The Legacy of Charles C. Slater

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Abstract
At 39 years of age, Dr. Charles C. Slater (Chuck) returned from industry to academic scholarship. In the next 15 years, until he finally succumbed to cancer in 1978, he accomplished what few scholars have in their lifetimes—the institutionalization of a branch of study. The Macromarketing Society, 30 years of the Journal of Macromarketing, and 34 years of the Macromarketing Conferences and their progeny all emerged as a result of his ability to excite other scholars to study and develop this field that he envisioned. He was a unique combination of visionary, enabler, and adventurer whose limitations even helped insure his legacy.

Keywords
macromarketing, Slater, marketing, economic development, models, history

“He [Slater] was a professor that made a difference and his impact on macromarketing thought is immeasurable. Macromarketing is his major legacy.”

(Chuck Goeldner, Professor of Marketing, University of Colorado)

Formative Years*
His lineage, the hard knocks of the depression, and World War II strongly molded Chuck’s unique abilities and drive. Chuck Slater was born July 29, 1924 in Denver, Colorado into a middle class family. His only sibling, Robert, was 15 months older. His father was an inventor with 27 patents, an entrepreneur, a promoter, and a consummate salesperson. He moved in and out of a long string of ventures, partnerships and sales/advertising jobs. For example, a number of the patents led to a successful but ahead of its time room air conditioner business. His father often had two or three ventures going including taking advantage of the area’s population expansion prior to the Great Depression. Descended from Irish and Scottish stock, his father only completed the eighth grade due to the Depression of 1896 and was burdened from childhood with chronic osteomyelitis, a bone disease which throughout his life periodically hospitalized him for weeks at a time making it hard to sustain both startups and employment. Never-the-less, by the inception of the Great Depression in the fall of 1929, the Slater family owned a single family home in an attractive Denver development.

Then when Chuck was 5½, his mother suddenly died in January 1930. The economy was in full freefall with massive unemployment causing the family home to be foreclosed June 1930. For the boys, childhood innocence was replaced by the harsh reality of family, financial, and sustenance instability. Their father immediately took the boys on a three month tour of towns in the Rockies while he sought work and conjured up what income he could from his inventive mind. For example, he created a “Trade at Home” program where merchants would give out coupons to customers to buy U.S. made goods, thereby winning a chance for prizes. They stayed in boarding houses offering one or two meals a day with young Robert and Chuck often left to their own devices. The three returned to Denver in September where the boys were placed in temporary, crowded foster homes while their father continued to try to eke out an existence for his family.

After three years, Chuck’s father moved the family to Chicago where they stayed with financially stressed maternal uncles. The family moved to Indianapolis three years later where the boys were placed in foster homes and low-end boarding houses. By June 1938, Chuck had completed 8th grade. During this period his father’s continued severe health problems and hospitalizations caused the Indianapolis Child Welfare Agency to schedule the brothers for the county orphanage. However, their father rallied and took the boys back to Chicago, where they settled into a rented single room. His father was almost immediately hospitalized. In order to stay out of the Cook County orphanage and allow Chuck to enroll in high school, Robert dropped out of school to seek work and help support the family through a succession of delivery, clerking, and factory assembly jobs. Chuck completed high school in three years. Under the mentorship of Alma Morgan, his art

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* This section is derived from interviews with Chuck’s brother, Robert Slater, and Chuck’s children, Steven Slater and Ellen Taylor

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teacher, his drawing and painting skills excelled, and he received 4 year scholarship offers from the Chicago Art Institute and the University of Chicago. He attended the latter for three quarters.

The war draft was being aggressively expanded in 1942 as Chuck approached 18, and thus, he enlisted in an Army program which promised two years of college followed by officers training. He was stationed at Grinnell College in Iowa where he met and married his wife, Emma Despres. However, after one year the need for troops closed the program and thrust him into accelerated basic infantry training with assignment to the 32nd Division, 320 Combat Team Regiment. He was deployed July 1944 to Normandy, one month after “D” Day and immediately faced combat against the occupying Nazi troops. He was part of the beachhead breakout through the French Hedgerow Country, was trapped behind German lines for two weeks in the Ardennes area, and then fought across the southern Netherlands and northern Germany to meet the Russians at the Elbe River at the close of the European war. What he experienced is reflected in the fact that of the 250 soldiers in his infantry company that landed in Normandy, 6 (including Chuck) were still standing at the Elbe River. In May 1945 he was promoted to Second Lieutenant and assigned to the reorganized 320th Regiment in preparation for the invasion of Japan. The war ended with Chuck standing on the wharf in San Francisco waiting to embark.

His brother Robert, then an Air Force officer in the Pacific, again stepped into Chuck’s life by helping him overcome what is now called Combat Stress Syndrome, encouraging him to return to college, and dividing his savings between them. After the war, Robert earned the BS and JD degrees from the University of Chicago. During the past 25 years, he practiced law in the New York Wall Street community. He is a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel.

Certainly as an adult Chuck had a strong interest in helping the least well off in the world as well as nerve, salesmanship, entrepreneurial spirit, and drive. Although many of these traits were inherited, they were also shaped by his experiences during the depression and WWII. He had lived and seen firsthand human misery, deprivation, carnage, and loss.

Rapid Rise

The next phase of his life shows an urgency to achieve. Rather than returning to the University of Chicago, he turned to Northwestern University for all his degrees. In January 1947, aided by the GI Bill, he enrolled at Northwestern and completed the BS in Business Administration with a major in advertising in 1949. He went directly on to complete an MA in Economics in 1954 and a PhD in Economics in 1956. His dissertation was on marketing in the baking industry. While in graduate school, he was also an assistant professor at Loyola University of Chicago (1950–1955) and while completing his dissertation, took a position as vice president and director of Marketing, Supermarket Food Division, Omar Inc. in Omaha, Nebraska (1955–1958). Arthur D. Little consulting made him Head of their Consumer Marketing Section in 1958 where he and his team worked mainly with the food industry. Although he became close friends with retired General James Gavin (CEO), he was increasingly uncomfortable with the fact that his work was not providing broad social benefit. Thus, he resigned in 1963 to pursue academic research. In 15 years, he ascended from honing his considerable intellect by earning three degrees to being a managing consultant in a leading consulting firm. In the end, he found consulting limited his ability to explore the greater good.

Refocus on What Mattered

Based on his experience in the food industry and two articles he wrote in the Journal of Marketing, “Picking the most Profitable Market Share Objective” (Slater 1960) and “Decision Theory and Marketing Management” (Buzzell and Slater 1962), Michigan State University (MSU) made him a Full Professor of Marketing. Other than one additional article in the Harvard Business Review, “Markets in Motion” (Mainer and Slater 1964), his motivation shifted from industry to society at a time when marketing scholarship was becoming even more concentrated on the objectives of the firm. Paradoxically, he joined a marketing department that included the leader of the managerial movement, Professor E. Jerome McCarthy. Based on his belief that marketing could and should be used for social good beyond firm profit maximization, he visualized marketing as a means of achieving humanistic goals, especially in developing societies.

His colleague, Professor William Lazer, another leading marketing scholar, described him as creative, optimistic, friendly, respected, and productive. He was always full of interesting ideas and kept pushing the envelope. Lazer recalls his comment “Another good idea will kill me!” However, he did not have common scholarly interests with faculty in his department, with the exception of Professor Donald Taylor who advised him on his research projects.

By 1964, Slater had obtained the first of two large United States Agency for International Development (USAID) grants to study the role of marketing in economic development in Latin America. The Latin American Food Marketing Study and the subsequent Latin American Market Planning Center provided platforms for his work through 1968 while at MSU. In 1964, research commenced in Puerto Rico to develop channel mapping survey methods that could be tested against reasonably accurate existing data. Then in 1966, the team was split to study the food supply systems of La Paz, Bolivia and Recife, Brazil.

Three strongly held convictions guided his projects:

1. Development was a complex interaction of both social and economic forces requiring a multidisciplinary approach. Consequently, he formed a team of faculty experts and doctoral students not only from marketing but
agricultural economics, communications, and systems engineering.

2. Development could only take place if those affected were fully invested in the reforms. Hence, his projects involved host governments as equal partners in the research, funding, and prescriptions. For example, fourteen Brazilian economists were assigned full time and supported by the Brazilian government to work hand in hand with the MSU researchers. Reports and books were printed in English and host country languages.

3. Marketing was an important and neglected catalyst in the development process. His theory of market process guided his research.

Slater (1977, p. 120) framed the developing country problem as follows:

The trend in most underdeveloped societies is for the expanding population in traditional sectors to gradually drift into urban slums and create a proletariat. Meanwhile, the upper income elite continues to consume imported luxuries so that the nation has a high requirement for foreign exchange and limited demand for internal production. Foreign exchange can usually be most easily earned by maintaining labor intensive plantations for export commodities which delay the education and industrialization changes needed for takeoff.

His research approach was to first understand the traditional system of food supply for an area, such as the Northeast of Brazil—a region covering about ¼ of the land mass of Brazil with per capita income of about $100 but where 7 percent of the people earned 50 percent of the income. He did this with the channel mapping methods he and his team developed, which not only measured the flow of all agricultural products from farm gate to urban consumption but surveyed all the types of channel participants in terms of literacy, achievement levels, cooperativeness, fatalism, innovativeness, and mass media access/use. He then created a model of the region with its behavioral characteristics to identify where the greatest physical and psychological barriers existed to increased market participation and where change could most likely reduce those barriers. The model allowed trade-off analysis to show what might happen if alternative interventions or programs were established. This research resulted in two striking and seemingly contradictory conclusions. First, huge amounts of perishable and semiperishable agricultural goods once in the market system spoiled beyond edibility—up to 50 percent. Second, each traditional farmer/channel member in the system generally acted rationally, given their very limited resources and the risks and barriers facing them. Armed with knowledge of these risks and barriers and the propensity of various channel members to accept change, the model pointed to where innovation should be tried and what the likely impact might be. Options ranged from flood and drought insurance to changes in the structure of the food channel such as provision of refrigeration at some points, coordination of purchasing in fairs or fair-like supermarkets, and institution of different transportation modes.

His theory of market process was that if such reforms could be inserted properly, farmers and channel members would have more to gain from supplying higher quality goods versus perpetuating the existing subsistence mode, which had evolved over many generations. This would simultaneously increase farm income and reduce urban food costs. Thus, real income would increase and according to the marginal propensity to consume, expenditure on food and nonfood goods would increase. This would provide incentive for further innovation and the cycle would repeat itself as a multiplier of development.

Slater’s research, disseminated through a series of books, dissertations, Journal of Marketing article (1968), conference proceedings, and doctoral dissertations, became a benchmark among marketing scholars who studied developing and transition economies. His work informed studies by others conducted in Columbia, Indonesia, and transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well his own work in Africa during the 1970s. He had established himself as a research pioneer who brought the issues of economic development and marketing together. A more detailed description of this phase of his work can be found in Nason and White (1981).

Harnessing Systems Models

At MSU, he was well liked by colleagues even though he cut across the grain by expanding the domain of marketing while others were narrowing it to a managerial tool. However, in 1968, he accepted a position at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he faced a surprisingly hostile environment. The Dean of Business at Colorado hired Slater without faculty input to be a Research Professor assigned to work with all departments. Rather than seeing him as a resource, the business faculty resented his salary, super status, and imposition on them and thus voted down an innovative program and courses that he developed. As a result, Slater moved to Africa on another USAID-funded study to give some breathing room and then petitioned for and was granted membership in the Marketing Department. On his return, he was seen as mortal and eventually became well liked, productive, and respected.

As before, Slater assembled multidisciplinary teams of scholars and doctoral students motivated by his visions and ideas to deliver what he alone could not. His thrust was to develop a new generation of general systems simulation models of market processes expanding on those developed for Latin America. The most important features of these models included the following:

1. They were “demand driven” including consumption and investment of consumers, government, and business (domestic and foreign).
2. The household sector was disaggregated into nine demographic/income sectors.
A sales sector was added to include institutions and processes of distribution to link production and household sectors.

The first of four “Dynamic Input/Output Simulation” models (DIOSIM) was built for Kenya (KENSIM). Others followed for Rhodesia (ZIMSIM), the United States (USSIM), and the State of Colorado (COLSIM). Slater envisioned DIOSIM models as useful in informing policy decisions by allowing the use, “trade-off analysis” applied to alternative policy options. Furthermore, impacts on various sectors of the social system resulting from those potential interventions could be investigated. The objective functions of DIOSIM models could also be adjusted to focus on specific problems such as drought management in the COLSIM model and nutritional levels in Lesotho South Africa. He felt while most scholars in the social sciences were splintering the big picture by discipline and subspecialization, that systems models had the potential to refocus on the study of integrated social processes. A more detailed description of this phase of his work can be found in Nason and White (1981).

Who Was This Man?

Charles Slater was a tall and commanding person who filled a room, was the center of attention, and took charge. He was innovative, hard charging, and as Chuck Goeldner, CU Professor, put it “He seemed to have more good ideas in a day than many people have in a lifetime. He was always challenging faculty and PhD students with new ideas, article ideas, dissertation topics, and research projects.” He had an incredible ability to make things happen and adjust on the fly. For example, his first USAID contract called for the study of first Puerto Rico and then Argentina. However, following a military coup in Argentina, all USAID projects were pulled leaving Slater’s team stranded on the eve of deployment. Within months, he somehow got the second phase shifted to Recife, Brazil and La Paz, Bolivia, which entailed the Herculean task of getting USAID, host country governments, the State Department, and local embassies all to sigh off. When the team, minus Slater, reached La Paz, the U.S. Embassy told them in no uncertain terms that they were the boss and not Slater. No research or interviews were to be conducted without their express written consent. Within a week, Slater informed the team to ignore the embassy which never interfered again. John Wish, his first doctoral student at MSU, sums him up—“First and foremost he was a delightful coach, teacher, friend, and salesman/rainmaker.” Lee Dahringer, his last doctoral student at CU, further relates: “As a doctoral student at U of Colorado, I was walking down the hall when Chuck, whom I barely knew and had no courses with, came up and asked ‘would you like to go to Africa?’ Thinking he was joking I said ‘sure.’ Six months later I was on a plane with Chuck to Lesotho, Africa.”

His furtive mind and fascination with the next idea kept him on a treadmill ever trying to run faster. As Chuck Goeldner, Professor at UC, put it, “His limitations and disappointments were that he probably tried to do too much and juggled too many balls in the air at the same time, not carrying all projects to a conclusion. He didn’t always follow through as well as he might have.” Yet, the excitement he generated attracted many scholars to his projects and macromarketing development as a whole. Thus, he was able to compensate for his limitations by attracting technical experts and scholars who willingly picked up the pieces and drove research to completion. He was a tough taskmaster who would suddenly appear to push the envelope with the next insight then vanish leaving the doing to others. Most of his projects were conducted by teams where he was not physically present but would show up to push the next step, solve the most recent crisis, and put results in the kind of perspective he was so gifted at doing. For the 5 years he dealt with Latin America, he never learned Spanish or Portuguese. Even with a translator, he would get impatient and loudly enunciate his own version of pidgin Spanglish. His work ethic was unquestioned. Chuck Goeldner, CU, recalls:

I will never forget one June [1978] when I was in my office and received a call from him from the hospital. He wanted to take care of some macromarketing things before he had brain
surgery the next morning. He was very cheerful and getting things done from the hospital. Unfortunately the surgery found cancer and the tumor was inoperable. Chuck worked up until the very end and we lost him that November.

His personal life in many ways matched the intensity of his intellect. When in Michigan, he bought a 28” sailboat, though he did not know how to sail. In Puerto Rico, he organized scuba trips. In Kenya, he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya. In Colorado, he rafted, skied, and embarked on rock climbing and technical mountaineering. His son Steve put it this way:

To say my father had an adventurous spirit is an understatement. He was always getting involved in a new extreme sport. Goals and achievements that seem impossible and beyond the reach of mere mortals can be had and enjoyed if you only have confidence. He was always eager for new challenges and adventures.

**But for Slater**

What Slater experienced with his entrepreneur father during the Great Depression and what he endured as a soldier in the European theatre during WWII must have given him an acute sense of urgency. He lived his life chasing the next idea and the next experience. Along the way, he institutionalized a field of study and energized a movement of worldwide scholars, which even his furtive mind may not have envisioned. Also, along the way and due to his untimely death, he left much undone, much that he wished yet to do. Bob Mittelstaedt, Professor, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, put it this way:

I am aware of his several contributions to the literature. To me they are the work of someone who was so busy that he didn’t have time to get his innovative ideas worked up into highly publishable form. There are some people that, when you read their work, you know you are getting everything they know on the subject at hand and, sometimes, maybe even a little bit more than they know. And then there are people like Chuck Slater, when you read their work, you know that you’re getting about one tenth of what they know about the subject. One just wishes that he had been granted the time to give us the other nine-tenths.

Roger Layton, University of New South Wales, used Slater’s work as a basis of a large-scale study of development in Indonesia. “Certainly his insights into marketing systems and the ways in which they could be operationalised (terrible word) were most important. I still have most of this material and it will still play a role in my thinking about marketing systems.” Don Larson, Ohio State University, notes “He started that research over 40 years ago and scholars continue this line of research to this day.”

Yet, perhaps, his greatest achievement was launching the Macromarketing Seminar at the University of Colorado in 1976. Because of his research, he attracted interested scholars from around the world to share ideas and research. Even though he died shortly after the Third Annual Macromarketing Seminar in 1978, the seminars initiated the movement, which now has blossomed into a widespread international intellectual field of study focused on a vast array of issues relating marketing to society. The seminar has remained an annual event now hosted around the world. In 1981, the seminar spawned the first issue of the *Journal of Macromarketing*, now in its 30th year and considered a strong academic journal. In 1985, the *JMM* Policy Board established the Slater Memorial Best Article Award that was conferred in 1986 and annually thereafter. The movement encouraged the development of historical thought in marketing and in 1983, the Conference on Historical Analysis and Research in Marketing (CHARM) was born to be repeated every 3 years. The *Journal of Macromarketing* established a special editor/section on marketing history in 1996. CHARM grew into an association in its own right and launched the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* in 2009. By 1986, another critical mass of seminar scholars created the International Society of Markets and Development, an organization that now holds its own biannual international conferences. In 1996, the *Journal of Macromarketing* established a section editor linking scholarship from International Society for Quality of Life Studies. Charles Slater was the catalyst for the creation of widespread research and the institutions that support it. As Lee Dahringer concludes, “Simply put, without his leadership in organization, and his leadership in developing new scholars in the area, the area of Macromarketing would not exist today.” Chuck Goeldner adds “He was a professor that made a difference and his impact on macromarketing thought is immeasurable. Macromarketing is his major legacy.”

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**References**


Bio

Robert W. Nason is an Emeritus Professor of marketing at Michigan State University; was editor of the Journal of Macromarketing, 1987–1997; and was elected the first president of the Macromarketing Society, 2003–2007. The annual “Nason Award” was established in 2008 to recognize scholars and leaders who have made truly unique contributions to macromarketing.