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What is This?
A comment on the relationship between the history of marketing thought and the development of marketing theory

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Abstract
This comment argues that the history of marketing thought and the development of marketing theory are intimately intertwined. The history of marketing thought is necessary for the development of marketing theory, and marketing theory is necessary for the advancement of marketing as a social science. Science matures as theoretical developments improve over time, contributing to the body of historical thought. As this thought–theory cycle continues to regenerate, the social science of marketing continues to progress.

Keywords
history of marketing theory, history of marketing thought, marketing history, marketing theory, marketing thought

This comment addresses two questions. First, what is the relationship between the history of marketing thought and the development of marketing theory? Second, why is the interaction between thought and theory critical for the development of marketing as a social science?

To avoid potential confusion, the most efficient method to address seemingly complex conceptual relationships is to start by understanding the terms under discussion. First, thought is described and distinguished from experience; then the history of marketing thought is differentiated from the history of marketing practice. After a description of theory is provided, the similarities and differences between thought and theory are discussed. These distinctions should clarify the relationship between the history of thought and the development of theory. Finally,
discussion turns to the criticality of their interaction for the advancement of marketing as a social science.

Thoughts reflect noumena, or ideas or concepts conceived in the brain, in contrast to experiences that reflect phenomena, or appearances or objects perceived by the senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching). Concepts organize and provide meaning to sensory data. The history of marketing thought reflects a concept or a set of concepts (usually called approaches or sub-disciplines or schools of thought) that have been discussed over time, usually by many researchers, to describe ideas (e.g. the Four Utilities Concept or Theory of Retail Gravitation, the Institutional or Commodity Approach to Marketing, the Marketing Management or Marketing Systems School of Thought); whereas the history of marketing practice describes the actual phenomena, experiences or events that have occurred over time (e.g. the history of the itinerant peddler, cigarette advertising, department store, or Ford Motor Company).

The purpose of theory is to systematically explain phenomena (Blalock, 1969), and theory construction involves logically interrelating diverse concepts expressed as propositions, with some specifically expressed as confirmed empirical regularities and others as concepts that are empirically testable (Hunt, 1976). Thus, the common element between thought and theory is the notion of concepts. Both use concepts as building blocks, but each uses them differently.

In the history of marketing thought, the same concept, set of concepts, approaches, schools, etc., usually taken from multiple sources, are expanded, contracted, recombined or otherwise modified in a narrative progression over a (usually extended) period of time. In contrast, with marketing theory different concepts are systematically integrated into empirically testable statements so that they can be confirmed (or disconfirmed) at a point or points in time. Concepts capable of being measured (e.g. independent, moderating, dependent variables) become higher level concepts termed constructs (i.e. construct = concept + measurement). Thus, historical thought uses concepts to create a descriptive narrative of the flow of ideas, whereas theory uses constructs to create an explanation of phenomena that can be empirically tested.

Consequently, thought and theory are intimately intertwined. Thought provides the raw materials, i.e. concepts, to build theories. Theory, in turn, becomes part of the history of thought, and by contributing and enriching the body of knowledge, over time, provides the bootstrapping process necessary to further develop the original theory.

One example of this process is Reilly’s ‘Theory of Retail Gravitation’ in 1931. Incorporated into the historical literature of the ‘Interregional Trade School of Thought’ (in Sheth et al., 1988), the theory was subsequently modified and improved by Converse in 1949, and then further refined and improved by Huff in 1964. Another example is the historical development of the ‘Consumer Goods Classification System’ within the Commodity School of Marketing Thought (in Shaw and Jones, 2005). Ideas developed by both Parlin (1912) and Shaw (1916) were refined and organized by Copeland in the 1920s into a three-category (convenience, shopping and specialty) consumer goods classification system (Copeland, 1924). Copeland’s system has evolved over the decades with contributions from more than a dozen researchers arguing the rationale for each of the three categories, and the logic of various proposed expansions or modifications. This bootstrapping process of tweaking and refining, pursuing then rejecting various dead ends, culminated in the 1980s in the work of Murphy and Enis, who organized the historical evolution of thought to rationalize a fourth category (preference goods) (Murphy and Enis, 1986) that expanded and enriched Copeland’s original classification system.

There are probably many more examples where the history of thought contains the conceptual elements for theories just waiting to be discovered. Undoubtedly, the most important for the
development of marketing as a social science is a general theory of marketing (in Shaw, 2009). Concern with theory started when Alderson and Cox (1948) launched the discussion of its importance in ‘Towards a Theory of Marketing’. Much of Alderson’s subsequent work included many of the concepts, theories and laws necessary to construct such a grand theory. In the late 1960s, Bartels proposed seven sub-theories of ‘A General Theory of Marketing’ (1968). In the 1970s, Bartels (1970) developed meta-theoretic axioms to ground a general theory, and El-Ansary (1979) suggested nine ‘Components of a General Theory of Marketing’. In the 1980s, Hunt, Muncy and Ray (1981) partially formalized ‘Alderson’s general theory’ based on ‘three primitive elements’; next Hunt proposed ‘four sets of fundamental explananda’ (Hunt, 1983), i.e. phenomena that a general theory should explain; and Sheth et al. (1988) identified six ‘Ingredients for a General Theory of Marketing’. Assembling these various ‘sub-theories’, ‘axioms’, ‘components’, ‘primitive elements’, ‘explananda’ and ‘ingredients’ strewn across the history of marketing thought would go far toward developing a general theory of marketing and would make a powerful research statement for advancing marketing as a social science.

There are several important reasons for studying the history of thought. Aside from intellectual stimulation and scholarship for its own sake, it helps to avoid reinventing the wheel by using new terms to express old concepts. Another reason is to transmit the knowledge base from one generation to the next. Each reason is important. However, the crucial purpose for studying the history of marketing thought is to assemble the concepts necessary to construct marketing theory. This is critical because developing and testing theory are necessary conditions of a science; and therefore, testable theory is a necessary condition for marketing to be a social science.

In sum, thought and theory are reciprocally interrelated. As a professor once told his students in a Seminar on the History of Marketing Thought and the Development of Marketing Theory, ‘it is seldom entirely clear where thought ends and theory begins’ (Dixon, 1976; class discussion). Studying the history of marketing thought is necessary to understand the concepts available to create marketing theory. Over time, the process of creating and improving theory becomes part of the history of marketing thought. As this thought–theory cycle continues to regenerate, the social science of marketing continues to progress.

References


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