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What is This?
Reflections on the history of marketing thought and theory development

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Abstract
What happens when accumulated knowledge from the past as regards both practice and theory is absent in marketing education? Simply put, scholarly knowledge gets lost with dire consequences not only for the nature and scope of marketing as an academic discipline but also for the type of research undertaken. The quest to be current, especially in marketing management, has resulted in the fragmentation of marketing into ever more specialized areas resulting in the creation of silos with little room for scholarly work in marketing thought and marketing theory building.

Keywords
education, history, marketing theory, marketing thought

Introduction
Knowledge of the history of marketing thought was once seen as an important unifying force for marketing educators, especially at the doctoral level. It provided a scholarly overview of the origins of marketing and revealed the pioneer contributors. The focus was more on marketing’s broader dimensions than on managerial issues. The golden age of teaching marketing thought lasted but a mere 25 or 30 years, roughly from the 1960s to the 1980s. This is when marketing thought courses were part of the marketing curriculum at many schools across the US, Canada, and, perhaps, elsewhere. Exactly how many schools during this period offered such courses and at what level is unknown. Most likely they were offered mainly at the doctoral level.

The number of relevant volumes published during this time period (and some beyond) confirms that the topic attracted some attention among marketing scholars (e.g. Cox et al., 1964; Fisk, 1971; Ferrell et al., 1979; Bartels, 1962, 1976, 1988). Sheth et al. (1988) may be considered the last published book on the topic during the period in question.
The content of thought seminars, especially those being offered at the PhD level, was also being discussed (Jackson, 1979; Lipson, 1979; Monroe, 1979; Wright 1979), along with the state of marketing theory (Ryans et al., 1974; Capella and Maronick, 1979; Capella et al., 1986, 1987; Kurtz et al., 1997). All this culminated in a special AMA Winter’s Educational Conference on the teaching of marketing thought and theory (Stone and Gardner, 1989; Tamilia, 1989). And, of course, the AMA Task Force on the Development of Marketing Thought (AMA, 1988) attempted to assess the current state of knowledge development and dissemination in marketing.

However, from the late 1970s, another trend emerged in that marketing educators began emphasizing epistemological and ontological issues of marketing theory construction rather than the history of marketing thought (Hunt, 1976, 1983). By the 1990s, most marketing theory courses had little or no history of marketing thought content (e.g. Hunt, 1991, 2002). Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, the teaching of marketing thought is conspicuous by its absence in doctoral education, a fact which led Wilkie and Moore (2003) to conclude that some knowledge has indeed been lost.

The fragmentation and specialization of our discipline into narrower subfields and the proliferation of journals have contributed to academic marketing losing sight both of its history and of its past thought leaders and their contributions. Now, marketing thought is viewed merely as a subfield of marketing, a marginalized activity, and one competing with all the ‘hot’ topics that have emerged since the 1970s. Specialized scholarship in marketing has created a silo effect and in most of those silos, one no longer needs to know much about marketing thought, marketing history, or marketing theory.

Only a limited group of marketing scholars remains interested in pursuing the link between marketing thought and marketing theory. These few believers include those of the macromarketing faith (Macromarketing Society/Journal of Macromarketing) and, of course, the committed scholars and researchers carrying out historical research in marketing thought and theory under the Conferences on Historical Analysis and Research in Marketing (CHARM) banner and in the newly created Journal of Historical Research in Marketing. The recent publication of a readings book on marketing thought is but one result of such efforts (Tadajewski and Jones, 2008). Thus, discussing marketing thought and its link to theory development with a generation of marketing scholars, most of whom have had little or no exposure to this subject area over the course of their studies and training, is problematic, to say the least.

Marketing practice and economic thoughts
Marketing as a practice has been around from time immemorial. Concomitant with practice, marketing thought, as a topic of intellectual pursuit and development among philosophers and economic thinkers from Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas, Adam Smith, to Alfred Marshall and Edward Chamberlin, among many others (Jones and Shaw 2002), also has a history as long as this practice. Donald Dixon has demonstrated this fact over and over again in much of his published work (Tamilia, 2011).

Such a conclusion may surprise many modern-day marketing scholars who, for whatever reason, view marketing as a new field of human inquiry, one rooted in the ‘marketing concept’ philosophy popularized in the 1950s. Or this confusion may stem from the fact that the study of marketing at the university level was a twentieth-century US pedagogical development.

Thought and theory development in economics proved to be by far the main source, if not the only source, of marketing thought and theory development until the behavioral sciences gained
momentum after WWII. In fact, marketing was once labeled ‘applied economics’ and strongly influenced by the German historical school of economics.

Alderson was a strong advocate of theory building in marketing, and his efforts to make marketing more theoretical were contagious. His 1948 article with Cox on the topic is one of his most influential (Wooliscroft et al., 2006: ch. 3), and similarly influential were his two edited collections on marketing theory (Cox and Alderson, 1950; Cox et al., 1964). Moreover, microeconomic theory was the framework upon which Alderson formulated his deductively based market behavior theory (Wooliscroft et al., 2006: ch. 34).

Microeconomic theory has also been the source behind the marketing mix (the 4Ps). In fact, theoretical developments in economics, especially Chamberlin’s theory of monopolistic competition, have been the building blocks not only of Alderson’s various theories but also of many other contemporary marketing topics and ideas concerning pricing, segmentation, marketing planning, and consumer choice behavior, among others. However, economics as a source of thought and theory in marketing has long since been replaced by a new focus on the behavioral sciences, notably social psychology and psychology, with the consumer at the center of the marketing universe.

Marketing thought and behavioral sciences

The decline of interest in marketing thought coincided with academic marketing’s growing pre-occupation with methodological sophistication and rigor in empirical research (elegance over relevance?) More specifically, starting in the 1970s, the marketing discipline witnessed an explosion of empirically based research using the hypothetico–deductive model of science. Academic marketers embraced the positivistic empiricist approach to marketing knowledge development and dissemination with gusto, a trend that has continued unabated. The focus of interest became the social, psychological, and cognitive processes that make up consumer behavior. The data obtained from such consumers are then subjected to a stream of ever more sophisticated statistical analyses. Such research can be carried out over time with changed parameters with no need to know much, if anything, about either marketing thought or marketing theory. The theoretical framework justifying such research is more than likely to have been borrowed from the behavioral sciences and not from the marketing thought literature or from economics.

The consumer as unit of analysis and measurement became the focus of attention, an entity to be studied per se rather than as a member interacting over time with other members and institutions of the economy. A not so subtle transformation has occurred such that researchers now appear to act more like technicians and methodologists than marketing thought scholars and marketing theory builders.

The current research tradition in marketing highly values quantitative analysis, almost the antithesis of marketing thought research, which is far more qualitative and interpretive. Marketing thought research ‘makes historical research seem atheoretical . . . and consequently, irrelevant to the accumulation of knowledge, which it is not’ (Witkowski and Jones, 2008: 12).

Research into marketing thought can be empirically based but not in a manner involving hypothesis testing and statistical analysis. It does not mean that such research is not rigorous or lacks a methodological orientation. On the contrary, the methods are of a different type, can be just as intellectually challenging, and even more time consuming to carry out. Such research involves word crunching rather than number crunching and, for most historians has a narrative focus. One
must also know where thought leaders have come from, in time and place, in order to make sense of their theoretical and thought contributions. This was done both for Aldersonian marketing thought (Wooliscroft et al., 2006), and more recently for Dixonian marketing thought in the special issue of the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* devoted to his scholarly contributions to marketing (Shaw and Wilkinson, 2011).

Theories derived or borrowed from the behavioral sciences have limited use in the history of marketing thought research. What are available to a marketing historian are sets of data quite unlike those utilized in modern consumer behavior research using attitude scales and questionnaires. These can range from paintings and pictures, to written sources such as in biographies, or oral history sources on long gone marketing scholars. Other primary or archival data sources can also be useful, for example the correspondence of marketing thought leaders and even inventories of the books they owned when they died. Marketing thought also deals with publications which are often very dated, esoteric, and can be hard to locate. For example Dixonian marketing thought relied heavily on the published work of economic thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Bartels’s (1970) set of seven axioms in his metatheory shows that the hypothesis testing axiom (axiom 4) is only possible if the other preceding axioms have been fulfilled. Defining a marketing phenomenon (axiom 1), which leads to classification and description (axioms 2 and 3) is essential before a theoretical relationship can be tested and verified. The real purpose of marketing science thus should be to know, to describe, and to understand marketing phenomena (axioms 1 to 3) rather than being able to predict them, and that may be more important to marketing scholarship.

**Conclusions**

Writing about marketing thought emphasizes the content, form, and structure of marketing knowledge over time and chronicles the intellectual development of the discipline. It also helps to delineate the academic boundaries of the field. What was academic marketing before, where is it now and where is it going?

Marketing thought attempts to trace the history of the ideas, concepts, and theories, subsumed under schools of marketing thought of those scholars whose contributions have molded and shaped the discipline, and have impacted on its orientation and social purpose (Shaw and Jones, 2005). The act of connecting past events with facts and with a network of marketing thinkers and their ideas is theory building. While such an exercise may look overly descriptive and devoid of rigor, it nevertheless brings meaning and understanding, both of which are prerequisites for theory building. A discipline which is reluctant to study its past and fails to acknowledge the contributions made to thought and theory building by its founding fathers is in serious trouble indeed! Bartels’s (1983) provocative warning that marketing was defaulting its academic responsibilities is still with us almost 30 years later. The challenge remains for contemporary scholars to ‘focus on marketing matters that really matter’ (Shapiro, 2006: 319).

**References**


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