



Resurrecting marketing

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Abstract

Marketing lays dying, felled by two fatal blows: 1) the shift in control of brands from marketer to consumer; and 2) the shift of many marketing functions from marketing to Big Data, algorithms, and data analytics. To resurrect marketing, we need to fundamentally refocus on marketing in a digital age.

Keywords Marketing RIP · Disruptive innovation · Big data · Algorithms · Analytics · Distributed brands · Co-creation · Abductive logic · Imitation

Key et al. (2020) appear to be in agreement that marketing is dying or dead. They do a great service in offering a funeral eulogy for marketing both as a practice and as an academic discipline. In my view, two things have converged to bring this about or at least hasten the field's alleged demise. They both involve end-runs around traditional marketing institutions. After introducing these two poison pills and discussing related ailments, I offer a prescription for reanimating the marketing corpse.

By-passing marketing

The first end-run around marketing is that consumers have gained tremendous agency in evaluating products and services themselves without much concern for what marketers have to say. Sure, there has always been word of mouth. But now consumers enjoy what McQuarrie et al. (2013) call the megaphone effect. The consumer can write a blog, broadcast a vlog, do an unboxing video, create a YouTube channel, contribute to online ratings on sites like TripAdvisor, tweet, and engage in discussions on numerous topical forums.

What Stevens and MacLaren (2005) and I (Belk 2001) found that consumers once did with specialty magazines to auto-arouse their desires, they now do online in anticipating new product releases, posting narratives and photos of product use, and

revealing and reviewing the product online (Kozinets et al. 2017). Where once the editors of fashion magazines got the front-row seats at fashion shows, now it is the 14-year-old fashion blogger with a hundred-thousand followers (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Food porn is fed by Instagram and Twitter posts of the ritual pre-meal food photos, often offering comments and reviews. Such amateurs and bloggers now shape our tastes in fashion, foods, music, electronics, movies, autos, and many other areas of consumption. Even though they are signed up by marketers to be influencers as soon as they get even a micro-following (with the help of influencer matchmaking agencies), marketers have still largely lost control of their brands, whether this is for good or for ill (Lou and Yuan 2019; Stubb et al. 2019). And brand trolls, spoofs, and memes hardly help stabilize things. Welcome to the era of distributed brand ownership.

The second trend that has made marketing irrelevant is the rise of Big Data, data analytics, and algorithms. Why bother with segmentation strategies when clever algorithms and surveillance can not only pinpoint your consumers, but find their individual social media habits, locate where they are geographically or in a store, and discover what and who they believe are the hot brands and cool celebrities? The quants and algorithms may not be able to explain any of this, much less theorize it, but who needs theory or diagrams with boxes and arrows when you can find the right buttons to push, the additional celebs to hire, the right social media to use to reach each target consumer, as well as the right mobile coupons to offer at the right moment. Google and Facebook (as well as Baidu and WeChat in China and their Korean and Russian equivalents) have also made marketing, ad agencies, and marketing research firms irrelevant by selling ad space algorithmically to produce the most hits, likes, shares, and links to

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related content using automatic advertising placement models that precisely target individual consumers. These new media firms have massive online databases that can cross-reference consumer searches, readership and viewership, as well as their social networks and what their friends and their friends' friends are excited about.

The internet has also, according to some, led to the demise of cognitive models of consumer behavior. This was the forecast of Chris Anderson (2008) in a *Wired Magazine* article announcing the death of theory. Who needs theory when Amazon or Google can conduct field experiments instantly with millions of people and detail patterns of response? We may not be able to explain or understand them, but we can use them. One example is found in the ability to predict disease outbreaks from Google searches (e.g., Verma et al. 2018). You can easily do this sort of research yourself using Google Trends or Google n-Grams. Welcome to the age of automated marketing.

The death of traditional marketing systems

So, there's a new sheriff in town and its name ain't marketing. Not only that, there are new outlaws in town, and no one has made much of an effort to stop them. I'm talking about the lawful monopolistic outlaws: Microsoft, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google (MFAANG). Illegal criminals also steal data, breach computer systems, install ransomware, sow fake news, steal elections, and otherwise disrupt civil society. But it is the lawful outlaws who have done the most damage to traditional marketing systems. As the growth and size of the MFAANG players, along with big "sharing economy" players like Airbnb, Uber, and TaskRabbit show, consumer habits have also changed dramatically. We no longer need to own things like music, books, DVDs, cars, designer clothes and accessories, or vacation homes. We can stream them, hire them, or rent them short-term with the push of a smartphone button. And as we've discovered thanks to COVID-19, you can have most anything delivered to your door or a lockbox with the same push-button ease. It is not that marketing, as a part of business, has been rendered irrelevant in these cases, but we're seeing the triumph of a few corporations at the expense of the many others who failed to create disruptive innovations or were too slow to react.

Marketing as a functional area of business is still an essential activity for MFAANG companies and their Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Russian equivalents. But direct-to-consumer distribution as well as the ephemeral nature of many of their products, means that traditional models of marketing and distribution are becoming things of the past. Marketing has become more the practice of seduction (Deighton and Grayson 1995) and consumers have become complicit in their self-seduction (Belk et al. 2003). Marketing is an activity that,

while substantially altered, is alive and well. It is us as academic scholars, researchers, and teachers who need to catch up.

Steve Jobs, who is touted in one of these essays, also helped put the lie to marketing institutions by pronouncing that consumers don't know what they want until you show them. Elon Musk, Jack Dorsey, Jack Ma, and numerous other tech giant disruptive innovators seem to be cut from the same cloth. None of them succeeded through brilliant consumer and marketing research (Mautz 2019; Murray 2011). This is not to say that they didn't do some brilliant marketing along the way, but it was not the result of traditional research-driven product, pricing, promotion, and distribution decision-making. Those young people who revere them as idols and role models are less likely to become marketing majors than to take up engineering, computer science, or design. Better still, they'll drop out of university with a tech startup already in-process.

But again, the need for marketing in business does not disappear with the creation of a new app. One element of marketing mentioned repeatedly by these five authors is supply chain management. Yet there has been no mention of the rise of China and Asia. Asia has played a dominant role as firms in the West began to outsource most everything. Just-in-time delivery has been put to the test by COVID-19 and supply-chains are becoming more flexible and redundant rather than putting all your egg-cartons in one cargo box. But China is now increasingly outsourcing itself, and its Belt and Road initiative suggests that the trade wars have just begun. Despite this global shift in economic power, I don't see much discussion of culture or globalism in these essays (see Steenkamp 2019). It is as if there were such a thing as cultural universals. And rising isolationist nationalism and protectionism don't do anything to counter a pattern of ethnocentric blindness to the changing world around us.

What we're missing

Emphasizing supply over demand in these essays suggests a concession that managing marketing is going back to a pre-twentieth century concern with transportation rather than focusing on the consumer who has here-to-fore been the focus of contemporary marketing. It looks as though the parade has passed us by, but we get to clean-up after the elephants and get them to the next pachyderm parade destination. And it isn't the case that "for want of a good theory" we could have been the grand marshal in the parade. What we marketing academics and researchers need, in addition to the ethnographic CCT research that is overlooked here, is abductive reasoning that transcends hypotheses, data coding, and Big Data (Belk and Sobh 2019).

Abductive reasoning looks for puzzles, surprises, and anomalies in the data – puzzles like the sudden demise of

marketing in business and academia or the sharp drop in conceptual marketing papers or the global rise of right-wing populism. Abductive reasoning then seeks a leap of faith that helps it all make sense. What initially appears to be curious and unfathomable would be easily understood if only *X* were true! *X* is not necessarily a theory; it may be a concept that makes it all seem obvious. For instance, Leigh Star (1991) found that McDonald's rationalization of hamburger production (Ritzer 1993) marginalized those with allergies to ingredients like onions. It all started with an observation that a request for "no onions" led to stopping production to address the order, leading to at least 30 min of delay with cascading delays for all consumers in the queue. This recognition of the limits of the hyper-rationalization concept did not involve inductive reasoning from careful analysis of a data set, nor deductive reasoning from some a priori theory borrowed from another field. Rather it was the result of the sort of fortuitous, serendipitous bricolage that cannot be derived formulaically.

In the same way that I claim that there has been a double end-run around traditional marketing, I'm afraid I have made an end-run around these insightful essays. Rather than deal with the issues they raise, I am more concerned with what they do *not* say. While they do provide excellent provocations in their analyses and their requiem for marketing, my provoked POV is also less beholden to marketing history than the views of this set of experts. I look for curious phenomena in the inevitable interactions of marketers and consumers in the marketplace. William T. (Tom) Tucker (1967) once commented that marketers study consumers in the same way that fishermen [sic] study fish. He called instead for studying them in the ways that zoologists study fish. However, I prefer to not to study them on a dissection table, but in the wild. By observing consumers and how they use markets as well as how they market themselves as Uber drivers, garage-salers, eBay traders, or Airbnb hosts, I believe that we may just learn something fundamental about why marketing, exchange, and acquisition have lasted for millennia as well as what makes these processes unique in the twenty-first century. None of marketing's traditional functions are going away anytime soon, although we are witnessing shifts in who or what performs them and how. We marketing academics just need to catch up with the market and do some abductive thinking to understand the fish and the new pond in which we all are swimming. I say "we" because we are all consumers, just as we are all becoming co-opted as co-producers and co-marketers (Zwick et al. 2008).

I think we marketing academics need to substantially change our curricula as well. Marketing textbooks have not caught up with these changes in marketing and consumption. Rather than adoption and diffusion of innovations – innovations that seem to spring into existence full born like Athena from the head of Zeus – we need to learn and then teach how to create radical innovations. How do we give birth to the next

Steve Jobs or Elon Musk? How do we nurture the next Bob Dylan or John Lennon? How do we encourage the next Star Trek or Star Wars? And once we have an initial marvelous innovation, how do we sustain the next version and the one after that (see Belk et al. [forthcoming](#))? Since we can't all expect such abductive and passionate product and service breakthroughs, how do we teach creative copying (Boon 2010; Shenkar 2010)? Successful streams of marvelous innovations or clever copies are not mere updates or product line extensions; rather they involve a whole series of leapfrogging catapults. This is a completely new type of product development; not a rationalization of existing product ideas.

To sum up, I see two end-runs around marketing that are making marketing disappear. One is the shift in control of brands from marketers to consumers. This has largely been due to the internet and its affordances. The second seismic shift is also a product of the internet and the rise of the tech sector. The internet has precipitated Big Data, algorithmic decision making, and data analytics. Data is the new oil, at least so long as consumers keep agreeing to those EULAs (End User License Agreements) and governments still allow forcing consumers to tradeoff data and privacy for access to service. These may be bargains with the devil, but the temptation of access to wonderful "free" stuff is irresistible. These trends away from marketing have also been reinforced by some prominent tech visionaries who have flaunted their avoidance of marketing and consumer research. Coupled with the rise of the tech sector's giant corporations that are headed by such visionaries, marketing is not likely to be seen by students as a very attractive major.

Hope for a resurrection

But the same outside-the-box abductive thinking that has led the new tech giants to become the giants that they are, offers a way to revitalize the curriculum by emphasizing blue ocean entrepreneurship as well as follow-the-leader mildly-innovative copying – the two ends of the innovation continuum rather than the muddy middle where our pedagogy has been bogged down. This emphasis on the big thinkers is not to fall victim to the Great Man Theory of History (Carlyle 1840; Hooks 1955). But our present tech-industrial heroes are important because they have helped question the relevance of old marketing ideas. As a field and discipline, we need a re-think of marketing fundamentals like the never-truthful PR-oriented marketing concept. We need re-conceptualized marketing pedagogy. We need, as much as ever, to understand the consumer, but not by emulating psychological experiments, borrowing theories, doing structural equation modelling, or conducting focus groups and survey research. Rather, we need ethnographic research, netnographic research, autoethnographic research, observation, participant

observation, depth interviews, and projective methods. We need abductive reasoning and analysis. We need a great reawakening of the exquisite corpse of marketing.

As academics, one of the best ways to do this is by attending conference sessions on topics about which we now know nothing or using methods about which we now know little. We should read articles and journals that also force us to cross boundaries and learn new things. We can then follow-up with Google Scholar searches of topics and authors that have newly caught our interest. When we have enough reading and listening background to try it, we should take a plunge into new ponds, pushing our research and writing into new areas. And we should take what we learn as well as what puzzles us into the classroom. Before we can reanimate marketing, we need to reanimate ourselves. Then again, they may be one and the same.

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