Commentary on “developing successful theories in marketing: insights from resource-advantage theory”

Bodo B. Schlegelmilch

Received: 4 August 2011 / Accepted: 6 August 2011 / Published online: 24 August 2011
© Academy of Marketing Science 2011

Marketing has long been criticized for lacking a unifying theory and for relying too strongly on theories developed in other fields (Buzzell 1963; Baker 1995; Murray et al. 1997). Gummesson (2001, p. 29), for example, describes marketing management as “a patchwork of fragmented models, assumptions, case stories and checklists on top of a partially obsolete foundation: micro-economics, marketing mix, four Ps, and the marketing of packaged consumer goods.” Concomitant with these criticisms, calls for putting stronger efforts on theory development in marketing are nearly as old as the academic discipline itself (Alderson and Cox 1948) and have been persistently repeated by a variety of marketing scholars (Day and Montgomery 1999; Malhotra 1999; Carter 2011). However, the response to such calls has been muted. In fact, instead of a stronger emphasis on theory, the opposite appears to be the case: Baumgartner and Pieters (2003) showed that marketing publications overwhelmingly focus on applications and Yadav (2009) observed that, among articles published in leading marketing journals during a thirty year period (1978–2007), conceptual articles actually declined. Still, despite the dearth of conceptual articles—or just because of their relative scarcity—they receive disproportionately more citations (Yadav 2009).

So why are there not more marketing scholars focusing on theory development? One reason appears to be the historically strong practitioner influence on the discipline. And with an increasing influence of practitioners, the emphasis “shifted from theoretical to

empirical research, from basic to applied thought development, and from educational to occupational concerns” (Bartels 1983, p. 33). Consequently, until today, “the majority of marketing academics more closely identify themselves with marketing practice and applied practitioner-oriented research, rather than theory development” (Burton 2005, p.6).

Another explanation for the lack of theoretical grounding in marketing may lie in the unresolved discourse among marketing scholars on what constitutes a suitable level of theory aggregation. Venkatesh (1985), for example, argues that theories lie on a continuum ranging from those that follow a natural science model (highest form) to those that merely relate empirical findings to other empirical findings (lowest form). If we were to accept the argument that the latter would be sufficient to constitute a theory, marketing would actually be a very theory rich field! Burton (2005) draws an interesting distinction between “theories of marketing” and “theories in marketing.” The former are general or universal theories of marketing, such as Bagozzi’s (1975) theory of marketing as exchange or Vargo and Lusch’s (2004, 2006) service dominant logic theory, whereas the latter are theories that are frequently rooted in other subject areas, such as psychology, but have proven to be very useful in researching marketing topics, such as Ajzen’s (1985) theory of planned behavior. Some prominent marketing scholars, such as Hunt (1983) and Grönroos (1994), argue that scholarly efforts in marketing should be directed to develop the former, that is, theories of marketing. Others view grand theories of marketing as too removed from marketing practice (Bird 1996), argue that marketing cannot be described nor understood by any one general theory (Anderson 1986; Arndt 1985; Burton 2005; Möller 2007) or even regard them as a waste of time and effort (Prendergast and Berthon 2000).

B. B. Schlegelmilch (✉)
Vienna University of Economics and Business,
Institute for International Marketing Management,
Augasse 2-6,
1090 Vienna, Austria
e-mail: bodo.schlegelmilch@wu.ac.at

Given the long standing critique of the lack of theory in marketing, given the calls for more theory development in marketing and the scant response to such calls, and given the ongoing debate on the criteria and utility of marketing theory, Hunt's article on *Developing Successful Theories in Marketing: Insights from Resource-Advantage Theory* (2011) could not have come at a better time. Using his well known Resource-Advantage (R-A) theory as a case example, Hunt outlines five factors that explain the success of his R-A theory and, mindful of the customary caveats of generalizing from case research, develops five guides for the development of successful theories. And although certain aspects of Hunt's writings on marketing theory in general, and R-A theory in particular, have not always met with universal approval, such as his stance on relativism or the coarse-grained nature of his theory (Albaum 1992; Brown 1999; Brownlie et al. 1999; Schlegelmilch 2002; Willmott 1999), using his R-A theory to illustrate the hallmark of successful theory development in marketing makes interesting reading for marketing academics regardless of their methodological convictions. Below, I address each of Hunt's ingredients for developing a successful theory in turn.

1. Successful theories are characterized by a focus on important issues in macromarketing and/or micromarketing.

Hunt hits a central nerve when stipulating this characteristic. Notwithstanding the fact that the term "important issues" is open to interpretation in that what is important to some marketers might not be important to others, it also raises the question: "Important for whom?". Is importance merely a question of utility for managers or corporations, or is it the insights gained on the attitudes and behavior of various actors in marketing? Hunt does not dodge these questions but uses R-A theory to provide illustrations on what important issues might be, namely providing "a foundation for models of endogenous economic growth," contributing "to understanding the wealth of nations," having "public policy implications", etc. (p. 11).

His statement also addresses the relationship between macro and micro perspectives. While he clearly indicates that successful theories can be developed *either* with a macro *or* a micro perspective, Hunt bemoans the relative decline of the former in mainstream marketing thought. Since most major marketing journals and textbooks view the field through the lens of marketing managers looking for solutions to marketing challenges, for scholars who are developing theories in the area of macromarketing, Hunt detects significant difficulties in getting their works accepted in major marketing journals. But it is not only the issue of macro versus micro perspective that confronts researchers working on theory development. Hunt also

points to a questionable tradeoff between importance of the research issue and methodological finesse.

This trade-off between "rigor versus relevance" is a key question in our discipline and many leading scholars have commented on it. The sentiment is always very similar. Nearly two decades ago, Simon (1994, p.44) complained that "Too many problems of minor relevance are treated by sophisticated methodology which is king." Similarly Ehrenberg (1994) remarked that modellers often use their proverbial hammers (techniques) in an attempt to pick on research questions that are many generations removed from real problems. The fact that Hunt is picking up this theme and underlines the importance of redressing the balance between rigor and relevance in the context of importance needs to be applauded. Hunt (p. 22) correctly observes that pleas from prominent marketing scholars to favor importance over methods are neither heeded by reviewers nor editors of marketing journals, who "seem to favor 'exquisitely executed' research that makes an incremental contribution to a minor marketing issue." Consequently, he predicts that scholars developing theories that address important issues can expect an uphill struggle in getting their ideas published.

2. Successful theories have a high explanatory and predictive power.

To support his second ingredient for developing a successful marketing strategy, Hunt showcases a wide variety of examples where R-A theory contributes to explaining or predicting major phenomena. While this provides impressive evidence of the quality of R-A theory, Hunt could have gone into more depth on a number of pertinent issues. For example, he does not address whether a distinction is required between "explaining" and "predicting" (Kuß 2009), nor does he debate the more fundamental distinction between positivists and relativists of various shades. See, for example, Guba and Lincoln (1994), who use the term post-positivism to denote a "softer" version of positivism, versus Feyerabend's (1977) anything goes approach. There are at least three reasons why it is a pity that—in this article—Hunt keeps silent on these issues. First, we know that Hunt actually has a lot to say about scientific realism (e.g., Hunt and Hansen 2010). Second, the article evades the prominence some postmodernist scholars have gained in our discipline (e.g., Belk 1988; Brown 1999; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook 1995). Third, it appears that it is precisely the use of diverse research paradigms why some marketing scholars remain relatively indifferent about R-A Theory. To illustrate this point: Both macroeconomists and marketing scholars focus on consumer behavior, yet they use different research paradigms. The former is steeped in simplifying assumptions and mathematical modeling; the second is characterized by experiments and

testing of hypotheses. Consequently, both fields have different vantage points, communicate their insights differently, and hardly communicate with each other. This kindles parallels to Hunts R-A theory which is, like macroeconomics, also relatively coarse grained. This, in turn, raises similar issue of (often rather limited) interplays between different research paradigms in marketing (Möller et al. 2010).

3. Successful theories respect other disciplines' literatures.

Once again, Hunt highlights a very important point: the relationship of marketing to other disciplines. In marketing (and management) practice, some of the most relevant insights are generated through looking at other industries. Learning—and adopting best of class standards—within an industry will, at best, lead to parity with the industry leader. To go beyond parity and lead an industry, most likely ideas have to be taken from other industries. Similarly, our field often benefits most by developing a deep understanding of theories and research traditions that have been developed “outside of marketing.” In reality, determining what is outside or inside the marketing discipline involves subjective judgment, as it is often unclear where the field of marketing ends, and where disciplines like management or psychology begin. Similarly, subjective judgments are required when distinguishing one theory from another. For example, should something like the “Attitude-towards-the-Ad-Theory” be treated separately from “Attitude Theory”? Are “Dissonance Theory,” “Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,” and “Theory of Cognitive Consistency” identical? (cf. Franke 2002, p. 205–206). The comprehension of what a particular theory entails is subject to inter-personal and inter-temporal variations (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992).

Bearing in mind these caveats, in the case of R-A theory, Hunt (p. 14) states that over seventy percent of the references included in the original Hunt and Morgan (1995) article came from nonmarketing sources, primarily from economics and management. Hunt also identifies eleven different research traditions and theories with an affinity to R-A theory and, in his book on *A General Theory of Competition* (Hunt 2000), devotes three chapters to discussing the antecedents and affinities of the R-A theory with evolutionary and “Austrian” economics, heterogeneous demand and differential advantage, and business strategy and institutional theory. Doing so not only provides a strong anchor for R-A theory in neighboring fields but, in the sense of discriminant validity, also shows how R-A theory differs from related theories.

4. Successful marketing theories are published in non-marketing journals.

Turning to the fourth characteristic for developing a successful marketing theory, Baumgartner and Pieters, (2003, p. 137) point to the evidence of impact indicators.

These show that marketing academics cite from many other disciplines, but are far less frequently cited by other disciplines, which demonstrates that “marketing knowledge does not yet have much influence on its sister disciplines.” To this end, it would certainly be desirable if marketing theory would have more to contribute to other disciplines. But is publication in a nonmarketing journal a success criterion? Pointing to the impressive publication record of R-A theory in marketing journals *and* nonmarketing journals, Hunt (p. 17) clearly thinks it is: “Developing R-A theory in the journals of several disciplines has contributed to the theory’s success.” However, there is a difference between *contributing* to the theory’s success and being a *prerequisite* for success. There will always be theories that are almost exclusively quoted within the marketing literature but hardly ever outside the discipline, simply because their theoretical range (Leong 1985) scarcely extends beyond marketing. Take, for example, the “Buying Center Theory” advanced by Venkatesh et al. (1995). Given the lack of citations in non-marketing disciplines, should this theory really be judged as less successful? Hunt’s fourth argument is not entirely convincing.

5. Successful theories have normative implications.

The last of Hunt’s ingredients once again touches on a very central topic. Does marketing aspire to be a professional discipline in the sense of having an influence on the practice of marketing and, if so, what are the implications? This question captures the long standing debate on the degree of practitioner orientation of marketing academia. On the one hand, there are researchers who focus explicitly or implicitly on solving practical marketing problems. Modelers who aim to produce decision models and support tools that solve practical marketing problems are an example of this breed of academic (Cornelissen and Lock 2005; Leeflang and Wittink 2000; Malhotra 1996). On the other hand, there are prominent researchers who argue that marketing academia (and in particular consumer research) should be concerned with gaining a fundamental understanding per se rather than providing understanding that serves managers (e.g., Holbrook 1985, 1986).

The former “theory-in-use” approach often criticizes the “seemingly dismal performance of marketing theory” (Heffring 1985, p. 106) on the practice of marketing (cf. discussion in Saren 2000). In contrast, the latter is often seen as self-serving. Typical are the opinions expressed in the *European Journal of Marketing*. In an editorial devoted to the theory-practice divide, the view of the editors and the advisory board of the journal are synthesized as follows: “It seems many consider that the role of the marketing academic is to provide rigorous evidence-based solutions to the problems faced by marketing practice (Lee and Greenley 2010, p. 17).

In the theory versus practice debate, Hunt (pp. 21–21) takes a refreshingly conciliatory stance. He points out that it is not an “either / or” question. Instead, “many theories whose primary purpose is to explain / predict phenomena also have normative implication.” However, while Hunt recommends that “authors should search for them” [i.e. normative implications], he clearly rejects “managerial implications” as a requirement for all articles in marketing journals. This appears to be a sound point of view that is likely to be representative of mainstream marketing thought.

Thus, taking a collective look at Hunt’s insights from R-A theory, what are the key lessons and are marketing academics now better equipped for developing successful theories in marketing? For a start, most readers will be in awe of the success story behind R-A theory. The numerous contributions this theory has made to a diverse set of macro- and micromarketing issues and the citations the theory has attracted, both inside the marketing discipline and in neighboring fields, are truly impressive! Thus, the key lesson from the R-A theory “case story” will be that successful theory development is a rather complex process that comprises much more than writing one good theory paper. A tall order for any budding theorist!

But are those marketing academics not yet overwhelmed by the task ahead now better equipped for developing successful theories in marketing? Looking at the “five guides for authors seeking to develop successful theories” (p.19), the verdict is mixed. On the one hand, Hunt unerringly identifies key issues to be considered in theory development; on the other hand, some of his recommendations are difficult to operationalize (e.g., what is an important issue), self-evident (e.g., craft theories with high explanatory and predictive power), or debatable (e.g., publish the theory [also] in nonmarketing journals). To this end, Hunt’s recommendations are also a poignant reminder that there is not complete agreement—and perhaps there never will be—on what constitutes a good theory. But after all, Hunt very aptly describes his recommendations as *guidelines*, and guideless, by definition, leave room for interpretation and judgment. He also states very correctly that “...no set of guides can guarantee the development of successful theories” (p. 23).

Notwithstanding some of the critique levied above, Hunt’s recommendations will certainly make marketing academics think more about the characteristics of a successful theory. Hopefully, Hunt’s reflections on theory will also entice more marketing academics to engage in the development of marketing theory. Whether such new marketing theories will always fulfill each and every one of Hunt’s guides is only a secondary issue. Of importance are two aspects: First R-A theory provides an impressive example of a highly successful theory development process,

and vividly demonstrates that successful theory development in marketing is possible. Second, Hunt’s guides offer some welcome illumination of the stony path towards theory development. But it should not be forgotten that the path is undoubtedly long and difficult, and only very few gifted marketing academics can ever hope to replicate the success of R-A theory.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1985). From Intentions to Actions: A Theory of Planned Behavior. In J. Kuhl & J. Beckman (eds.), *Action-control: From Cognition to Behavior*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 11–39.
- Albaum, G. (1992). What is marketing? A comment on marketing is.... *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 20(4), 313–316.
- Alderson, W. and Cox, R. (1948). Towards a Theory of Marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 13, 137–152.
- Anderson, P. F. (1986). On methodology in consumer research: a critical relativistic perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(9), 155–173.
- Arndt, J. (1985). On making marketing science more scientific: role of orientations, paradigms, metaphors and puzzle solving. *Journal of Marketing*, 49, 11–23.
- Bagozzi R. P. (1975). Marketing as Exchange. *Journal of Marketing*, 39, 32–39.
- Baker, M. J. (1995). The need for theory in marketing. In M. J. Baker (Ed.), *Marketing: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). London: Macmillan.
- Bartels, R. (1983). Is marketing defaulting its responsibilities? *Journal of Marketing*, 47(4), 32–35.
- Baumgartner, H., & Pieters, R. (2003). The structural influence of marketing journals: a citation analysis of the discipline and its subareas over time. *Journal of Marketing*, 67, 123–139.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15, 139–168.
- Bird, D. (1996). Education could be the death of good marketing. *Marketing*, 5, 14.
- Brown, S. (1999). Postmodernism: The end of marketing? In D. Brownlie, M. Saren, R. Wensley, & R. Whittington (Eds.), *Rethinking marketing: Towards critical marketing accountings*. London: Sage.
- Brownlie, D., Saren, M., Wensley, R., & Whittington, R. (1999). Marketing disequilibrium: on redress and restoration. In D. Brownlie, M. Saren, R. Wensley, & R. Whittington (Eds.), *Rethinking marketing: Towards critical marketing accountings*. London: Sage.
- Burton, D. (2005). Marketing theory matters. *British Journal of Management*, 16, 5–18.
- Buzzell, R. D. (1963). Is marketing a science? *Harvard Business Review*, 41 (Jan. / Feb.) 32–34, 36, 40, 166, 168, 170.
- Carter, C. R. (2011). A call for theory: the maturation of the supply chain management discipline. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 47(2), 3–7.
- Cornelissen, J. P., & Lock, A. R. (2005). The uses of marketing theory: constructs, research propositions, and managerial implications. *Marketing Theory*, 5(2), 165–184.
- Day, G. S., & Montgomery, D. B. (1999). Charting new directions for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 3–13.
- Ehrenberg, A. S. C. (1994). Commentary on Gary L. Lilien’s paper on ‘marketing models: past, present and future. In G. Laurent, G. Lilien, & B. Pras (Eds.), *Research traditions in marketing*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

- Feyerabend, P. (1977). *Wider den Methodenzwang—Skizze einer anarchistischen Erkenntnistheorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Franke, N. (2002). *Realtheorie des Marketing: Gestalt und Erkenntnis*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Grönroos, C. (1994). From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing, *Management Decision*, 32(4), 4–20.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In E. G. Guba & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Gummesson, E. (2001). Are current research approaches in marketing leading us astray? *Marketing Theory*, 1(1), 27–48.
- Heffring, M. (1985). A theory-use approach to developing marketing theories. In N. Dholakia & J. Arndt (Eds.), *Changing the course of marketing: Alternative paradigms for widening marketing theory. Research in Marketing Supplement 2*. Greenwich: Jai.
- Hirschman, E. C., & Holbrook, M. B. (1992). *Postmodern consumer research: The study of consumption as text*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Holbrook, M. B. (1985). Why business is bad for consumer research. In E. C. Hirschman & M. B. Holbrook (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research* (pp. 145–156). Ann Arbor: Association for Consumer Research.
- Holbrook, M. B. (1986). Whiter ACR? Some pastoral reflections on bears, Baltimore, baseball, and resurrecting consumer research. In E. C. Hirschman & M. B. Holbrook (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research* (pp. 436–441). Ann Arbor: Association for Consumer Research.
- Holbrook, M. B. (1995). *Consumer research: Introspective essays on the study of consumption*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hunt, S. D. (1983). *Marketing Theory: The Philosophy of Marketing Science*. Homewood, IL: R. D. Irwin.
- Hunt, S. D. (2011). Developing successful theories in marketing: insights from resource-advantage theory. *AMS Review*, doi:10.1007/s13162-011-0007-0
- Hunt, S. D., & Hansen, J. M. (2010). The philosophical foundation of marketing research: for scientific realism and truth. In P. Maclaran, M. Saren, B. Stern, & M. Tadajewski (Eds.), *The sage handbook of marketing theory*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hunt, S. D., & Morgan, R. M. (1995). The comparative advantage theory of competition. *Journal of Marketing*, 59(2), 1–15.
- Kuß, A. (2009). *Marketing-theory*. Wiesbaden: Gabler.
- Lee, N., & Greenley, G. (2010). The theory-practice divide: thoughts from the editors and senior advisory board of EJM. *European Journal of Marketing (Editorial)*, 44(1/2), 5–20.
- Leeflang, P. S. H., & Wittink, D. (2000). Building models for marketing decisions: past, present and future. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 17(2/3), 105–126.
- Leong, S. M. (1985). Methathory and metamethodology in marketing: a Lakatosian reconstruction. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(3), 23–40.
- Malhotra, N. K. (1996). The impact of the Academy of Marketing Science on marketing scholarship: an analysis of research published in JAMS. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 24(4), 291–299.
- Malhotra, N. K. (1999). Guest Editorial: the past, present, and future of the marketing discipline. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27(1), 116–119.
- Möller, K. (2007). Marketing research traditions: toward theoretical unification or pluralism? *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 15(1), 64–69.
- Möller, K., Pels, J., & Saren, M. (2010). The marketing theory or theories into marketing? Plurality of research traditions and paradigms. In P. Maclaran, M. Saren, B. Stern, & M. Tadajewski (Eds.), *The sage handbook of marketing theory*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Murray, J. B., Evers, D. J., & Janda, S. (1997). Marketing, theory borrowing and critical reflection. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 15(2), 92–106.
- Prendergast, G., & Berthon, P. (2000). Insights from ecology: an ecotone perspective of marketing. *European Management Journal*, 18(2), 223–232.
- Saren, M. (2000). Marketing theory. In M. L. Baker (Ed.), *Marketing theory*. London: Thomson Learning.
- Schlegelmilch, B. B. (2002). Comments on Shelby D. Hunt's a general theory of competition: resources, competences, productivity, economic growth. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 18(1–2), 221–227.
- Simon, H. (1994). Marketing science and the ivory tower. *Business Strategy Review*, 5(1), 29–45.
- Vargo, S. L., Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing, *Journal of Marketing*, 68, 1–17.
- Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (eds.) (2006). *The Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate, and Directions*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.
- Venkatesh, A. (1985). Is marketing ready for Kuhn? In N. Dholakia & J. Arndt (Eds.), *Changing the course of marketing: Alternative paradigms for widening marketing theory*. Greenwich: Jai.
- Venkatesh, R., Kohli, A. K., & Zaltman, G. (1995). Influence strategies in buying centers. *Journal of Marketing*, 59(4), 71–82.
- Willmott, H. (1999). On the idolization of markets and the denigration of marketers: some critical reflection on a professional paradox. In D. Brownlie, M. Saren, R. Wensley, & R. Whittington (Eds.), *Rethinking marketing: Towards critical marketing accountings*. London: Sage.
- Yadav, M. S. (2009). The decline of conceptual articles and implications for knowledge development. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(1), 1–19.
- Zinkhan, G. M., & Hirschheim, R. (1992). Truth in marketing theory and research: an alternative perspective. *Journal of Marketing*, 56, 8088–8088.