The failgood factor: playing hopscotch in the marketing minefield

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What is the secret of marketing success? For fifty plus years, customer orientation has been regarded as a key factor, possibly the key factor. This may have been the case when marketing was in its infancy, but in a world where every organization has embraced the marketing philosophy, customer orientation no longer guarantees competitive advantage. The present paper examines alternatives to existing marketing ideology by means of a biographical study of several maverick marketers who not only succeeded when they should have failed but also failed their way to success.

Keywords Success, Failure, Seven A's, Dialectical Management

Sitting comfortably?

When Thomas J. Watson died in 1956, the New York Times described him as “the world’s greatest salesman”. Although he wasn’t the first marketer to achieve the ultimate accolade, nor indeed the last, there’s no doubt that the founder of IBM was one of the most brilliant marketing practitioners of the century just past. Appointed CEO in 1914, he turned a shambolic organisation selling a mish-mash of unrelated product lines, everything from butcher’s scales and cheese cutting machines to automatic punch clocks for hourly-paid employees, into imperious Big Blue, arguably the most remarkable marketing organisation of modern times. Whatever else he allegedly was – tyrant, jailbird, Nazi sympathiser, occasional cross-dresser – T.J. Watson was a bona fide marketing genius.

Much has been written about TJ’s amazing selling abilities (Maney 2003; Tedlow 2001, 2003), but there’s something else about Watson that’s worthy of note. He was a serial failure. He failed, failed and failed again. His manifold marketing triumphs must be set against his equally manifold failures.1 He failed to make a go of the family farm in New York State. He failed in his first commercial venture, an upmarket butcher’s shop. He failed nowadays, appropriately, Watson’s best remembered for his notoriously erroneous prediction that the size of the total, all-time, world-wide market for computers is five. Yes, five!

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as a travelling salesman, hawking sewing machines from a horse-drawn wagon. He finally wound up at “The Cash”, the National Cash Register Company, where he managed to wangle a two-week trial. Only he failed there too. Watson anticipated the sack – understandably – but instead the manager took pity on the taciturn youngster and showed him the rudiments of NCR’s renowned selling system, a features-and-benefits classic. Armed with a sure-fire script, which overcame the kid’s conversational difficulties in unstructured selling situations, TJ turned himself into the company’s best salesman. He was promoted to The Cash’s used-register department, which was notorious for its unscrupulous sales tactics. He was indicted for anti-competitive acts in 1912 and sentenced to one year in prison for “flagrant commercial piracy”. Naturally he appealed, and eventually won his case, but in the meantime he’d been unceremoniously cashiered by The Cash...

Criminality aside, T.J. Watson’s story is not atypical. Business history shows that many renowned marketers either stumbled their way to success or know what it’s like to stare down the barrel of failure:

• Colonel Harland Saunders, the marketing maestro behind KFC, failed at just about every job imaginable – soldier, lawyer, train driver, ferryboat operator, mule wrangler, tyre salesman, petrol station impresario – before he hit upon a method of franchising fried chicken in the 1950s. He was sixty-two at the time (Pearce 1982).

• Joe Girard, listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the most successful car salesman ever, struggled for years as a hapless house-builder, who somehow managed to do the impossible by going bust during America’s post-war housing boom. Hampered by a serious speech impediment, he went into automobile sales as a last resort. He p-p-p-persuaded a local car dealer to take him on, cold-called prospects day after day without reward, and eventually got lucky late one evening when he was the only salesperson on duty. Stuttering Joe never looked back (Sant 2006).

• Ruth Handler, the brains behind Barbie, faced fierce opposition within Mattel when she suggested that there was a demand for grown-up dolls. The design team balked, executives quit in disgust, pre-launch market research was uniformly negative, toy retailers refused to carry the busty creation. But within three months, Mattel was selling 20,000 Barbies per week and, Bratz notwithstanding, the 48-year-old doll’s still going strong (Wawro 2000).

Even Walt Disney, widely regarded as one of the most prescient marketers of the twentieth century – he recognised the potential of tie-in merchandise decades before Hollywood caught on – was a congenital failure who went bankrupt on several occasions (Gross 1996). He tried and failed to make his fortune as a newspaper cartoonist in Kansas City. He turned to the animated movie business only to see his co-owned company, Laugh-O-Gram, fail before releasing its first film. He moved to La La Land and, after the usual Tinseltown disappointments, finally broke through with Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, only to discover that his distributor owned the rights to everything, Oswald’s lucky paws included. So, in desperation, the man became a mouse. Walt’s first two Mickey Mouse adventures, Plane Crazy and The Gallopin’ Gaucho, failed to
make an impact. He went for broke with the third, *Steamboat Willie*. He sank every penny he had into the risky venture. He ignored the sceptical naysayers, who confidently predicted catastrophe at the box office. The naysayers were wrong. The world went wild for *Steamboat Willie*. The rest is Disney history.

**Exceptions that prove**

Would that every business story ended as happily as Disney’s or Handler’s or Girard’s or Saunders’ or Watson’s. The sad reality, however, is that the bulk of business ventures end in failure (Finkelstein 2003; Ormerod 2005; Sandage 2005; Tibballs 1999). Most companies collapse, most CEOs flop, most start ups stop, most mergers misfire, most innovations implode, most R&D founders, most long-range forecasts flatline (except those predicting periodic gales of “creative destruction”) and most business success stories have a back story full of blunders, clangers, faux pas, cock ups, errors of judgment. Call them what you will.

This, of course, is where marketing comes in. The modern marketing concept – developed by Drucker, popularised by Levitt, codified by Kotler and regurgitated by every textbook writer ever since – is conventionally presented as a sure-fire method of avoiding failure. It is nothing less than the secret of long-term business success. Unlike countless fly-by-night management bromides, such as “six sigma”, “reengineering” or “excellence”, the marketing concept *really works*. Simply find out what your customers want and meet their needs better than the competition, then success is sure to follow. In theory, at least.

In practice, marketing’s record is patchy at best and pathetic at worst. Despite the finest market research that money can buy; despite detailed situation analyses of the likely fit between marketplace opportunities, corporate capabilities and competitor activities; despite sophisticated marketing plans, strategies and campaigns, all mounted with military precision; despite the stupendous brainpower of numberless business school-based thinkers, teachers and theoreticians – collective gasp! – the fact of the matter is that marketing’s successes are surpassed by its failures (Haig 2003; Harley 2001; Hendon 1992). Empirical studies show that most new products fail and, if anything, the failure rate is increasing (Franklin 2003). Empirical studies show that most brand extensions crater and, if anything, they subvert the core brand’s laboriously established reputation (Simmons 2003). Empirical studies show that we still don’t know which half of an advertising campaign works, or the half of the half that cuts through the clutter, or the half of the half that stimulates consumer desire, or the half of the half that results in a purchase (half of which will be returned as unsuitable, unsatisfactory or otherwise inappropriate).

Marketing, if truth be told, is implicated in some of the biggest corporate calamities on record (Haig 2003). As everyone knows, the notorious New Coke debacle was preceded by a prodigious amount of market research which proved that consumers preferred the new formulation. As everyone knows, McDonald’s gourmet burger miscalculation – the unforgettably named Arch Deluxe – was pre-tested till the cows came home and assured the company they were on to a winner. As everyone knows, RJ Reynolds’
wretched brand of “smokeless cigarettes”, Premier, was backed by a money-
no-object marketing campaign. However, the concept was quickly stubbed 
out by consumers who lacked the vacuum-powered lungs needed to inhale 
successfully, didn’t possess the pocket flamethrower required to keep the 
freakin’ thing alight, and couldn’t acquire a taste for a fag that not only 
smelled of sulphur but, according to RJ Reynolds’ own CEO, “tasted like shit” 
(Haig 2003, p.58).

Don’t mention the Edsel

Now, none of this means that the marketing concept is a con trick. History 
shows that the marketing concept can and does work, as do numerous studies 
of marketing orientation (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski 1990). The real problem 
nowadays is that marketing is a victim of its own success (Grant 1999). 
Fifty years ago, the customer-centric marketing concept was a comparative 
rarity and therefore conferred considerable competitive advantage. These 
days, by contrast, every organisation is marketing orientated, or claims to 
be; every start-up has embraced the marketing philosophy, if only because 
it’s a precondition for funding by banks, venture capitalists and suchlike; 
every marketing executive has read Kotler from cover to cover, or looked at 
some of the pictures; every manager is bandoleered in Masters degrees, CIM 
diplomas or short course campaign medals; every sales rep has spent many 
a happy weekend in CRM seminars, guerrilla marketing bootcamps and 
hug-the-customer love-ins (Earls 2002). Indeed, it is estimated that, at any 
one time, approximately two million people are studying marketing formally 
and they’re all using the same textbooks, learning the same principles, 
working through the same syllabus (Hackley 2007). Where’s the competitive 
advantage in that?

The crucial question, therefore, is where do we go now that the marketing 
playing field is level once more and teaching programmes are like Ps in a 
pod? Who do we turn to now that innumerable indistinguishable products 
are available in very conceivable product category and there’s only identikit, 
Kotlerclone, me-too marketing on offer? What do we do at a time when 
marketing is more important than ever – selling is easy in times of scarcity 
but it’s a bitch when abundance prevails – but the marketing concept is 
coming under ever-mounting attack (Sheth and Sisodia 2006)?

Happily, there is an answer to our discipline’s current quandary. It is 
found among those who haven’t been contaminated by existing marketing 
ideology. It is possessed by the exceptions, the mavericks, the “odd-balls”; 
that is, individuals who don’t subscribe to established marketing ideas or 
conventional textbook thinking. It resides among those who should have 
failed according to accepted marketing principles but who succeeded 
despite accepted marketing principles. It involves people who did all right by 
doing the “wrong” thing, people who failed to follow “the rules” (or were 
fortuitously unaware of them), people providentially blessed with what can 
only be described as “the failgood factor”.

May contain nuts

As part of a larger research project, the present author has been investigating the business practices of marketing eccentrics. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of my flaky chosen few. The list, nevertheless, includes such need-no-introduction luminaries as Michael O'Leary, Donald Trump, Madonna, Steve Jobs, Coco Chanel and the aforementioned Thomas J. Watson. Without exception, these are individuals of enormous achievement in their chosen fields, individuals who are universally recognised as outstanding marketers, individuals whose marketing practices often run counter to received wisdom and, not least, individuals who have tasted the bitter brew of failure as well as the ambrosial nectar of success (for further biographical details see Boru 2006; Madsen 1990; Maney 2003; Slater 2005; Taraborrelli 2002; Young and Simon 2005).²

When the lives of the martists are studied in detail, seven salient characteristics are apparent. Only a few of these personal characteristics, it must be stressed, are marketing specific, but without them our mavericks’ singular business careers would have worked out differently. Just as marketing is only one element of management practice, albeit an enormously important element, so too natural marketing ability is no guarantee of untrammelled success. As every entrepreneur well knows, it is perfectly possible to sell oneself into oblivion.

Caveats and qualifications notwithstanding, my study of marketing oddballs reveals that unschooled, unprincipled, uncontaminated commercial success is associated with the following personal attributes:

**Ambition**

Thomas Watson, if not quite a megalomaniacal despot, set out to make IBM the biggest and the best. In 1926, he exhorted his troops with the stirring words, “This business of ours has a future...it is going on forever. Nothing in the world will ever stop it. The IBM is not merely an organisation of men; it is an institution that will go on forever”. He meant what he said, moreover. He aimed to build an unbeatable business. This is true of all our exemplars. Donald Trump’s vaunting ambition is emblazoned on every building he’s ever constructed: Trump Tower, Trump Plaza, Trump Place, Trump Circle and countless others. Steve Jobs urges Apple employees to “make a dent in the universe”, or “think different” at least. Coco Chanel set out to make Number 5 Number 1 and, as the world’s best-selling perfume, she got where she wanted to go. Michael O’Leary, Ryanair’s supremely self-confident chief executive, won’t rest until he has clipped the wings of Aer Lingus, easyJet, Lufthansa and, especially, British Airways (and put the boot into their undercarriages, for good measure). When Madonna was interviewed on *American Bandstand* at the very outset of her career, Dick Clark asked the

² My research method, such as it is, is predicated upon the approach adopted by Howard Gardner, the eminent Harvard psychologist, in his pioneering studies of creativity. Rejecting traditional laboratory experiments, Gardner (1995) concentrates on biographical analyses of prodigiously creative individuals (Mozart, Freud, Gandhi, etc) and seeks to identify ideal types of exceptional achievement.
wannabe pop star what her ambitions were. “To rule the world”, Madonna replied. She meant it, too.

**Activity**

It is impossible to overstate the sheer physical effort that our exemplars put into their endeavours. Trite as it is to say there’s no substitute for hard work, it’s true all the same. Thomas Watson was an elbow grease monkey, who worked stupendously long hours, didn’t retire till a month before his death at the age of 82 and famously attributed his success to the fact that he tried more often than most, failed more often than most, and finally struck lucky. Michael O’Leary, as Boru (2006) shows, is a foul-mouthed force of nature, constantly haranguing customers, employees, suppliers, reporters and government ministers foolish enough to get in his way. Coco Chanel spent hour after hour in her Rue Cambon atelier, developing ideas on live models, many of whom collapsed through exhaustion as the indefatigable dressmaker pinned, hemmed, cinched and adjusted (Madsen 1990). Madonna’s work ethic is legendary, whether it be her gruelling keep-fit routines, her exhausting rehearsals and stage shows, her refusal to accept anything less than perfection from backing musicians or her gimlet-eyed willingness to go through every single item of on-tour expenditure. Steve Jobs, according to Young and Simon (2005), periodically stalks the corridors of Apple Inc’s Cupertino headquarters, button-holing home-bound employees with tongue-lashings along the lines of who-the-hell-are-you-and-how-come-you’re-heading-off-so-early? Donald Trump strikes many as a cosseted celebrity CEO, a big-haired dilettante with pneumatic supermodels on either arm, yet he works extremely hard propagating the playboy image that sells his glitzy, gaudy, glamorous lifestyle brand. Well, that’s his excuse and he’s sticking to it.

**Astigmatism**

All marketers are familiar with the notion of marketing myopia (Levitt 1960), companies’ inability to see what business they’re really in (railroads rather than transportation, movies not entertainment, ¾ inch drills rather than ¾ inch holes, et cetera). Our exemplars suffer from a different “defect”, an astigmatic ability to see—and seize—what competitors can’t. Coco Chanel could sense the latent demand for less formal, less constricted, less elaborate outfits and by replacing bustles, stays and suchlike with a simple relaxed look, she changed the face of fashion forever. At a time when New York City was almost bankrupt and no property developer in their right mind would invest in Gotham’s bottomless money pit, Donald Trump calculated that enormous rewards awaited those who took a chance on the Big Apple. A pop-culture polymath, Madonna is preternaturally attuned to edgy musical trends – techno, vogueing, neo-disco etc – and equipped with an unerring ability to turn them into mainstream successes. When Steve Jobs visited the Xerox PARC facility in 1979, he saw the future in the form of a graphical user interface, an object-orientated language and a curious pointing device called a mouse. The Apple Mac debuted four years later. An accountant by training, Michael O’Leary was considering closing down Ryanair, a loss-making Irish regional airline, when he intuited that Southwestern’s low-cost model could be adapted successfully to the EU, where post-1992 airline deregulation was
in the offing. When Thomas Watson took over the dysfunctional company in 1914, he was faced with a hodgepodge of hopelessly unrelated products, yet he could see that the most unprofitable part of the business, tabulating machines, had the greatest long-term potential. He bet IBM on his belief in information management and reaped cornucopian marketing rewards.

**Amplification**

There are many ambitious individuals. There are numerous extremely hard workers. The world is full of people with fantastic, off-kilter business ideas, as TV shows like *Dragons’ Den* bear witness. Much less common is the capacity to stand out from the crowd and in that regard our marketing mavericks are unrivalled. They get people talking. They are larger than life. They are prodigious self-promoters one and all. They stir up controversy. They know that free publicity is priceless. They keep themselves in the public eye. Michael O’Leary is never reluctant to make a fool of himself provided Ryanair gets a plug for its latest route, price promotion or crush-the-competition manoeuvre. Donald Trump’s architectonic combover receives more media coverage than many publicly quoted companies. Madonna’s ability to manufacture shock-horror headlines – crucifixion scenes in her stage show, lesbian kisses with Britney Spears and the like – is unsurpassed and unsurpassable. Decades before Georgio Armani famously dressed Richard Gere in *American Gigolo*, Coco Chanel was a master of high-profile product placement in big-budget Hollywood movies. Steve Jobs is never out of the spotlight nowadays, though this is as much due to Apple’s allegedly fraudulent stock options scheme as it to his dazzling impromptu performances at the annual MacWorld Expo or his attention-grabbing place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the “world’s lowest paid chief executive”. Thomas Watson, similarly, was an out-and-out publicity hound who happily put himself about on behalf of Big Blue. His stage-managed sales meetings for IBM’s foot soldiers were a sight to behold, the road warrior equivalent of Winston Churchill’s fight-them-on-the-beaches speeches. As for the unspeakable company song…my lips are sealed.

**Aphorism**

Another remarkable characteristic that our marketing eccentrics share, alongside an aversion to self-effacement and the searing insight that sets them apart from the common commercial herd, is encapsulation. They are endowed with an aphoristic bent, the ability to “say everything” in a memorable epigram or pithy turn of phrase. As every savvy marketer appreciates, it’s hard to beat a good slogan. It appeals to the public; it energises employees; it is ineradicably inscribed in the collective memory bank: Coke is It, Where’s The Beef?, Finger Lickin Good, Stick to the Knitting, Show Me The Money. T.J. Watson was very fond of soundbites and they echoed and re-echoed around IBM. THINK was his all-time favourite, a one-word exhortation that followed him from NCR to Big Blue (an aphorism in itself). Donald Trump is no slouch with the aperçus either, most famously “You’re fired!” Coco Chanel was renowned for one-liners like “fashion changes, style remains”, “simplicity is the keynote of excellence” and “in order to be irreplaceable one

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3 Note, the company Watson took over in 1914 was called Computing-Tabulating Recording Co (CTR). He changed its name to IBM in 1924.
must be different”. Steve Jobs constantly reminds his “insanely great” silicon stormtroopers that “the journey is the reward” while making it absolutely clear that “real artists ship”. Michael O’Leary’s attack ads are a monument to concision (“expensive bastards”) and he is always prepared to denounce competitors in piquant Anglo-Saxon soubriquets (see Boru 2006 for the distasteful details). The “Queen of Pop” is not only responsible for one of the most over-used terms in the English language (“wannabe”), but she manages to sell millions of albums, concert tickets and associated ancillaries on the basis of a single word that says it all: Madonna.

**Ambiguity**

The beauty of THINK, or indeed many memorable marketing memes, is that they contain a bit of semantic wriggle room. That is to say, their meaning is inherently ambiguous. What does THINK mean, exactly? What does the “It” in “Coke Is It” refer to? Thomas Watson never elaborated on THINK, because he believed spelling out its meaning destroyed its mystique. Robert Goizueta, the Coke kingpin during its early-80s heyday, was quite specific about the importance of ambiguity (Pendergrast 1993). “It” created a space for consumer fantasising, much the way manikins in display windows used to be faceless or headless, thereby letting consumers project themselves into the outfit (the silhouettes in iPod ads perform a similar function). Success in marketing often involves an element of uncertainty, inscrutability, incongruity, equivocation. Madonna is famous for her restless mutability, infuriating capriciousness, and bottomless ambivalence. Coco Chanel’s high-handed treatment of employees and her “never apologise, never explain” attitude only added to her ineffable allure. Steve Jobs is a cult figure for many Apple aficionados, a corporate King Arthur slumbering in Avalon who returned in Apple’s hour of need to save the ailing company. Perhaps it’s the ludicrous hairdo or ever-present pout, but Donald Trump always conveys the paradoxical impression that underneath the CEO braggadocio, he’s taking the piss. Michael O’Leary is an inherently contradictory figure, a well-bred, public-school educated, landed gentry-leaning, lord-of-the-manor type who dresses in navvy chic, plays football with the baggage handlers and swears like a Tourette’s-stricken hoodie from Asboville (Boru 2006). Thomas Watson, meanwhile, was allegedly an absolute monster, a tyrant who ruled with an iron fist in a steel glove (Maney 2003). At the same time, he was capable of benevolence beyond the call of duty and remarkable acts of unnecessary generosity that earned the undying loyalty of his workforce. If ever anyone embodied Winston Churchill’s “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”, it was undoubtedly Big Blue’s bruiser.

**Anti-customer**

Alongside ambiguity, which runs counter to conventional marketing notions of crystal clear positioning and immediately intelligible USPs, perhaps the most singular shared personality trait is anti-customer orientation. Or, to be more precise, anti-customer-centric orientation. Without exception, our mavericks are opposed to established marketing ideas about customer sovereignty. While concurring that customers are crucial – no business can survive without them, after all – they don’t subscribe to the textbook idea that
customers are the be-all-and-end-all, the centre of the marketing universe, the object of veneration, adoration or supplication. Michael O’Leary, if not quite customer phobic, is far from a customer-philiac. He frequently tells customers to f*** off, he’d sell his family into bondage before issuing a refund, near enough, and, as for Ryanair’s suppliers and stakeholders, he treats them even more abominably than he does paying passengers (Boru 2006). Compared to Coco Chanel, of course, O’Leary is a pussycat. She not only maltreated her employees – to the extent of going into liquidation rather than giving them a pay rise – but rudely refused to meet her most important customers (Madsen 1990). “A client seen,” one of her aphorisms went, “is a client lost”. Donald Trump, likewise, is a master of reverse psychology, who sets out to make life infuriatingly awkward for customers thereby ensuring that he has them exactly where he wants them. Denial marketing is equally integral to Madonna’s malign charisma. Notorious for her rudeness to fans, as well as her short sets and reluctance to play encores, the irascible diva’s stage shows eschew “love you all” inter-song patter for “f*** you, motherf*****s” and similar “sod off” salutations. Steve Jobs, most commentators agree, is a nasty piece of work who has made a career out of messing with customers’ heads, not simply though exorbitantly overpriced, often unreliable products, nor ensuring that Apple’s proprietary systems are incompatible with competitors’, but also by negotiating multi-million dollar deals with suppliers then reportedly reneging on them (see Young and Simon 2005). Even Thomas Watson at his most terrifying never reneged on a deal, though he did subscribe to the so-called “selling philosophy” that latter-day marketers ostentatiously disdain. He wrote the book on it, in fact, an elaborate instruction manual covering every aspect of the sales process – targets, territories, pitch scripts, shake downs and suchlike. Watson might have been modern marketing’s worst nightmare, but by God he could move the merchandise.

Fail better

Salient as they are, the 7A's of unconventional marketing are neither a guarantee of success nor the only attributes that matter. Accident (good fortune is vital), Appearance (a distinctive look’s de rigueur) and Aggression (being hit with the rabid stick helps), could quite easily be added to our A-list, for instance. No matter how long the list, however, salient attributes are insufficient in themselves. We can’t properly understand marketing, much less make it happen, by working through an inventory of A’s, or mixing a plethora of P’s or simply ticking the boxes that matter. Management is a dialectical process, a hopscotch-like ability to leap from grand visions to fine detail, from past glories to future prospects, from local focus to global domination, from customer needs to corporate capabilities, from following the pack to leading the charge, from tooth-and-nail competition to cooperating in everyone’s best interest (Magretta 2002).

Nevertheless, of all the dialectical tensions that ambitious managers must wrestle with, three are particularly noteworthy:
Sales versus marketing

It can’t have escaped your notice that all of our marketing exemplars are described as great salespersons and everyone knows that there’s more to marketing than sales. Indeed, the antagonism between the two is legendary. While it is true that marketing and sales aren’t synonymous, it’s also true that marketing ultimately boils down to selling stuff. Advertising, distribution, package design, brand personality, market research etc, etc are all of inseparable importance. But unless someone buys the product or service or idea or whatever, our entire marketing effort is in vain. Boiling marketing down to “selling stuff” may seem unforgivably crude and reductionist, but in a world where every organisation is marketing orientated and every organisation unctuously promises to love, honour and obey the customer till death do them part, many of today’s marketing-savvy consumers prefer to deal with organisations that openly admit their profit-making motivation rather than hypocritically claim that they really, really care about customers’ welfare (Brown 2003). Financial services organisations are particularly remiss in this regard. Today’s mart-smart consumers are wise to the wiles of marketers, they have no time for what Zuboff and Maxim (2003, p.11) term “manipulative pseudo-intimacy”, and it follows therefore that honesty is marketing’s best policy. Honesty about our commercial intent, that is. As Ryanair under O’Leary epitomises, 21st century marketers should endeavour to do exactly what it says on the tin (Boru 2006).

Structure versus agency

Alongside the pre-eminence of salespersons, it can’t have escaped your notice that this paper foregrounds the so-called fifth “P” of people. Even though marketing is something that is done by and for people, the people who actually do marketing are strangely absent from most mainstream marketing textbooks (for an exception, see Blythe 2006). The academy’s emphasis, in other words, is very much on “structure” rather than “agency”, whether it be the structural elements of the external environment or the structured components of the marketing mix or the five structural forces that affect a company’s competitive context or whatever it happens to be. Although the “great man” school of thought has fallen into disrepute among feminists, historians, postmodernists, organisation theorists, leadership analysts et al, it is inarguable that A-list individuals like ours make a very real difference in the capitalist steeplechase. Marketing mounts need a jockey and no amount of scholarly huffing and puffing will change that. Apple went to pot without Jobs. The Trump Organisation without Donald is hard to imagine. Big Blue famously imploded when the Watson dynasty stood down. Disney has struggled ever since Walt departed to the great cryogenic capsule in the sky.4 None of this means that human agency is the only thing that matters. But to imagine that great men and great women don’t make a massive difference is to misunderstand the nature of management. So important is agency that if a charismatic frontperson doesn’t exist, marketing orientated organisations

4 There are many, many examples that could be cited here. The Body Shop, for example, lost the plot when Roddick went walkabout. Where would Virgin be without Branson, or Oracle without Ellison? Sam Walton’s ghost is still alive and well in Bentonville. Muiccia is the devil in Prada…
invent one: Bibendum, Ronald McDonald, Ms Chiquita Banana, the Marlboro Man, the Energiser Bunny. It keeps going and going.

Success versus failure

The difficulties of Disney in the wake of Walt, or Big Blue’s meltdown when the Watsons went west, or the recent estimation that Apple Inc could lose 20% of its value if Jobs is indicted on stock options charges (Burrows 2007), remind us that success and failure are part and parcel of commercial life. They are the ebb and flow, the systole and diastole, the plug and socket, the yin and yang of western capitalism. They are nothing less than the Tao of commerce. For all academics’ preoccupation with success – and managers’ understandable determination to win, come what may – the fact of the matter is that failure is the norm, the default setting of business (Ormerod 2005). Success is fleeting at best and difficult to sustain at all times. As latter-day heroes to zeroes like Dell, Ford, Coke, Lego, Sony, Sanyo, Airbus, Gap, Carphone Warehouse and French Connection amply demonstrate, failure is always lurking, looming, loitering with intent. Failure, however, isn’t all bad. Failure, in certain respects, is the key to success. Business history consistently shows that those who hang in there despite repeated failure, abject failure, heart-wrenching failure, are those who win through in the end. Thomas Watson, Donald Trump, Madonna, Steve Jobs, Coco Chanel, Michael O’Leary (and many, many more) all learnt what it’s like to be kicked in the teeth repeatedly. Yet they persevered in the face of the eighth and perhaps most prevalent A, Adversity. Collectively, they embody the personal philosophy of Samuel Beckett, the Nobel prize-winning Irish playwright, who urges us to “fail better” (Brown 2006). That is, to embrace failure, to learn from failure and, eventually, to overcome failure. As someone whose first collection of short stories, Dream of Fair to Middling Women, was rejected by 42 publishers before appearing sixty years after it was written, Sam Beckett knew whereof he spoke. But he refused to say die and earned immortality as a result.

Adversity orientation?

Henry Ford, lauded by Ted Levitt as the greatest marketer of all time, was a complete failure for much of his career. He failed to make hay with the family farm, toiled unsuccessfully for Thomas Edison, developed an electric car during his spare time and earned the nickname Crazy Henry for his trouble (Collier and Horowitz 1989). In 1899, he formed the Detroit Automobile Company, which quickly hit the skids without producing any products. Undeterred, he founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and made a series of high price, low volume, top of the market autos, with strictly limited success. After a

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5 Corporate comebacks, it must be stressed, are possible too. Failure isn’t terminal in business life, though fear of failure can be. As media mogul Felix Dennis (2006, p.38) observes in his recent bestseller, How to Get Rich, “After a lifetime of making money and observing better men and women than I fall by the wayside, I am convinced that fear of failing in the eyes of the world is the single biggest impediment to amassing wealth”.

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Damascene conversion to the cause of cut price/high volume production, Henry came up with the radical Model N. It promptly bit the dust. Ford went back to the drawing board and finally hit pay-dirt in 1908 with the celebrated Model T.

Ford’s story is par for the course. Failure afflicts even the greatest marketing exponents. Business life is a rickety roller-coaster that weaves between swings and roundabouts while assailed by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (Farson and Keyes 2002; McGregor 2006; Sonnenfeld and Ward 2007). Yet the marketing academy has largely ignored calamitous reality, arguing that if organisations adopt our wonder-working marketing concept they’ll be spared the fate of the benighted unenlightened multitudes (and should true believers fail it is because “they’re not doing it properly”). This argument may have held water fifty years ago when marketing orientation was a novelty, but in a world where marketing orientation is all-but ubiquitous it is arguable that marketing orientation is contributing to failure rather than holding it at bay. Cookie-cutter marketing is all around us and by perpetuating cookie-cutter marketing through me-too textbooks, identikit degree programmes and ho-hum scholarly articles, the academic community isn’t helping our principal constituents. It’s little wonder they’re no longer reading our writings or attending to our recommendations, as Tapp (2005) rightly notes.

It follows that the time is ripe to reinvent marketing once more. The challenge we face is to find an alternative to the traditional customer-centric marketing concept. There are many possible alternatives out there, as the on-going debate over Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) “Service-Dominant Logic” readily demonstrates. But I for one believe that we need to look outside the marketing mainstream, we need to explore the nooks and crannies where modern marketing never really took hold, we need to analyse the marketing mavericks, those who operate according to our 7A’s, who venture forth into the marketing minefield and who hopscotch their way to a failgood future.

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