal truth ('people like what they like and don't what they don't', 'the future comes from the present but it occurs in the future', 'the primary business of any business is to stay in business', 'a customer usually doesn't know what he's getting till he doesn't'). As the sibilant shlyline repeatedly observes, 'man does not live by bread alone, but mostly by catchphrases'.

Cultured commerce

Oracular he may be, in accordance with his lofty status as corporate sage, but the 'catchphrase' catchphrase epitomizes the enormously appealing side of Theodore Levitt. He doesn't take himself or his gurudom too seriously. Thus he 'complains' about being an underpaid educator, even though his consultancy income must be astronomical ('as a certified academic, who is paid, however paltry the sum, to think, teach and advise'); he criticizes prolix professorial prose in what else but prolix professorial prose ('obfuscation masquerading as wisdom'); he warns against the 'glittering plausibility of a well-turned phrase, itself a glitteringly plausible phrase that's been well and truly turned; and, of all things, he repeatedly
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rails against gurification, fad-fomenting and professional punditry generally, even though he’s a celebrated example of the burgeoning breed:

Then there are the communications from the outside that constantly claim the manager’s attention – magazines, trade reports, studies, newsletters, and so forth. Close by are clamoring experts, consultants, scholars, seminars, conferences and cassettes. Journalists and jingoists, smelling new markets, package fictional trends, imagined waves, motivational concoctions, and simplifying formulas, paradigms and managerial fads into saleable products. All promise salvation, liberation from the necessity to think for oneself. All compete for the time and minds of busy and burdened people who are already saturated with more data and ideas than they can use. (Levitt, 1991c: 59–60)

Unlike many wanna-be swamis, Ted Levitt comes across as a regular guy, one of the boys, an ordinary Joe, less of a guru than a grunt. He never forgets that his audience consists of people who have to meet a target, make a payroll, move the merchandise, or mind the store. He repeatedly stresses the need to keep it real, relevant and reliably rooted in the honest, earnest, quintessentially American work ethic. Palpable is one of his preferred words and ‘palpable as the primeval rocks’ a particularly preferred expression.

Conversely, he constantly warns against hi-falutin flights of professional, professorial and philosophical fancy, as well as fancy French words like ‘entrepreneur’. When he deigns to discuss theoretical constructs like the Product Life Cycle, it is with the avowed aim of distilling it down, knocking it into shape and – not before time – putting the thing to work. His textual persona is that of a pragmatic, unpretentious, no-nonsense, eminently sensible everyman. He uses lots of slang (‘bang for the buck’, ‘eat your heart out’, ‘cash on the barrelhead’), contractions (‘don’t’, ‘can’t’, ‘let’s’, ‘it’s’, etc.), personal pronouns (‘I’, ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘us’, et al.) and, in pre-PC days, male bonding bonhomie to convey the impression that he’s not only a marketing man of the people, but a marketing man of the world (‘the middle-aged man today wants to believe that he still has a good fighting chance for the occasional conquest’).

Near the knuckle or not, the true genius of Theodore Levitt is that he manages to combine gung and town, ivy league and bowling league, baseball cap and mortar board into a highly attractive package. The illustriousness of his academic position wryly reinforces the homespun, aw-shucks, Connecticut-Yankee-in-King-Arthur’s-Court aspect of his popular appeal. ‘Yet for all his cornballisms, our reactionary revolutionary never descends to tawdry populism, tacky vulgarity or terminal philistinism. On the contrary, his plebeian demeanor is counterpointed by a patrician dimension, his strategic self-effacement is offset by firm control over any fleeting tendency to modesty’, his meat and potatoes manner is fortified by a Moet and Chandon sensibility.

Thus, his range of cultural allusion is quite astonishing. Casual references to Rubens, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Marx (Karl & Brothers), Beethoven, Bernoulli, Cellini, Copernicus, Handel, Hemingway, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Elvis, Kiss (yes, Kiss, the glam rock band), Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Bill Cosby, Max Weber, Adam Smith, Ben Franklin, Larry Bird, Elbert Hubbard, Fidel Castro and countless others pepper his papers. He is happy to paraphrase Hegel in one breath and

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namecheck *Alice in Wonderland* in another. He not only uses words that few of us in the slow-reading, finger-tracing, mouth-breathing constituency have heard of ('integument', 'incubus', 'insensate', 'internece'), but he's happy to concoct neologisms if the cadence of the sentence calls for it. And even when it doesn't ('vertglomerate', 'heteroconsumer', 'errorlessly', 'informational'), he rarely uses an arcane word when an arcane one is available and unfailingly chucks in several arcanest synonyms to reinforce his sesquipedalian point ('Brobdignagian', 'perquisites', 'puissant', 'tropicist'). He's a very strict grammarian, what is more. Infinitives are never split, participles don't dangle and prepositions are kept well away from the end of sentences, except when he's feeling especially demotic.

Levitt's prose, in short, presupposes very wide reading, considerable cultural capital, familiarity with *Fowler's* and intimate verging on carnal knowledge of *Merriam-Webster*. Or, at the very least, decades of word power improvement courtesy of *Reader's Digest* ('protein', 'flexuous', 'abjure', 'munificent', 'shibboleth').

The crucial thing about Theodore Levitt, however, is that he wears his learning lightly. Unlike several self-satisfied seers, who shall remain nameless, he doesn't talk down to his readership, much less explain subtle cultural references. He simply assumes that they'll 'get it' when he employs titles like 'Marketing and its Discontents', 'The Marketing Imagination', 'Anatomy of Bureaucracy' or 'What Managers Want', or when he introduces Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* into a discussion of floor polish; or when he chucks in a show-stopping sentence involving 'Kafkaesque characters caught in the serpentine nexus of business processes'. He realizes, of course, that even if they don't 'get it', the sentence still signifies something very important; namely, that the author is a smart guy and, by implication, that the reader is a smart guy too. Levitt's evident erudition is not a barrier to entry but a benefit of entry. Readers benefit by association, by infiltration, by osmosis, by trickle-down scholarship. Call it what you will. Levitt's learnedness flatters the readership and, ironically, reinforces his man of the people persona.

Decades before Seabrook (2000) babbled about Nobrow, the melding of high and low culture; decades before Brooks (2000) identified Bobos, bourgeois bohemians who espouse art for art's sake; decades before Collins (2002) highlighted High-Pop, the proletization of patrician pastimes, Levitt skillfully synthesized culture and commerce. He is an academic alchemist, a turner of base cerebral metal into solid managerial gold. And vice versa.

**Metaphor and metonymy**

The metamorphic metaphor of alchemy is particularly apt, because Levitt is basically in the business of corporate transformation, turning ugly sales-led duckings into handsome marketing-oriented swans. He's also in the business of marketing metaphors – 'the metaphor makes the sale' – and, in that regard, Theodore's closer to a prince than a frog. Indeed, he frequently refers to the role of metaphor, simile, symbol and figurative language in management discourse and, once again, he practises what he preaches. His palette of persuasive meta-
phors and striking similes include music (popular and classical alike), animals (both domestic and wild) and pastimes (board games like checkers, poker and bridge, in particular).

The products and methods of the industrialized world play a single tune for all the world and all the world eagerly dances to it. (Levitt, 1986b: 30)

With packs of lawyers and investment bankers prowling everywhere for vulnerable prey, some companies Chryslerized themselves to avoid victimization. (Levitt, 1991f: 100)

A product is, to the potential buyer, a complex cluster of value satisfaction. The generic 'thing' or 'essence' is not itself the product. It is merely, as in poker, the table stake, the minimum necessary at the outset to allow its producer into the game. But it's only a 'chance,' only a right to enter play. (Levitt, 1986c: 77)

Another great favourite is food, everything from juicy apples and lobster thermidor to frozen pizza and sizzling steak. While it would be excessive to make inferences about the 'real' person from the textual persona, it is tempting to conclude that Ted is a bit of a foodie or, as a farm-bred boy brought up in the Hungry Thirties, someone who is inordinately fond of his vittles.8

Profit is the requisite of corporate life, just as eating is the requisite of human life. Profit is the food without which corporate life cannot be sustained. Hence to call profit the goal of the corporation is, operationally speaking, silly. It is like saying that the goal of human life is eating. Profit, like eating, is a requisite, not a purpose. (Levitt, 1986d: 236)

Delectable as Levitt's cornucopian conceits, high table tropes and larder-larded linguistic displays undoubtedly are, his preferred form of figuration is personification. Again, and again and again he uses sentient images, bodily similes, humanoid emblems and anthropomorphic allusions. He brings things to life. He animates incessantly. No matter how dead the metaphor or decomposed the trope, Theodore is capable of reviving, reactivating, reinvigorating, resurrecting it successfully. His figures of speech are literal, so to speak, as alive as metaphors can conceivably be.

The throbbing pulse of the reality the data sought to capture. (Levitt, 1986d: 138)

If entrepreneurship was the hippie youth of the 1980s, then making money was its long hair. (Levitt, 1991d: 75)

Companies that don't metabolize information right will see small problems and discontinuities metastasize into major maladies. (Levitt, 1991d: 46)

Clearly, when it comes to working with body parts, Professor Levitt is the Dr Frankenstein of marketing's scholarly corpus. Metaphor, however, isn't really his medium. Compared to real masters of metaphor, like Philip Kotler (Brown, 2002), Levitt's figurative range is rather narrow. In accordance with literary theorist Roman Jakobson's celebrated conceptual divide (see Hawkes, 1977; Lodge, 1977), Levitt is less of a metaphor wrangler than a metonymy man. Metonymy is a figure of speech where the part stands for the whole – sail for ship, crown for royalty, turf for racing, Westminster for government and what have you – and is often associated with 'realist' modes of literature, such as the novels of Dickens.
and Balzac. Metaphor, by contrast, describes one thing in terms of another and, hence, is associated with poetic flights of fancy, which may be striking in themselves, but can detract from the narrative drive. Although Levitt is no slouch in metaphorical matters, metonymy is his figurative forte. He repeatedly uses a limited number of mini case studies to stand for all of industry, everywhere, at all times. His much-recycled repertoire of catchwords serves in an essentially metonymical fashion, insofar as they echo and subconsciously recall all the other Levitt classics. His carefully crafted textual persona is an equally metonymical construct, since the Ted in the text is an everyman, someone who represents the rest of us. Likewise, he is partial to long lists of attributes that conclude with the metonymical expressions 'and so forth', 'and so on', 'and the like' and the like, where the reader is expected to extrapolate the list to infinity and beyond.

An even more remarkable example of Levitt’s metonymical flair is his appetite for absence. He often implies that things are not what they seem, that we are missing something important, that the appearance belies the essence, that the representation stands for something we didn’t anticipate or isn’t obvious. People don’t buy 3/8-inch drills; they buy holes. Women don’t buy lipstick; they buy hope. Successful leaders understand what subordinates aren’t saying. Effective differentiation involves doing what competitors aren’t doing. Consumers’ detestation of advertising is proof that it’s working. The existence of private labels demonstrates that branding is worthwhile. The rise of segmentation is evidence of globalization. Market research doesn’t lead to better decisions, but more indecision. The surest sign of a deteriorating business relationship is the lack of complaints from customers. In order to be marketing orientated, organizations must limit their marketing orientation. Nothing is more wasteful that doing what should not be done at all. The less there seems the more there is.

Levit’s modus operandi, in short, is intrinsically dialectical. It is predicated on the premise ‘Think Opposite’ (Levit, 1969: 316). It works on the presumption that the existence of something precipitates the emergence of its antithesis, that the unsaid is more eloquent than the spoken, that presence involves absence and absence implies opportunity.

In marketing sound strategy often consists in doing a better job of what competitors are doing but in doing what they are not doing. (Levit, 1965: 224)

Sacred/profane

To be sure, statements like ‘what is happening has already happened’; ‘the purpose of a large organization is to achieve its larger purpose’, or ‘without the organizing presence of the organization, there would be no organization’, contain more than a modicum of mysticism, a tincture of transcendence, a drop of dippy-hippiedom, the very thing that Theodore Levitt, the realer than realist, ralls against on numerous occasions.

Following Levitt’s own logic, however, the very fact that he abjures such practices and constantly stresses his hard-headed, no-nonsense credentials, is proof
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positive that spirituality, religiosity and esoteric otherworldliness are an integral part of his conceptual cosmos. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the marketing theologian’s body of work is its consistently occult character. Aside from the obvious thaumaturgy of personified phenomena—from myopic organizations to living, breathing brands—religious citations are one of his favourite textual utensils. Few articles fail to namecheck an Old Testament prophet, or mention a Biblical incident, or draw parallels with a spiritual parable, or simply quote a quotable theological passage. Isaiah, Daniel, Joshua, St Peter, St Paul, Job, Noah and numerous others are permanent fixtures in Father Ted’s evangelical prose:

Things are little different than when God told Noah to build an ark so that he, his family, and all the species of the earth could survive the flood he’d let loose in two weeks. Shocked, Noah said, “Two weeks! God, do you know how long it takes to build an ark?” And God replied, “Noah, how long can you tread water?” It got done in two weeks. (Levitt, 1991b: 95)

The marketing concept is closely related in origin and purpose to mores and the Ten Commandments, which represent an attempt to enforce civilization—i.e. goal congruence. The marketing concept is the civilizing consequence of the large business organization. It asserts a goal and advocates supporting strategies designed to consolidate a large organization behind a single purpose. (Levitt, 1969b: 242)

Above and beyond Professor Levitt’s reliance on pietistic parlance, as well as direct devotional citation, there is an implacably providential quality to his utterances and commandments. Levitt’s theology is not only Biblical in its inalienability, but positively Abrahaminian in its tone. Benign, it is not. Theodore has no time for sinners, backsliders and those who oppose his monotheistic message. He is impossibly dismissive of false idols—not dismissive to the point of impiety—whether they be the ‘artless astrologers’ of Motivation Research, like Ernest Dichter, ‘messiahs for excellence’, such as the infernal Tom Peters, or heretical Harvardians who have the temerity to articulate an argument that Levitt can’t or won’t countenance (J.K. Galbraith, the populist economist and one of the few management writers with a gift to match the marketing maestro’s, is demonized time and again). Executives who stray from the straight and narrow are also gorging on the grapes of Levittite wrath, as are assorted sellers of management fads, fixes and futures:

A general rule can be laid down about predictions regarding the shape of business conditions in the distant future: beware of the fluent expert. The answer man is always provocative and inspirational, owing his success to the same wonder-working evangelical talents as the itinerant soul saver in a tent. But inspirational answers are seldom prescriptive answers. (Levitt, 1969c: 286)

Not so great are the prophets of entrepreneurship who, practicing their own flashy brand of entrepreneurial hustle, profit from empty speeches about the liberating, ennobling, and profit-building possibilities of entrepreneurship for everybody who’d have you think that all self-employment is also entrepreneurship, like sinking your life’s savings into a banana-peeling franchise. If the entrepreneurship that is now so vigorously propogandized is not actually the false messiah of our economic times, certainly it is a falsified notion. (Levitt, 1991g: 75–6)

Clearly, it’s Levitt’s way or the highway to hellfire and damnation. He who must
be obeyed, however, is no sober-sided, straight-laced, prim 'n' proper puritan, a Pilgrim Father Ted. Quite the opposite, in point of fact. Levitt's sacred side is counterbalanced by a healthy preoccupation with the profane, the quotidian, the corporeal, the earthly, the salty, the salacious.

It is well to remember what the dominant folk beliefs of the West tell us – that man lost his innocence not in the corrosive materialism of recent times but in a garden – the Garden of Eden. It was lost in paradise, not in Soho, on Forty-second Street, in Amsterdam, on the Ginza, or in the exotic pleasure palaces of Bangkok. (Levitt, 1993: 92)

In this New (and improved) Testament, sacred and sacrilegious insidiously interpenetrate, in accordance with his patrician plebeian positioning, his pragmatic pedagogy, his man of the cloth-cum-world persona. Constipation, menstruation, fornication and excretion are regularly referred to, as are diets, dentures, diseases, death, undoodORIZED armpits, sadomasochism and declining libido, especially declining libido. Hangovers, haemorrhoids, hair loss and housewives – that feckless, frivolous figure of 50s executive fun – are an equally important, if rather less attractive part of Professor Levitt's rhetorical repertoire:

The self-consciously superior American male upon first viewing his wife's cleaning closet will, in a rarely charitable mood, have chuckled to himself in tolerant bemusement at the awful scene of redundant brands of partially used floor waxes, floor cleaners, scouring powders, and wax removers. The admn's dream, he will say wisely to himself. Just like a woman – as irrational as a Doxian otter. A less charitable or less well-adjusted husband, perhaps just returned from an abrasive day at the Broken Bow Centrifugal Milking Works, will blow his stack for the second time that week. Why in heaven's name does she fill the house with all that overadvertised rubbish, spending his hard-earned cash on one awful undistinguishable wax after another, never using up any one bottle completely, and besides not keeping the kitchen floor polished anymore? (Levitt, 1969: 173)

It should, in fairness, be acknowledged that Levitt's misogynistic remarks were made in the days before women were a fixture in executive suites worldwide. What's more, he goes out of his way to venerate domestic goddesses, arguing that their buying behaviour is much more rational than that of most men, fools or gibberty-gibberts one and all. Indeed, it is clear that the good professor's patronising, prurient passages of prose are an attempt to embody the boisterous, back-slapping, shoot-the-breeze, boys-will-be-boys personality that is portrayed in his publications. The racy, raffish, risqué roué is a role, but it is a role that is rehearsed too often for contemporary comfort. So much so, that when Harvard Business Review Paperback released a compilation of Levitt's greatest hits in the early 1990s, they prefixed the publication with an 'apology' for its non-gender-neutral language. Neutrality has never been the prodigious professor's forte.

Myopia myopia

Although most Marketing Theory readers might accept that Levitt's literary corpus exhibits antinomian elements, many might wonder whether the same isn't true of all academics. Few writers, after all, are entirely consistent in their thinking, espe
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cially those that have been publishing fairly steadily for 40-something years. Excessive consistency, in fact, might lead readers to conclude that the author concerned is being unnecessarily dogmatic, obdurate for obduracy’s sake, or unwilling to alter their intellectual stance in line with changed circumstances. Consistency, as Emerson observes, is the hobgoblin of little minds.

Theodore Levitt has never been accused of hobgoblinitude, if only because he has changed his mind on just about everything he’s argued for, up to and including globalization, customer orientation and the paramount importance of perspicacious phrasemaking (‘Nobody pays attention to even a well-argued proposition if it’s obviously devoid of plausibility’). He has even recanted on his preferred anthropomorphic trope (‘A business is not a person’). It is important to note, nevertheless, that Levitt’s sweeping statements and rhetorical reversals are part of what makes him ‘him’. Antinomy is engrained in everything he does and is evident in almost every article. ‘Marketing Myopia’, for instance, was one of this icon’s earliest publications – the article that made his name and for which he is best known – yet it exhibits all of the above quixotic characteristics (Levitt, 1960).

Structurally, the article is nothing if not unstructured, thanks to its bemusing blizzard of sections, subsections, subsubsections and fluctuating font styles and point sizes, some of which fail to adhere to the author’s stated sequential schema.’ However, it also contains the signature structural elements that Tedheads have come to know and love: the striking opening sentence (‘Every major industry was once a growth industry’); the disarming qualifier (‘the reason growth is threatened, slowed, or stopped is not because the market is saturated’); a collage of case studies (railroads, Hollywood, nylon, glass, gas, oil, buggy whips, etc.); the pseudo research exercise (‘in a casual survey I recently took among a group of intelligent business executives’); a light sprinkling of lists (nine in total, two numbered, seven bullet-pointed); the token sidelineswipe at competing commentators (‘Galbraith has his finger on something but he misses the strategic point’); and a classic closing couplet (‘If an organization does not know or care where it is going, it does not need to advertise that fact with a ceremonial figurehead. Everybody will notice it soon enough’). He even throws in a couple of ‘even’-ended inventories (‘It has to think of itself as taking care of customer needs, not finding, refining or even selling oil’, ‘Engineers and scientists are at home in the world of concrete things like machines, test tubes, production lines and even balance sheets’).

‘Marketing Myopia’, moreover, is redundantly repetitious, and not only on account of its relugent refrains (‘this end, this viewpoint, this attitude, this aspiration’) and ambitious alliterative affectations (‘aggressive ardor’, ‘product provincialism’, ‘relentless requirements’, ‘spectacularly successful’, ‘pridefully product-oriented’, ‘hard to hurt their heirs’). It inaugurates and iterates the ‘customer getting’ mantra for which Levitt is best known, as well as the infamous comment about marketing’s ‘stepchild’ status (‘recognized as existing, as having to be taken care of, but not worth very much real thought or dedicated attention’). At the same time, this is the article in which Levitt institutes the seminal distinction between ‘selling’ and ‘marketing’ (‘selling focuses on the needs of the seller,
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articles

marketing on the needs of the buyer’), the difference that made all the difference in this ambitious academic and provided the divide-and-conquer template that served him well for the remainder of his career. (In fact, he also distinguishes between growth industries and growth opportunities, consumer wants and consumer preferences, and proper scientific method and convenient scientific method, though these scholarly slicings-and-dicings are rather less renowned).

Now, a Levitt article wouldn’t be a Levitt article without a dash of dash, a zest of zest, an excess of excess. And ‘Marketing Myopia’ is no exception. The adjectival abundance (‘explosive demand’, ‘futile contentment’, ‘prodigious output’, ‘bountiful expansion and undetected decay’), adverbial acumen (‘rapidly expanding’, ‘extravagantly profitable’, ‘triumphantly replaced’, ‘thoroughly massed’, ‘imperturbably self-confident’), incessant interrogatives (‘Where has the competition come from? From a better way of cleaning? No.’), wonderful wordplay (‘The Perils of Petroleum’, ‘They kept their pride but lost their shirts’), adroit antitheses (‘the prospect of steeply declining unit costs as output rises’) and gerundizing genius (‘vulgarize’, ‘dieselization’) are all on scintillating show, as is his penchant for passages of purplish prose.

Unless an industry is especially lucky, as oil has been until now, it can easily go down in a sea of red figures—just as the railroads have, as the buggy whip manufacturers have, as the corner grocery chains have, as most of the big movie companies have, and indeed as many other industries have. (Levitt, 1960: 30)

However, the austere side of Professor Levitt is equally evident. There are lots of short sentences (‘That grew.’, ‘Far from it.’, ‘Take the automobile.’), aphorisms occasionally erupt (‘since words are cheap and deeds are dear’, ‘if thinking is an intellectual response to a problem, then the absence of a problem leads to the absence of thinking’), and tiny intellectual acorns that subsequently grew into mighty academic oaks are clearly discernible in the rich metaphorical mulch that is ‘Marketing Myopia’ (for example, the basic idea behind his later paper ‘Differentiation of Everything’ is contained in the passage, ‘What it offers for sale is not only the generic product or service but also how it is made available to the consumer, in what form, when, under what conditions, and at what terms of trade’).

Another interesting aspect of this prodigious professor’s pathbreaking paper pertains to Cultured Commerce. Although the author’s aesthetized attributes are readily apparent—the vocabularistic virtuosity (‘vicissitudes’, ‘senescence’, ‘appellation’), the punctilious punctuation (‘The abstractions to which they feel kindly are those which are testable or manipulable in the laboratory, or, if not testable, then functional, such as Euclid’s axioms’), the Harvardian hauteur (‘Not even in product improvement has it showered itself with eminence’), the unstated assumption that readers are well read (hints of Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler in the first paragraph, the unreferenced allusion to Joseph Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’, and the penchant for social Darwinism throughout) ‘Marketing Myopia’ is firmly positioned at the lower end of the cerebral spectrum. Personal pronouns (‘I doubt it’, ‘let us look’, ‘yet here we are’,

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'it seems to me'), demotic expressions ('and what have you', 'in this day and age', 'asking for trouble', 'even the skid-row bum') and what can only be described as a Joe Sixpack sensibility ('If you had told them 60 years ago that in 30 years they would be flat on their backs, broke, and pleading for government subsidies, they would have thought you totally demented'), are very much to the fore.' Certainly, compared to the extremely erudite papers that preceded his masterpiece (e.g. Levitt, 1955, 1956), 'Marketing Myopia' seems to be the work of someone slumming it. Or, rather, the work of a superlative wordsmith who chanced upon a wonderful alley of ivory tower and golden arches.

Above and beyond its iconoclastic anti-intellectualism, 'Marketing Myopia' is characterized by metaphorical ebullience and metonymical brilliance. Every one of Theodore's signature figures of speech is on dazzling display. Animals ('galloping industries'), ingestion ('in this land of hungry innovators'), pastimes ('the chief executive might as well pack his attaché case and go fishing') and, above all, personification ('marketing is a stepchild', 'gasoline ... may be on its last legs', 'the entire corporation must be viewed as a customer-creating and customer-satisfying organism'), are scattered throughout the piece. The title itself is personification writ large. True, the myopic trope is rarely employed in the body of the article (Brown, 2001). Aural allusions, curiously, are much more common than visual ones ('yet the automobile companies do not seem to listen', 'a nation of production-oriented business managers refuses to hear the great lesson he taught'). But the pith of the paper, that companies can be and often are nearsighted, is far and away the most famous metaphor in the marketing literature.

'Marketing Myopia' may be remembered for its titular trope, but the content is congenitally metonymical. Aside from common or garden synecdoches, such as 'Detroit' for the motor industry, 'Hollywood' for the movie business, and 'Wall Street' for the financial community, parts stand for wholes throughout the paper. Each of his highly specific, historically contingent case studies is presented as an exemplar of business tout court (by any stretch of the imagination, this is an incredible stretch of the imagination). Every named company, likewise, is taken to be representative of its constituent industrial sector ('if obsolescence can cripple even these industries, it can happen anywhere'). Similarly, the idiosyncratic contents of a single issue of a single trade magazine, American Petroleum Institute Quarterly, are deemed indicative of the myopic mindset of a massive (presumably highly internally variegated) industry and the magazine's unforgivable failure to mention marketing is presented as proof positive that all oilmen are product-orientated troglodytes. The very absence of marketing is taken as incontrovertible evidence of its importance, just as the threat of alternative fuel sources is all the more reason for developing them:

One might, of course, ask: Why should the oil companies do anything different? Would not chemical fuel cells, batteries, or solar energy kill the present product lines? The answer is that they would indeed, and that is precisely the reason for the oil companies having to develop these power units before their competitors. (Levitt, 1960: 52–3)

Be that as it may, the most metaphorically and metonymically anthropo-
morphized aspect of the paper is inscribed in the figure of its author. Not only does the paper metonymically embody Levitt's subsequent literary corpus, since every stylistic trait is on show, but its author presents himself as the intellectual equivalent of the outsider character who revolutionizes each of the industries he tackles. A non-marketer by training, this scholarly stranger's doing to marketing what eccentrics, deviants and interlopers did to oil, gas, railroads, electronics, motion pictures and many more besides. More than that, he's the disciplinary deity who smites purblind backsliders and those who have strayed from the path of marketing righteousness. There is an overwhelmingly Old Testamental tone to the paper: 'every major industry', 'in every case', 'the failure is at the top', 'the organization must learn to think of itself', 'Ford was both the most brilliant and most senseless marketer in American history'), especially in the orotund conclusion which reads like a histrionic cross between hellfire-and-brimstone evangelism and the ravings of a neo-Nietzschean übermensch, washed in the blood of will-to-power and God-is-dead:

But mere survival is a 10-10 aspiration. The trick is to survive gallantly, to feel the surging impulse of commercial mastery; not just to experience the sweet smell of success, but to have the visceral feel of greatness. No organization can achieve greatness without a vigorous leader who is driven onward by his own pulsating will to succeed. He has to have the vision of grandeur, a vision that can produce eager followers in vast numbers. In business, the followers are the customers. (Levitt, 1960: 56)

Yet, for every spiritual or supernatural reference ('powerful magician', 'twin messiahs', 'fiscal purgatory', 'miraculous escapes', 'eternal wealth was thought to be the benediction') there is a redeeming profanity, vulgar pun or earthy aside. There's the oil company who pooh-poohed the potential of gas. There's the handsome Adonis and alluring Venus who work at the local petrol station. There's the movie business that's been 'totally ravished' by television. There's the sane and solid citizens who quaff cocktails at 20,000 feet in a 100-ton tube of metal. There's the wry story of the Boston millionaire who insisted that his legacy be invested exclusively in electric streetcars, thereby condemning his heirs to perpetual penury. And then, of course, there's the breathtakingly blasphemous contention that 'consumers are unpredictable, varied, fickle, stupid, short-sighted, stubborn, and generally bothersome'. Only Ted Levitt could get away with insulting the consumer in a paper that purports to be a paean to customer orientation.

The contradictions, furthermore, are not confined to the striking style of his landmark article. The content too is inconsistent, as several commentators have since pointed out (Aherne, 1995; Brown, 2001; Marion, 1993; Mintzberg et al., 1996). In the space of 12 pages, Levitt variously argues that 'every major industry was once a growth industry' and 'in truth, there is no such thing as a growth industry'. His position on Research & Development is equally ambivalent, insofar as he condemns petroleum companies for failing to give R&D its due and, a few pages later, castigates the electronics industry for placing undue faith in Research & Development departments. He draws a distinction between 'selling' (which is driven by attempts to get customers for the company's products) and 'marketing'
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(where the focus is on producing products that consumers want), only to collapse the categorization by claiming that marketing involves ‘creating’ or ‘arousing’ consumer needs, that marketing boils down to ‘buying’ customers, that consumers are in fact ‘eager followers’ of charismatic marketers rather than those who call the marketing shots, and that Henry Ford, of all people, was a marketing man, even though the legendary carmaker’s clearly stated aim was to sell more cars to consumers and generally move the metal. Yet Levitt has the gall to call Ford contradictory!

More contradictory still is the sad but true fact that every one of the professor’s confident predictions in ‘Marketing Myopia’ failed to come to pass. Rocket-powered cars! Nope. Fuel cells under the stairs? Still waiting. The end of the oil industry by 1985? Tell that to George W. Bush. Whatever happened to Ultraschall, by the way? Granted, it is unfair to take past futurists to task, if only, as Levitt himself later acknowledges, because ‘past sight is more accurate than future sight’. However, there is a double irony here, in that every industry the prognosticating professor dismissed as ‘myopic’ is still going strong – oil, railroads, Hollywood and even Ann Summers-style buggery whips – whereas the ones he confidently foresaw failed to come to fruition. Little wonder he loudly condemned futurologists thereafter. In this regard, only the most churlish commentator would draw attention to the inconsistency of his poacher turned gamekeeper position or remind readers that Theodore’s own future sight turned out to be rather near-sighted. Myopic, even.

The write stuff

In the decades since its publication, ‘Marketing Myopia’ has been roundly condemned for the foregoing contradictions, as has Levitt’s oeuvre as a whole (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2002). His inconsistency on advertising, leadership, strategy, corporate purpose and, yes, even the need for consistency has not gone unnoticed by the scholarly Stasi, those who espouse rigour, rectitude, reliability, replication and rigid reliance on the rules of ‘proper’ research practice. Although this nit-picking propensity is perfectly understandable – mainstream management studies aspires to scientific status, academic approbation and all the redoubtable rest – it is important to appreciate that, from a literary or humanistic perspective, ambivalence isn’t necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, it is the contradictions, the paradoxes, the antinomies, the reversals, the unexpected twists and turns that keep us reading the novel, playing the computer game, watching the scary movie, or screaming from the stands at our unpredictable sporting heroes. This does not mean that predictability, probity, prior expectations and suchlike are irrelevant, since most forms of popular culture involve convention and invention (see Berger, 1992; McCracken, 1998; Palmer, 1992). What it does mean is that without contradictions, or uncertainties, or ambivalences, or contingencies, the appeal of the product quickly palls. Just as Madonna keeps her audience on tenterhooks with serial mutability (what on earth will she do next?),
so too successful writers need to keep their readers guessing. Levitt’s antinomian articles are riddled with inconsistencies, yet they are still being read and debated decades after they first appeared. His copious corpus may not be scientific, but there’s more to marketing scholarship than science. As the great sage rightly notes, ‘no amount of marketing science or heavy analysis will work without the protean powers of the marketing imagination’.

Imagination, then, is the secret of Theodore Levitt’s literary acumen. Not only is his single best-selling (and personal favourite) book called The Marketing Imagination, but he avers that imagination is ‘the starting point for success in marketing’. And marketing scholarship. It is his irrepressibly imaginative writing – the wild hyperbole, the bold assertions, the brass-necked back-tracking, the empundered prose, the ceaseless creativity, the humble hauteur, the droll dictatorialism, the consistent inconsistency, the ambidextrous antinomies – that make him worth reading, worth attending to, worth learning from, and even worth writing about.

Levitt, of course, is far from flawless, even in his capacity as our discipline’s Poet Laureate. To the contrary, he has often fallen flat on his face. In addition to his allegedly ‘practical’ recommendations, such as marketing R&D departments or no-limits customer orientation, which turned out to be utterly unimplementable in practice, his literary style isn’t perfect. For every cute quip, quotable passage, or erudition demonstration, there’s a laboured opening line, clunky closing couplet or over-egged prose pudding (‘The difference between line work and staff work is real, but not any longer really relevant’, ‘Enterprise thrives largely where variety is enabled and encouraged to be and become what the march of events requires it to be and become’, ‘Few things are so reliably true and understandably reliable as things whose truths are attested by their venerability’). In his laudable attempts to avoid hackneyed expressions and hoary chestnuts, like ‘hackneyed expressions’ and ‘hoary chestnuts’, he comes up with not so bon mots, aperçus that are inferior to the encrusted incumbent and sayings that are closer to non-sequiturs than Zen zingers (‘It is not who you know but how you are known to them’), ‘They are remarkably fast learners, even of some tricks it has been said only old dogs can learn’, ‘More things are so where they are generally believed not to be so than where they are commonly held to be so’).

What’s more, his invertebrate irreverence sometimes slides into disconcerting dissimulation, as when he disingenuously implies that he wasn’t responsible for the ‘marketing mania’ that the publication of ‘Marketing Myopia’ precipitated (it is hardly surprising that readers took the corporate optician at his word when they were informed, in effect, that the condition afflicted all industries at all times), or when he suggested that his celebrated Globalization article shouldn’t be taken at face value (‘Only a fool would try to standardize. The argument . . . assumes it speaks to sensible people’), even though the original paper neither minced words nor left any room for doubt (‘nothing is exempt and nothing can stop it’).

Some of Levitt’s suggestions, in short, are suspect, just as some of his writing is unreadable, unremarkable, unspeakable. But so what? Most of it is unsurpassable, unforgettable, even unassailable. Every dubious dictum, lilac lucubration, or flat-
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footed figure of speech is counterpointed by a sparkling sentence, to-die-for trope, or even arresting adjectival arpeggios:

If this proves to be true, the future of American socialists will be little different from the past, when they were reduced to talking dialectically to each other in dingy meeting places over tea. (Levitt, 1973: 136)

The gas station is like a tax collector to whom people are compelled to pay a periodic toll as the price of using their cars. This makes the gas station a basically unpopular institution. It can never be made popular or pleasant, only less unpopular, less unpleasant. (Levitt, 1969: 53)

Nobody in any organization is as visible as its chief, even when he remains anonymously closeted behind protective secretaries, busy assistants, and heavy oak doors in a luxuriously carpeted distant corner of the upper floor. (Levitt, 1969b: 272)

The 3Rs of Theodore Levitt

So what can we, the mediocre majority, learn from Theodore Levitt, author extra-ordinary? At the risk of misrepresenting the nuances of the magniloquent marketer’s style, it is clear that Levitt’s Literary Laws pertain to the 3Rs of Reading, Righting and Rhythmic: Like many great writers (e.g. King, 2000; Maller, 2003; Sontag, 2002; Winterson, 1996), Ted Levitt is a great reader. He is well read, very well read. As a child, he read voraciously, almost to the point of obsession. And this teenage textual infatuation is evident in almost every adult article, whether it be the literary, philosophical and historical allusions, the Brobdignagian vocabulary, the easy erudition, the quirky juxtapositions, the jaunty quotations or whatever. It is generally accepted that reading and writing are the ebb and flow of literary endeavour and numerous commentators contend that it is impossible to be a truly creative writer unless one is very well read (Birkerts, 1994, 1999; Fischer, 2001; Manguel, 1996).

To be sure, the injunction ‘read early, read often’ is unlikely to come as a surprise to the scholarly majority, all of whom are deeply read. One has to be in order to keep up with one’s specialist area – impulse shopping, gift giving, brand personality, the Boston matrix, e-tailing and what have you. The crucial difference, however, is that whereas most of us are deeply read and know everything there is to know about e-tailing et al., great writers like Levitt tend to be widely read. They draw upon a broader intellectual palette than most and are thus capable of producing the incisive insight or identifying the just-so parallel that passes us by. Literary myopia, admittedly, is an occupational hazard. So voluminous is ‘the literature’ these days, especially in a burgeoning discipline like marketing, that it is virtually impossible to keep up with what’s being written in our own field, or even subfield, much less master the content of adjacent domains. When it comes to more and more ‘distant’ academic disciplines, let alone the ever-growing mound of novels, short stories and other perusable output, the almost impassable soon becomes the humanly impossible. Be that as it may, the first Levittionian lesson is that if we want to become better writers, we must read more widely.

If reading is the foundation of striking writing, as many authors and authorities
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maintain, then righting is a route to distinction. That is to say, great writers are characterized by a desire to challenge convention, to overturn the obvious, to upend the accepted, to flip the field in some way, shape, or form, and indeed to look at things from a radically different perspective (Brown, 1999, 2004). As previously noted, arguing against the method of the moment, or buzzword du jour, is a signature Theodore Levitt trait. Nowhere is this propensity more apparent than in ‘Marketing Myopia’, where he claimed – contrary to late-1950s conventional wisdom – that customers are the point of marketing departure, not the denouement of marketer activity. Industries need to ‘develop backwards’, he went on, beginning with customer satisfactions, continuing through the delivery of those satisfactions via appropriate channels of distribution and concluding with the creation of the goods and services that will produce those satisfactions for consumers.

Granted, the very act of rubbing against the academic grain is unconventional in itself, inasmuch as it runs counter to marketing’s ‘scientific’ ethos, the assumption that scholarship is cumulative, that we stand on the shoulders of giants, that we contribute our two-pennyworth to the ever-growing trove of textual treasures (Brown, 1996). Theodore Levitt, and other marketing magi like Philip Kotler, reject this linear model of disciplinary development (Brown, 2002). Instead, they operate on the basis of reversal, inversion, antithesis, dialectics. Not only does this maverick mindset challenge established convention, but it generates discussion, debate, controversy and conflict, which further helps the insouciant anti-establishmentarian stand out from the me-too crowd. That said, there’s nothing like a little controversy and conflict – the occasional comment, rejoinder and side-swipe at someone or other – to raise one’s academic profile. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the second Levittite lesson is that it is necessary to use the pen as a sword from time to time. Might is write.

The third and final takeaway is rhythmic. Rhythmic is a (newly coined) neologism that combines ‘rhythm’, an essential characteristic of felicitous writing, with an intertextual allusion to ‘rhythm’ of the original 3Rs. As such, it is singularly appropriate to Professor Levitt, whose felicitous prose and neologistic elan are second to none. He writes lucidly. He writes poetically. He writes mellifluously. Some of his writing is breathtaking in its brilliance and sends shivers down our collective spine. Yet, perhaps the most striking thing about his literary style is that it contradicts the canons of ‘good’ writing. It flouts every conceivable rule of academic writing and more besides. According to copious how-to-get-published handbooks, the key is to keep it plain and simple, to avoid big words, long sentences, unnecessary adverbs or anything that detracts from getting the facts across in a clear, concise, coherent manner (Baker, 2000; Caukin, 2003a, 2003b; Hart, 2002). The prevailing scholarly style, in short, is for plain prose, simply put. There is, of course, nothing wrong with plain prose, simply put – what may be termed the George Orwell (1962) philosophy of writing – except that when everyone employs it, it becomes tedious, samey, formulaic, stultifying, dry as dust. As Levitt repeatedly observes, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing and, while readers no doubt benefit from their staple diet of plain and simple prose, they
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also yearns for adjectival abundance, cornucopian sentences and vocabulary virtuosity. Text they can get their teeth into. True, if everyone adopted Ted’s high-calorie writing style, a conceptual coronary would presumably soon ensue. But Levitt’s lexicoinfections, his ambrosial alliterations, his plump paragraphs, his sizzling syntax, his mouth-watering metaphors, serve to remind us that there’s more to nourishing writing than thin gruel, meagerly served.

To be sure, low-fat figures of speech have their place. Sugar-free sentences are all fine and dandy. Hi-bran bullet-points help regulate constipated prose. Low-carb conjunctions are part and parcel of a healthy intellectual diet. However, when Farmer Ted’s literary T-bone, garnished with truffled tropes and caviar conceits, is on the marketing menu, only the most abstemious academics and puritanical practitioners can resist. After all, a Levitt of what you fancy does you good. Managers cannot live by Ted alone, but his catchphrases consistently hit the spot. All else is mere sausage meat.

Notes

1 Several other forms of symbolic expression, in addition to writing, are routinely employed by marketing scholars (pie charts, flow diagrams, scatter plots, videography, etc.). Academics also communicate their findings in all sorts of ways, from student seminars and conference presentations to personal websites and television interviews. These variations, however, ultimately rest on the written word, the textual artefact, the published article. Not only does the published paper represent a distillation of several other textual phenomena – questionnaire surveys, interview transcripts, secondary data, literature reviews and the like – but it is arguable that research doesn’t actually exist until and unless it appears in published form, ideally in a journal of record. When all is said and done, marketing academics are authors, men and women of letters (Brown, 2004).

2 This recycling predilection is related to the file card collection, containing quotes, quips, bromides and bon mots, that Levitt assembled over the years (Bartels, 1988). Apparently, he used to shuffle the cards and deal himself hands of aphorisms, which duly found their way into his articles. I’m not exactly sure if this qualifies as Theomancy, but it undoubtedly has shades of William Burroughs’s cut-ups! Set against this repetitive propensity, however, it is noteworthy that whenever Ted republished a paper, which was quite often, he reworked it anew, sometimes fairly extensively. (The ‘Globalization’ article was extensively reworked, for example, as was his book The Marketing Mind, which was republished in very different form under the title Marketing for Business Growth.) What’s more, when the reworked paper was itself republished, which was again quite often, he reworked the reworked version. Levitt, in keeping with his own much-recycled maxim, never leaves well enough alone!

3 Clearly, this quip runs counter to Liberace’s one-liner, cited earlier (‘too much of a good thing is just the right amount’). Levitt is nothing if not consistently inconsistent.

4 Professor Levitt not only served as Chair of HBS’s marketing department, but also edited HBR for four years. While he may not have been a lion of Harvard Yard, he was definitely king of the B-school jungle.

5 Appropriately, the only ‘law’ that Levitt lays down in his 35 years of active scholar-
ship is 'The Law of the Lunch'. (The fact that no one discusses the importance of the business lunch is testament, he argues, to its imperishable place in corporate life.) Characteristically, he lays it down on more than one occasion. It's a two-course law, presumably.

Consider, for example, the following extrapolative passage: 'The list of highly differentiated consumer products that not so long ago were sold as essentially undifferentiated or minimally differentiated commodities is long: coffee, soap, flour, beer, sugar, salt, oatmeal, pickles, frankfurters, rice, bananas, chickens, pineapples, potatoes and lots more. Among consumer intangibles, in recent years there has been an intensification of brand or vendor differentiation in banking, insurance of all kinds, auto rentals, credit cards, stock brokerage, airlines, travel agencies, realtors, beauticians, entertainment parks, small-loan companies, mutual funds, bond funds, and lots more. Among consumer hybrids the same thing has occurred: fast foods, theme restaurants, opticians, food retailers, and specialty retailers in a burgeoning variety of categories – jewelry, sporting goods, books, health and beauty aids, pants and jeans, musical records and cassette, auto supplies and parts, ice cream shops, home improvement centers, and lots more' (Levitt, 1986c: 86).

This problem has been compounded by the manifold reproductions of the original article, where the lists, font sizes, bullet-point formats, etc. are insensitively adapted to different house styles. Actually, much of the miscomprehension is attributable to a copy-editing mistake in the original. The second of four themes that Levitt sets out to discuss (lack of competitive substitutes) is indicated not by a first-level heading but a second-level heading (which renders it indistinguishable from the rest of the innumerable second-level sections).

Another intriguing manifestation of this man-of-the-people persona is found in Ted's constant use of technical language ('germanium diode', 'sintered-plate', 'nickel-cadmium'). One suspects that most readers don't really understand such terms, but then again they are not really meant to. The words work in a semiotic capacity, insofar as their use conveys the notion that, Harvard notwithstanding, Levitt is a shop floor kinda guy, descended from a long line of grease monkeys, completely at home with gadgets, gizmos and garage workshops.

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Stephen Brown is Professor of Marketing Research at the University of Ulster. He has written or co-edited numerous books, including *Postmodern Marketing* and *Free Gift Inside!* His papers have been published in the *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Business Horizons* and many more.

Address: School of Marketing, Entrepreneurship & Strategy, University of Ulster, Jordanstown, Co. Antrim BT37 0QB, Northern Ireland, UK.

[Email: sfx.brown@ulster.ac.uk]