To Serve Man: A Marketing Manifesto (and an Article That Should Not Have Been Necessary)

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This conceptual offering embodies what may be a long-overdue but plainspoken metaphysical assessment of the basic nature of marketing. A point of emphasis is that chronic misdefinition and misinterpretation of marketing itself have impeded proper appreciation of marketing’s positive impact on society. One purpose here is to correct that lingering miscomprehension (pervading even the highest reaches of scholarship) and appropriately position the business function of marketing taxonomically within the larger domain of economic and governance philosophy and the societal perspective. Armed with that insight, it becomes possible to dismiss as invalid much specious criticism of marketing. Improved understanding of the true nature of marketing in turn illuminates its macroeconomic and societal role. Therefore, the field of marketing may deserve to be celebrated more than it has been to date—not that it has been universally. This item’s message is thus submitted, in constructive and therapeutic spirit, as perhaps the transcendent good news story that the marketing field has received.

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Over several decades, scholarly attention has occasion-ally addressed marketing’s impact on society—in other words, its contribution, for good or ill, to human welfare. Some exemplars include Stewart, Dewhurst, and Field (1939), Borden (1942), Friedman (1962, pp. 133–36), Feldman (1971), Sirgy, Samli, and Meadow (1982), Ratzerger (1986), Nason (1989), Wilkie and Moore (1999), and Sheth and Sisodia (2005).

Most treatments of the societal impact issue necessarily have been analytical and theoretical, given the daunting challenge of operationalizing macro-level constructs such as \( x_1 \) the extent of marketing in a given society or economy and \( y \) societal welfare attributable to marketing, apart from the problem of controlling for \( x_2, \ldots, n \) confounding covariates. Yet some empirical studies do target the issue, in a fashion. Barksdale and colleagues (Barksdale and Darden 1972; Barksdale and Perreault 1980), Hustad and Pessemier (1973), Lundstrom and Lamont (1976), Gaski and Etzel (1986, 2005), and Fornell et al. (1996) attempt to measure by survey how well marketing practice serves the public, insofar as the consuming public itself perceives it. The results of this body of work have been mixed and inconclusive regarding the big picture of marketing’s net societal benefit. To be taken seriously, nevertheless, is the annual ranking of nations by the Wall Street Journal and Heritage Foundation on the basis of economic freedom tolerated (or fostered) by the respective national jurisdictions. Found consistently in this Index of Economic Freedom project is a strong correspondence between the extent to which a free-market system is permitted to flourish in a nation-state—the system that also allows the private institution of marketing to operate, that is—and overall living standards \( r = .78 \); Miller and Holmes 2011, p. 4). To make a crude dent in the empirical confounding threat—that is, illustrating the theme of similar resource endowments and dissimilar macroeconomic results—Heritage–Wall Street Journal has proffered the cases of North and South Korea, North and South America, and the former East and West Germany and North and South Vietnam as meaningful antithetical comparisons.

Policy significance intersects this societal impact concern. Public policy toward business does not just involve particular regulations. It encompasses a society’s fundamental stance toward what system of economic organization will be allowed and practiced within its social order, which in turn should be conditioned on the social performance of the given system types.

Interest in the marketing Æ society nexus is most understandable on this superordinate level. Discerning an institution’s full impact on the surrounding world is a fair interpretation of the ultimate human question for that institution and those who labor in it. Such issues animate the exploration to follow.

Definition

To rationally contemplate marketing’s relation to societal outcomes, one must first arrive at a common understanding of what marketing is, what the word “marketing” means. This phase of the analytical journey need not be overcom-
plicated. The following list summarizes a representative selection of leading definitions of marketing developed and accepted over the modern history of the field:

- “The analyzing, organizing, planning, and controlling of the firm’s customer-impinging resources, policies, and activities with a view to satisfying the needs and wants of chosen customer groups at a profit” (Kotler 1967, p. 12);
- “The performance of business activities which direct the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer or user to satisfy customers and accomplish the company’s objectives” (McCarthy 1968, p. 9);
- “Satisfaction of human needs and wants … to build and manage an … organization” (Drucker 1968, p. 54);
- “Providing customer satisfaction as a means to achieving a company’s profit objectives” (Bell and Emory 1971, p. 39);
- “Achieving the profit and other objectives related to the identification, stimulation, and satisfaction of demand” (Buzzell et al. 1972, p. 21);
- “The performance of activities which seek to accomplish an organization’s objectives by anticipating customer or client needs and directing a flow of need-satisfying goods and services from producer to customer or client” (McCarthy and Perreault 1984, p. 11);
- “A total system of business activities designed to plan, price, promote, and distribute want-satisfying products to target markets in order to achieve organizational objectives” (Etzel, Walker, and Stanton 2001, p. 6);
- “The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements profitably” (Chartered Institute of Marketing 2009);
- “The process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distributing of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (AMA 2003; Bennett 1988, p. 115);
- “An organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (AMA 2004);
- “The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA 2007).

(NB: These definitions address the business or administrative function of marketing practice, not marketing as an academic field.) The final three are the latest incarnations of the official American Marketing Association (AMA) definition, so it is far from an idiosyncratic profile. Yet, as I have put this listing and similar predecessor versions to classes of Introductory Marketing students countless times:

But wait, they’re all different. If the people who presume to write the definition of marketing can’t agree on what the word means, how are we supposed to know what marketing is? Actually, there is a way. All we need to do is identify the most common conceptual elements within the list, i.e., the ideas that most often recur throughout the set of definitions, to approximate a consensus.

Almost invariably in this exercise, the students’ top two nominees are the concepts of satisfying customers and achieving the marketer’s objectives. Thus is excavated an expert consensus understanding of marketing: satisfying customers to achieve your objectives (whether profit or nonprofit). Plumbing the conceptual norms is indeed found to be that prosaic, as performed with nearly perfect inter-rater reliability by my thousands of capable judges over the past three-plus decades—augmented by conventional content analysis (results available on request). We did not invent the definition or even interpret it. We, the classes, merely distilled it from the prevalent expert definitions of marketing in our field’s literature. The most universal conceptual components of the mainstream definitions of a construct thereby establish its consensus or protoconsensus core meaning. This proposition is ratified by the essence of the AMA definitions in particular, although those entries do offer some accoutrements, as would be expected of committee work. Different selections of definitions could yield different apparent consensuses, though not radically different in this case, but a set dominated by Kotler, McCarthy, Drucker, the AMA, and the other luminaries is tendered here as the gold standard.

This stripped-down definitional approach does satisfy Hunt’s inclusivity test (2007, p. 280) by accommodating profit and nonprofit, organizational and individual, transaction-directed activity. It also fulfills the exclusivity ideal by rejecting such ersatz exchange practices as transfer, coercion, exploitation by swindle, and so on. Details that show up in some of the listed definitions are reasonable elaboration but ultimately veneer.

Marketing, therefore, does not mean swindling customers. It does not mean cheating customers. It does not mean deceiving, coercing, or gouging customers—by definition. Marketing instead involves satisfying customers. It is a particular approach to actualizing exchange with a customer, the approach that uses customer satisfaction as the means. There are many ways to accomplish a transaction: cheating, coercing, deceiving, and so on, or just plain “selling” as the Intro textbooks say. Marketing is an alternative way, the one using a more benign means. Technically, it is marketer-induced customer anticipation of satisfaction that prompts transaction, but unless the seller/marketer is truly working toward provision of such customer utility, it is merely swindling, not marketing. Swindling and the like can be called commerce, exchange, or selling, but they are not marketing—again, by consensus definition.

In fact, reduced to even simpler terms, marketing’s “mutually beneficial exchange” becomes giving others what they want in order to get what you want (which is consistent with original “broadening”; Kotler and Levy 1969)—perhaps even “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In that light, the marketing concept may be far older than has been generally realized! Moreover, student interest in it seems to be amplified by the epiphany that our definition, in either standard or ultra-streamlined form, is extendable to the interpersonal social realm.

To be perfectly literal, though, and to improve a bit on extant definitions, marketing actually means trying to satisfy customers (yes, to achieve one’s objectives). We must define marketing as involving the attempt at customer satisfaction, to allow for the possibility that marketing might fail. No human activity is perfect—not even marketing—so we cannot assume success at customer satisfaction. But if one diligently tries to satisfy customers as the means of attainment of objectives, that still qualifies as marketing
Elaboration and Macro/Policy Connection

Of course, marketing’s customer orientation is not benevolence. It is unapologetic self-interest. The customer satisfaction instrumental aim is merely a means to an end—that being fulfillment of the marketer’s own objectives. The means therefore is benign, even anodyne, perhaps dispassionate, but definitely not benevolent charity. Again, reducing to the unvarnished plain English dispensed to undergrad Intro students, this customer dedication arises not because marketers inherently like their customers, but because they like themselves. Does a journal audience including marketing scholars need this primer? As demonstrated subsequently, a prominent segment does, based on its own testimony.

All of this is as it should be. As a policy choice, we would not want our main economic institutions operating out of benevolence anyway. Benevolence as a motivation for economic relations and resource allocation does not have a good track record. It has a very checkered history as a motivator for human endeavor. Economic benevolence is actually the socialist model, the bureaucratic model, the government central-planning model, which is notorious for inefficiency and ineffectiveness, even abject failure. (Some religious and charitable institutions would be exceptions, but they have a narrow economic role.) For confirmation, one merely needs to recall how many centrally planned, nonmarket economic systems collapsed and disappeared from the face of the earth about two decades ago.

And all of this makes total sense. The key insight of marketing is this: In which case are customers more likely to part with their money—when the vendor gives them what they want or gives them what they do not want? When would those customers be more amenable to an exchange relationship—when satisfied by the marketer or when dissatisfied? A worthy insight perhaps, but it is less than a panderer or drastic one. Like many great ideas, when specified in black and white, it seems too simple. But let us try telling that to the populations, numbering in the billions, who spent their lives groaning under the yoke of nonmarket, mass poverty economies, from socialism’s “benevolent” allocation approach, to feudalism, to prehistoric self-provision. The surpassing prosperity of market-respecting economies, extending even into the lower economic classes (Rector 1998; Samuelson 1967, pp. 118–19; U.S. Dept. of Commerce 2007, pp. 6, 10–11), is well documented (Blanchard 1997, pp. 528–40; Johansson 2004, p. 72; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2010; Samuelson 1967, p. 792), not that such support is necessary given direct observation of comparative results over the past century. The OECD does find an inverse relation between the size of a nation’s government sector, relative to gross domestic product, and economic growth rate: \( r = -0.52 \) (2010). Most of the world’s governments have thus come to sanction the presence of free-market institutions for benefit to the greater good.

Does this article’s argument conflate the micro-level marketing concept with the aggregate perspective of market macroeconomics? As I show subsequently, no, but marketing’s acceptance of a customer orientation clearly parallels the genius of a free-market, free-enterprise, capitalist economic system, in which marketing has a central role as well. What a free-market economy does so beautifully—utilizing marketing, in fact—is seize upon a basic human weakness, self-interest or so-called “greed,” and convert it into a societal strength. Free-market capitalism literally exploits the profit motive—selfishness, avarice, the desire for personal gain, or whatever one pejoratively calls this primal part of human nature, which could also be called natural ambition—and translates, actually sublimates, it into a mechanism that produces some highly desirable societal outcomes, namely, (1) satisfaction of human (i.e., customer) needs and wants and (2) economic efficiency. No matter how familiar already, even if not appreciated enough throughout U.S. and world society, Figure 1 reduces the process to its essentials: Private sector marketing, which is allowed to operate in a free-market system, features the profit motive. That is, the marketer’s defined purpose of achieving objectives generally translates into profit seeking in the for-profit sector; naturally. Profit is literally the difference between revenue and expenses, between sales and costs. Anything that increases that spread through either boosting sales or restraining costs contributes to profit. Sales are best generated by satisfying, not dissatisfying, customer (or human) needs and wants. And keeping costs low is just a simplified way of saying using resources efficiently.

QED. Great. Isn’t it pleasant how things work out so perfectly? Not perfectly, of course, because no known human activity is perfect, but there is a strong, natural tendency for self-interested marketing activity to enhance the common good by producing the two crucial economic and societal benefits as depicted. Marketing’s chief focus is the top line or upper sequence: the customer need/want satisfaction instrumental function. (The two sequences together are the domain of business, which subsumes marketing.)

Little of the exposition so far is a new idea, really, though it is worthwhile to reprise it in this new packaging, based on reportorial evidence to appear. The central idea is more than 235 years old. Readers may recognize Figure 1 and the accompanying text as an update of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand.” The Scottish philosopher said it eloquently and timelessly:

The person who intends only his own gain is led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention…. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it (Smith [1776] 1937, p. 423).

Again, without denying that marketers also prefer “efficient use of resources,” the upper connection in Figure 1 is the primary role of marketing. Marketing, so understood, is actually the central mechanism of a free-market economy. It is the usual and normal relationship between producers and consumers in a free-market or capitalist economy. So if the figure captures Smith’s classic invisible hand, market-
ing would be no less than the hand’s index finger. Or, perhaps more accurately, marketing’s significance can be thought of as the index finger and opposable thumb combined within the invisible hand metaphor. It is that vital.

Why not swindling or cheating as the typical relationship between producers and consumers in capitalism, as critics of the system suspect? Because nearly all businesses depend on repeat customers, not to mention the value of favorable word of mouth. The one-transaction business model is rare in most product categories (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987, pp. 12–14; Macneil 1980, p. 60).

To be sure, the wondrous automatic tendency for self-interested behavior to produce common societal benefit is not a result of human economic activity per se. Instead, it results from human economic activity organized in a particular way: the free-market system. The diametrically contrary system—that is, the state ownership, central planning, socialist model—is well known to impede the twin objectives because self-interest backfires in that type of system. Explicitly, because the economic actors in a socialist system are human, they are motivated by self-interest. But that natural tendency—because of a perverse system of economic organization, especially the incentives—operates to subvert customer satisfaction and efficiency under socialism. In short, first, the absence of competition in a state monopoly almost totally undermines the need to provide a high level of customer satisfaction (Campbell 1966, pp. 152, 161). All but the youngest readers will recall how notorious the socialist countries were for poor product quality, manifested in an inability to sell manufactured goods in world markets. Alternatively and plainly expressed, the decisions of central planners about what goods and services to make available are less likely to match consumer preferences as is done in the consumer sovereignty paradigm of a market- (and marketing-) based economy. Reduced to its essence in this way, the advantage of free-market incentives is hardly a radical insight. More people should have come to understand it. Again, most public policy makers worldwide now seem to, though backsliding sometimes occurs in the form of excessive regulation.

Second, common ownership of the means of production likewise provides less incentive to husband those resources than private ownership does (Blanchard 1997, p. 534; Campbell 1966, pp. 67–78, 150–151; Samuelson 1967, pp. 613, 615). In the U.S. case, for analytic example, total ownership of a productive asset motivates frugality and care far more than ownership of a one-three-hundred-millionth share of the same asset would. Sustainability has been an intrinsic theme of capitalism and its marketing ingredient all along, somewhat under the radar.

One corollary to note is the means–end reversal between the societal/macro/policy and marketer/micro perspectives in the free-market model. For the marketer, customer satisfaction is only the means to the end, typically profit in the private sector. From the perspective of a society that allows the operation of the free market, tolerating private pursuit of profit is the means of inducing fulfillment of societal aims such as satisfaction of customer needs. Thus, means and ends are reversed between the two levels of aggregation. But because the two terms of trade are each essential from both perspectives, individual aims and society tend to coexist and function most harmoniously in a market-based socioeconomic system—as demonstrated vividly through the collapse of socialism about two decades ago.

Questions, and Answers

If marketing is so wonderful, so preoccupied with customer dedication, the layman and student may wonder why we as consumers are so often dissatisfied. This may be a suitable venue for dispatching that needless conundrum with a comprehensive answer.

1. Scarcity: the basic economic problem of unlimited wants and limited resources. Scarcity, the very impetus for the science of economics, implies that the marketer cannot even try to maximize customer satisfaction—which would mean giving away all products for free and would be unsustainable largesse or charity. Accordingly, any deviation from maximum satisfaction leaves a customer, such as a consumer, dissatisfied to some degree. Naturally, consumers tend to focus on the salient residual dissatisfaction rather than whatever high level of satisfaction also may have been delivered by marketing. Satisfaction, yes; absolute satisfaction, not possible.

2. Marketer deficiency or error. As acknowledged previously, marketers are human and imperfect. Sometimes, despite their diligent efforts to satisfy customers, they fail short. Of course, largely because of the multitude of changing consumer needs and wants, the task resembles one of hitting a blizzard of moving targets, so we probably should not judge too harshly marketing’s imperfect performance. Think Space Invaders to the nth power or the air battle scenes in Independence Day. (Contrary to the old Vance Packard [1958, pp. 202–207] or Marshall McLuhan [1966] type caricature, Invasion of the Body Snatchers is not a fair metaphor.) Even with advances in mass customization enabled by technology, to expect marketing practice to do much better than it already does at the task of accommodating myriad shifting preferences would indeed be science fiction.

3. Consumer deficiency or error. The average education attainment level in the United States, for example, is high school; the mean highest grade completed is 12th (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Recent surveys report that 25%–50% of Americans read no books during the preceding year (Fram 2007; National Endowment for the Arts 2004, p. 4). The median IQ among the consumer population is, by definition, 100—so half the population registers with double digits in that regard. Inevitably, therefore, there will be many occasions when marketers do a fine job of providing want-satisfying products, but consumers themselves are just too incompetent to select and acquire the right ones. If this be marketing heresy against the tradition of “the customer is always right,” so be it. (The
position does not contest consumer sovereignty, however. The sovereign consumer is not necessarily correct, objectively or even subjectively, but consumer sovereignty does mean that the consumer has the right to be right or wrong.)

4. Government deficiency or error. In some cases, even many cases, marketers and consumers may be capable of consuming mutually agreeable transactions—if only government would leave them alone. A classic example of purported unwise regulatory interference is the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s proclivity to delay approval of new miracle drugs for years, even after they are available in highly regulated Western Europe (National Center for Policy Analysis 2003; The Wall Street Journal 2011; similar criticism would apply to the opposite error of premature approval). Another is the elevated retail price of gasoline in many countries because of heavy taxation. This is not to be construed as an argument for laissez-faire economics or denial that regulation of commerce sometimes is too lax. The issue of externalities is addressed subsequently.

5. Nonmarketing. There are some businesses out there that do not practice marketing (i.e., the customer satisfaction ideal) at all. They engage in cheating, swindling, deceiving, or cynically manipulating customers in some way and, naturally, this produces dissatisfaction. (This phenomenon is distinct from option 2, which represents the failed but genuine attempt to deliver customer satisfaction.) Applying this orientation can be considered commerce, exchange, selling, or “business”—as well as cheating, swindling, and so on—but it is not marketing, by definition, because it does not employ customer satisfaction as the means. There is probably less of this type of activity than is commonly believed because intentionally dissatisfying customers is generally a losing strategy. As bears repeating, most businesses rely on repeat customers to stay in business, so disregard of customers is usually irrational. This motivation would even apply to a private sector monopolist because if customer dissatisfaction is extreme enough, potential outcomes include adverse government regulation or total withdrawal from the relationship by the customer in favor of either self-provision or abstention.

So is the marketing definition and essence ultimately contingent on the presence of a particular motive? What if a vendor is trying to swindle but accidentally satisfies? A fair ontological question, and the answer depends on “in order to,” as in “in order to accomplish objectives,” which does imply motivation. Likewise with “for” in the 2007 AMA definition. Given literal reading of either the prevailing consensus or the official definition, then, as well as the earlier and necessary qualification of “trying,” the specified ill-motivated accident would be ruled out of the definitional domain.

In summary, abundant consumer dissatisfaction is the natural order of things, along with abundant satisfaction, despite the best efforts of marketing practice. This reality is reflected in the mixed aggregate U.S. consumer satisfaction levels reported in some omnibus national assessments (American Customer Satisfaction Index: Fornell et al. 1996; Index of Consumer Sentiment Toward Marketing: Gaski 2008; Gaski and Etzel 2005). Not to overstated any criticism of marketing as an institution, note that the former study does support generally satisfied U.S. consumers (American Customer Satisfaction Index [ACSI] 2011), and the latter reports secular improvement in the state of U.S. consumer sentiment toward the output of marketing. And, again, part of any measured collective dissatisfaction must result from nonmarketing factors, as discussed previously.

### Defending Marketing

To witness the unwarranted and even ignorant criticism the field of marketing practice often receives from outsiders is so routine that one becomes inured. A small sampling, which itself approaches a litany and is sufficient for the purpose, follows. First, some broad-gauge classics:

Marketing is unethical. For the past 6000 years the field of marketing has been thought of as made up of fast-buck artists, conmen, wheeler-dealers, and shoddy-goods distributors. Too many of us have been “taken” by the tout or con-man; and all of us at times have been prodded into buying all sorts of “things” we really did not need, and which we found later on we did not even want…. [M]arketers in the United States create an image of vulgar hucksters. (Farmer 1967, pp. 1, 3)

Parents who ask their children to tell the truth must explain that, of course, a certain cereal will not transform them into great athletes, as the highly paid announcer says, nor will the drug mentioned really cure hemorrhoids, or cancer, or arthritis. The announcer is really lying…. Somehow the parent must explain that … a huge industry can be based on falsity, exaggeration, and distortion. (Skornia 1965, p. 158)

[W]e are brainwashed by our economic system until we end up in a tomb beneath a pyramid of time payments, mortgages, preposterous gadgetry, playthings that divert our attention from the sheer idiocy of the charade. (Hayden 1963, p. 24)

Then comes a barrage of defamatory specifics, alleging that marketing is guilty of

- defective, unsafe, and deceptive products;
- misleading one-sided communications, excessive hype, pushy promotion and advertising;
- exploitative pricing and promotional tactics;
- abusive marketing practices, shoddy practices, “in-your-face” attitude; and
- predatory competition, protection of monopoly.

Furthermore, presumed of marketing:

- Questionable pricing tactics leave the buyer embittered and resentful.
- Promotion is heavy handed.
- Advertising “trick[s]” a customer into trying a product.
- Marketing [causes] noise pollution, customer irritation, excessive consumption, unhealthy lifestyles. It wastes resources and alienates customers.
- Products are obsolete while still perfectly functional.
- Products are inferior. [To what? Apparently other marketers provide superior products.]

In fact, and maybe the only surprise here, these criticisms are not all from outsiders. The latter sets of entries, the nonattributed ones (though all direct quotes), come from leading marketing scholars. The import: In light of the preceding content on definition, it now becomes apparent that these criticisms do not apply to marketing at all, because they do not relate to a customer orientation—that is, marketing’s salutary fixation on satisfying customers as a means of doing business. The criticism instead addresses nonmarketing: practices such as swindling, cheating,
Integrative Reflection

At this point, reliance on our particular and strict definition of marketing may appear to become an issue. Any content can be excluded from a conceptual domain if the definitional specification is narrow and idiosyncratic enough. Is this such a case? Not everyone defines marketing as precisely as is done here. If marketing were defined more broadly, the itemized objections could indeed target the business function known as marketing. Have we merely defined away the criticism or its legitimacy?

Because the AMA imprimatur attached to some of the progenitors of the exchange-via-satisfaction concept and, fortunately, we have not made it up. The definition was not lifted from obscurity. It was literally filtrated from the most prominent extant definitions, including those officially sanctioned by the AMA. As such, it captures the quintessence of prevailing understanding and can be considered, therefore, the consensus definition of marketing. And if the AMA is not entitled to define the word “marketing” authoritatively, who is? Perhaps the only approach to devising a marketing definition rivaling or superior to the AMA’s long-term, conscientious, serial efforts would be the consensus derivation method—true a market-based method—demonstrated here. Meaning does conform to consensus of authoritative acceptance in lexicography, after all.

Yet one semantic and lexicographic anomaly may still appear to be an inconsistency: If the consensus conceptual definition of marketing is so readily accepted in this discussion, why not the same latitude and treatment for the alleged consensus misuse of the word “marketing”? A distillation of formal academic definitions has been achieved here, but the broader de facto interpretation inclusive of all selling, exchange, commerce, swindling, and so on, may be even more widely used and accepted, even in the scientific literature, as excerpted here previously. If meaning follows usage, a neo—“broadened” definition of marketing would seem to have been established, superseding the formal one. Why not recognize and allow it? What basis is there to disqualify “marketing equals exchange” as definition?

For three good, objective reasons, the answer is the answer. First, if we equate marketing with exchange (or transaction/commerce/selling), then there are two words, at least, for the concept of exchange, but no word for the concept of exchange through customer satisfaction. That is inefficient and incoherent nomenclature. We need a word for the exchange-via-satisfaction concept and, fortunately, we have one: marketing.

Yes, sometimes meaning follows usage—sometimes rationally and productively, sometimes debasively. And we can decide for ourselves which descriptor applies best to the equating of marketing with all commerce, including swindling, cheating, deceiving, manipulating, and so forth. Also signified is that, even if it were not true that the real definition of marketing isolates customer satisfaction as the necessary instrument, it should do so.

Second, as mentioned previously, there are the decades of AMA imprimatur attached to some of the progenitors of the simple, but strict and grounded, definition developed here. In respect of that history, a brief digression is now in order:

About 50 years ago, before the referenced decades, a consensus definition would have equated marketing with exchange or commerce. The AMA definition of that era was simply “the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer or user” (AMA 1960, p. 15). But with the invention, or realization, of the marketing concept (Keith 1960; McKitterick 1957), a need arose for a term to apply specifically to the transaction-via-satisfaction phenomenon. Thus, the evolution of the modern consensus definition of marketing as revealed. So the originators of the marketing concept, ipso facto, also set in motion proper definition of the concept of marketing. In retrospect, that should not seem unnatural.

Finally, the consensus definition disclosed in the preceding sections results from multiple independent occurrences of formal definition process. The rejected looser “definition” is only an implied definition growing from careless usage. Legitimate linguistic effort earns extra credit.

Summary Reflection

Is it fair to label frontline scholars as misguided or wrong just because they accept a different definition of marketing than the precise one elaborated in this piece? Actually, the noncontroversial allegation is merely that some scholars are fallible, as witnessed by the one pivotal mistake exposed and corrected throughout. The main point, congruent with all analytic evidence supplied, is that deviating grossly from that consensus definition of marketing, or even the very similar official ones, is not reasonable because by equating with exchange, in effect, it allows slippage of dissimilar phenomena into the conceptual space of the definiendum. Such renegade taxonomy is not admissible. This anti-scientific conduct is especially dysfunctional considering the need for marketing—the field of study—to develop a formal language system (Hunt 1991, pp. 153–55) as opposed to our sometimes too casual and sloppy usage. Teas and Palan (1997) portray the damage done to theory by a poor language system, definitional ambiguity in particular. Frankly, the way the meaning of “marketing” has been abused is unsatisfactory even for a natural language system.

So how can wider conceptual admissibility and categorically “slippage” be abided for terms such as exchange, transaction, and commerce, which could permit swindling, cheating, and so on, within their shared domain? Parallel to the initial discussion, to be completely literal, it is actually attempted exchange.) Answer: Some concepts simply represent broader categories. From the consensus definition, though, marketing is not of that type. Specifically, exchange/transaction is the (polythetic) supra-category, with marketing one (monothetic) subset and swindling/cheating another.

A Composite Issue of Marketing, Society, and Public Policy

Now, what of market failure in the form of negative externalities? Marketers may do a good job of satisfying customers in any particular case, but the process of so doing...
The Practical Problem

Marketing managers are experts at satisfying customers and earning a profit (or achieving whatever nonprofit organizational objectives they may have, as we attend to the now-tedious disclaimer a final time). Those managers are not experts at discerning what course of action would best fulfill the greater public interest. To impose that task on them is therefore likely to lead to bad decisions, which, paradoxically, would undermine the public interest or social responsibility that such a naive ideal purports to serve. Defining the public interest, and then crafting it into regulation, is what our elected and appointed representatives are hired to do.

But might wise and virtuous, possibly AMA-member, marketing managers actually do a better job of this? Yes, they might. It is possible that those untrained in a complex task will achieve competent performance at the task, in the sense that anything is possible. This trivial realization, though, is insufficient basis for such a policy direction.

Ironically, once again, the best way for marketing/business to attend to its social responsibility may be by ignoring considerations of social responsibility, leaving that
matter to more appropriate arbiters, such as the public and its duly authorized representatives. If and when marketing practice deviates meaningfully from societal preference, corrective instructions are likely to follow by way of established mechanisms including regulation or public pressure in the market. If not, that is society’s fault.

Is this sanguine trust in regulation a contradiction of the ongoing skepticism about bureaucratic economic control? Hardly. Advocated is sensibly sized and focused government, not no government, and certainly not private interests presuming to supplant government by arrogating public policy choices to themselves.

A qualifier. To the lingering question of using social responsibility as a business tactic to enhance profits, typically through either favorable image impact or the forestalling of cost-imposing regulation: No contest is put forth from this quarter, and there is no incompatibility with the foregoing. Already conceded is the expertise of marketing managers at identifying what is likely to be profitable. Therefore, attempting to serve the public or societal interest merely as a tactic, as a means of advancing self-interest, should be very likely to yield good decisions from the societal perspective. This phenomenon is really nothing more than an exhibition of conventional marketing strategy: offering a new product, ostensibly “socially responsible” behavior, to the market segment that values it.

But because marketers are unschooled and not equipped when it comes to macro-altruism or knowing the public interest for its own sake, such an alternative pursuit, although well-intended, can be expected to boomerang and subvert the public interest. The critical difference is the highly efficient business motivator of self-interest. A truly empirical resolution of this type of proposition may be intractable, but twentieth-century history verifies the dismal aggregate record of economic altruism or benevolence.

As to the related micro-level question of whether socially responsible business/marketing behavior really is good business—that is, more profitable—scientific findings are all over the map (Luo and Bhattacharya 2009; McWilliams and Siegel 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). A reason may be the inability to separate the heterogeneous independent variables of self-interested social responsibility and altruistic social responsibility.

**Summary Reflection**

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) norm, manifested in our field as the “societal marketing concept” (SMC), has been around for decades (Feldman 1971; Kotler 1972, p. 26). The motivation of its advocates is conspicuously noble. However, spirited academic debate, as here, should not be suppressed. The explicit nature of the argument is that CSR/SMC requires both near-omniscience and de facto, if inadvertent, economic dictatorship. The prevalence of the CSR position in our literature and the scarcity of real challenges to it (Hunt 2006; Levitt 1958) may be the projection of a closed-minded orthodoxy infecting the marketing field’s culture. Those rare voices that expose weakness in CSR/SMC are entitled to be heard, at least occasionally. If the societal marketing concept qua CSR can be decoded as a matter of less than meets the eye, then a large fraction of chronic public criticism of marketing is likewise debunked as fatuous and can be neutralized, appropriately. In turn, much cavil against free-market capitalism is also rendered inert.

To those who snipe at marketing unreasonably, whether on CSR/SMC grounds or otherwise: Let marketing be marketing. To the extent that marketing needs improvement, compelling its managers to double as amateur public policy meddlers or social engineers is not it. To guide societal resource allocation, a more dependable and consistent force than subjective caprice is needed. That force is self-interest, constrained by democratic regulation, of course. So the societal interest is likely discernible after all, if the marketer defers to market signals of profit incentive within the bounds of law.

All this retort just for asking marketing to do the right thing? Review of the argument justifies and explains why the ethereal CSR/SMC aspiration hinges hopelessly on “right.” Altruism may be an admirable impulse, but it is not necessarily helpful when clumsily jammed into the gears of the market system.

To encapsulate, if implementing the SMC would indeed reduce societal welfare, then its advocacy indicates under-appreciation that marketing’s performance is probably near the practical optimum already, by virtue of doing what it knows best (which is not an extreme hypothesis in such a competitive environment). Conversely, if the SMC/CSR side is correct that unqualified marketer guesses can reliably divine the optimal public interest, it is incumbent on that camp to disclose by what preternatural or mystical mechanism such an outcome occurs. Since the beginning of the SMC/CSR movement, that disclosure has been absent.

Returning to the exemplary pollution externality dilemma, many readers will surely have firsthand memory that environmental degradation in the socialist world—when there was a socialist world—was characteristically far worse than in the free, and free-market, national societies on this planet. The same can be said of product quality and living standards almost universally. Yet the inverted relative decibel level of free-market-directed criticism (e.g., Sen 1985) dramatizes the magnitude of injustice that free-market institutions, such as marketing, have borne for too long. Hence, this reaction.

**Conclusion**

In the classic Twilight Zone episode, the titular phrase “To Serve Man” served up fatal misunderstanding because of the difference between idiomatic meanings of a single word. (Said to actor Lloyd Bochner: “It’s a cookbook.” Remember?) No such exotic meaning or drama applies to the same expression in this work’s title. Here, it is straightforward. Contrary to some stale calumny by marketing’s critics, consumers are not on the menu. Instead, they have a good seat at the table. Marketing is inherently driven to serve mankind in the best sense, in accord with the primary dictionary definition of “serve” as “to work for … in the service of” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1959, p. 1149).

Marketing does this not out of charity, benevolence, or duty ethics, but out of self-interest. More than two hundred years of appreciation for philosopher Adam Smith ([1776] 1936), as well as the past hundred years of world history, teach us not to be too surprised that the marketing and free-market way works out pretty well from the societal
perspective. To illustrate, readers also will recall some depredations of nonmarket regimes that have far surpassed our highlighted pollution and living standard complaints in terms of catastrophic impact on humanity. Mass murder of innocent civilians (Conquest 1986, pp. 299–307) would be the pertinent imagery. Market-based systems, for all their imperfections, which now may seem relatively minor, offer no historical scandals of comparable scale (Dunn [1886] 2006, pp. 15–16). A skeptic’s attempt to conjure up counterexamples should vividly confirm. Yes, by all means, let us compare annoying advertising jingles to genocide. Or to nominate Western European mixed economies, in which virtually all the national wealth is originated by the private sector, for favorable comparison because they sometimes label themselves “socialist” would be totally fraudulent.

Would the mass sale of tobacco products be a graver example than irritating advertising methods? Actually, in a free economy such as the United States, tobacco is demanded by the market and approved by the democratic process of public regulation (as ratified by taxation). This is the epitome of societal preference enactment through economic democracy. If this is not serving man, what is? If there are stronger societal signals than the market and law combined, what are they? So if one objects to tobacco marketing, the complaint is with mass-market demand, the public, and government, not private marketers who defer to the public will in this regard. In other words, the objection applies to the broader institutions of economic democracy and freedom. And unless Cuban cigars are prohibited in Cuba, this putative criticism does not even uniquely indict free-market marketing.

Some may consider tobacco marketing just plain unethical. Not to be ignored, however, is de facto rebuttal in the form of most world societies having vetoed that view and declaring the opposite by consensus, through their consumer markets, hired governments, or both. Once again, the complaint would be with society, not marketing. If a society deems a practice unethical, it has the tools available to prohibit or shun it. This is not done with tobacco.

Would the malignant institution of slavery be a more valid and significant counterexample of the societal performance question? For the record, although pre-twentieth-century history may be of limited relevance to this comparative systems issue, incalculably more slavery has been practiced by despotic governments throughout world history than by private interests (Rodriguez 1997, pp. xiii–xxiii). Considered in a historical time frame, private slavery was eradicated very soon after modern free-market societies emerged.

To reinforce, any reader who is now counterarguing the larger point should compile a catalog of favorite problems and failures of market capitalism, especially American free enterprise, and then do the same for the opposite type of system, one that practices public sector allocation by fiat instead of private enterprise markets. More than likely, as the latter list will demonstrate monumental crimes against mankind—including premeditated slaughter and starvation of a hundred million or more in Russia, China, and elsewhere during the past century, often to implement economic rather than political policies (Campbell 1966, p. 24; Conquest 1986)—any argument will be preempted while the doctrine of moral relativism also takes a hit.

### Integrative Reflection

This attention to the dystopian results of antemarket central governance is not gratuitous. Part of the social and humane value of the free-market(ing) system is comparative. The free or capitalist order, inherently incorporating marketing, spares society from the extreme pathologies that regularly afflict the alternative system of centralized power.

What, marketing prevents genocide? The serious lesson is that marketing, among its contributions to elevating human welfare, is almost inescapably integral to the politico-economic system that has not been known to commit such atrocities. The 20 million or so who perished during Soviet collectivization of agriculture, for example, would likely have strong opinions on the relative merits of command and market-based economies, if only we could poll them.

Because of marketing’s close connection with the free-market system, its societal implications have always been further reaching than has been popularly recognized. To hypothesize a causal route, ascribe the propitious reality accompanying free markets to an economic and social order guided by individual decisions in the marketplace that necessarily respect others’ welfare, rather than by autocratic command. Marketing literally is one side of at least a large fraction of those decentralized social relations. That is how marketing is a key piece in the socioeconomic bulwark against the macro pathologies witnessed historically in some nonmarket parts of the world—and another illustration of how marketing remains so unjustly underappreciated. If democratic capitalism deserves some comparative credit for not perpetrating the mass crimes of its rival systems over the past century, its major components, including marketing, rightfully share some reflected credit.

Is a distinction to be made between the economic order and political system? The compatibility between market-based economics and political liberty (as well as between their antitheses, socialism and dictatorship) is visibly demonstrated, with very few exceptions, contemporarily and historically. Although a nonmarket macroeconomic structure is clearly not the same as an autocratic national administration, the two are close cousins, generally linked in symbiosis, because they both rely on the same central authoritarian or totalitarian ruling power base. The freedom of free markets and private decentralized marketing is incompatible with both central economic planning in particular and centralized social power in general. China’s attempt to mix oil and water is a work in progress, with final results yet to be determined.

### Summary Reflection

Even if the content of this opus were already known by all readers, which is unlikely considering the quotes and citations collected, provision of that subject matter in this vehicle still would add value. A comprehensive, integrated presentation of sharpened conceptual ammunition for the purpose of overcoming damaging misconceptions about one particular business function could be a useful didactic tool. It should be especially helpful in defense of a field of study and practice, marketing, that itself has served as a longtime rhetorical punching bag among the ill-informed in
the academy (Farmer 1967; Galbraith 1958; McLuhan 1953; and the many quoted but unnamed here), polity (see almost any daily news source; e.g., Catan and Efrati 2011; Pace 2011), and society (e.g., Packard 1958). One aim this whole contrarian excursion does not aspire to is the chimera of evenhandedness. Instead, it supplies “equal time,” a gap-filling counterweight and answer to reams of overwrought antimarketing disinformation.

Unfortunately, we now know that some misguided attacks on marketing come from within the field, which highlights a special need for this type of device. Quoting one JPP&M reviewer’s insight: “This reviewer is unaware of any other academic discipline whose members think so poorly of the value of their discipline, at least as reflected in the discipline’s journals.” CSR/SMC thinking in particular has rarely, if ever, been called to account and required to answer the kind of questions raised here. A favorable review of the institution of marketing is not altogether unprecedented (Hunt and Morgan 1995, pp. 8–10; Wilkie and Moore 1999), but apparently, a refresher of this very different sort is still needed. The cited misplaced criticism from high-echelon scholars validates the knowledge-restoration role of this article.

Notwithstanding any impression that knowledge advances inexorably, mass knowledge loss is an authenticated phenomenon (Gaski 2013). Even in this composition, we encounter quotations suggesting that truly internalized knowledge of the definition of the word “marketing” has been widely lost. With that problem recognized, an implication is that many adverse beliefs about a misconstrued “marketing” are thereby revealed as fallacious, incoherent, and untenable because they are based on misdefinition and false premises. Much self-styled marketing criticism, therefore, is really no such thing, but rather criticism of nonmarketing. Subtracting such false “knowledge” and restoring some lost knowledge constitute a dual track among the main unconventional goals of this exercise, including a dose of “setting the record straight,” toward the very conventional scientific objective of knowledge enhancement.

For emphasis: Because marketing is the central mechanism in the economic system that has delivered more prosperity and liberty for more of the world’s people than any other system ever devised, marketing itself therefore becomes one of the greatest forces for the common good in human history. Given that, and in the wake of the AMA’s 75th anniversary, perhaps a call for the association membership to intensify the celebration of our field is in order. The author will buy the first round.

References


AMA, Committee on Definitions (1960), Marketing Definitions: A Glossary of Marketing Terms. Chicago: AMA.


Gaski, Fred (2013). JPP&M reviewer’s insight: “This reviewer is unaware of any other academic discipline whose members think so poorly of the value of their discipline, at least as reflected in the discipline’s journals.”

Harper & Row.


Dictionary of Marketing Terms

The Economic Effects of Advertising

The American Customer Satisfaction Index: Nature, Purpose, and Findings

The American Customer Satisfaction Index: Nature, Purpose, and Findings

One in Four Read No Books Last Year


