

Life begins at 40?

Further thoughts on marketing's "mid-life crisis"

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Offers an analysis of marketing's current crisis of representation

Introduction

Forty years ago, a momentous event occurred in the history of modern marketing[1]. In a short section of his best-selling textbook, *The Practice of Management*, Peter Drucker (1954, p.36) stated that, "Marketing is the distinguishing, the unique function of business...It is the whole business seen from the point of view of its final result, that is, from the customer's point of view. Concern and responsibility for marketing must therefore permeate all areas of the enterprise". Although this remark merely reiterated a long-established principle of commercial life, that customers are the be-all and end-all of organizational wellbeing, Drucker's elevation of marketing to a position of paramount importance and his spellbinding rhetoric represented a dramatic, innovative articulation of what is now known as a "marketing orientation" – viewing the business from the customer's standpoint and placing the customer at the very centre of an organization's endeavours. Drucker's statement, in short, represented the birth, the genesis, of modern marketing and paved the way for subsequent generations of practitioners, consultants and academic researchers.

Forty years on from Drucker's remarkable insight, one could be forgiven for thinking that he was mistaken, that we have all been wasting our time, our very lives. As a glance at the journals amply testifies, doubts are increasingly being cast on the veracity of the marketing concept (Brownlie and Saren, 1992); marketing principles no longer appear relevant to the real world and, if anything, seem to do more harm than good (McKiernan, 1992); leading figures in the field are marketing's most outspoken critics rather than the propagators of the marketing message (Day, 1992; Wensley, 1994); reports on the plight of modern marketing are periodically produced and their recommendations routinely ignored (AMA, 1988; Coopers and Lybrand, 1993); and, the once prevailing sense of academic cohesion, solidarity and commitment to the marketing cause has been torn asunder by a series of bitter philosophical disputes and declarations of epistemological independence (see

Kavanagh, 1994). In these depressing circumstances, it is little wonder that many people consider the marketing concept anachronistic, an aberration, a throwback to a bygone era of mass markets and mass marketing (Hoyt, 1991; McKenna, 1991). Not everyone, admittedly, would concur with this disconcerting diagnosis of marketing's current state of health, but it is undeniable that a great many contemporary commentators maintain that marketing is in the throes of a "mid-life crisis", a fundamental crisis of representation (e.g. Brady and Davis, 1993; Freeling, 1994; Wilson and McDonald, 1994).

Although it is somehow appropriate that marketing should be facing a mid-life crisis in this its fortieth year, it is equally necessary to try to keep things in perspective. Few would deny that modern marketing has its problems and that these problems are very serious. But they are not new problems, they are not insurmountable, they are not necessarily unhealthy or terminal. Quite the reverse. Marketing's hairline may be receding, its eyesight and hearing may be imperfect, a wrinkle or two may be discernible, and cosmetic surgery may well be necessary, but as this article will seek to demonstrate, there's life in the old dog yet! In order, therefore, to try to place things in proper context, the article commences with a potted history of the modern marketing concept; it turns to an analysis of marketing's current "crisis of representation"; continues with the presentation of ten key points concerning the past, present and future of marketing; and concludes with a simple model of marketing's developmental or evolutionary cycle. This article does not claim to be the last word on the "crisis" debate, but it argues that a broader, more historically informed perspective is vitally necessary.

Historical overview

The marketing revolution

It is commonplace of introductory textbooks that activities akin to marketing occurred before the "marketing revolution" of the 1950s. According to some commentators indeed marketing practices have been around since the very dawn of civilization (for example, the long-distance trade in flint axe heads during late palaeolithic times). It is generally accepted, however, that

an appreciable intensification of marketing activity, a new phase in the development of modern marketing, has occurred in the last 40 years (Baker, 1989). Apart from the environmental factors that underpinned this process, primarily the post-war economic miracle, growing consumer affluence, high levels of intersectoral competition, and a situation where supply often exceeded demand, Drucker's above mentioned exhortation is traditionally regarded as the spark that ignited the marketing conflagration (Foxall, 1984).

Drucker's seminal, albeit brief, statement was subsequently expanded on and codified in perhaps the two most frequently anthologized articles in the marketing literature, "The marketing revolution" by Keith (1960) and "Marketing myopia" by Levitt (1960). The former described the experiences of the Pillsbury Company, contending that the organization was in the throes of a marketing equivalent of the Copernican revolution. From the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, the company was "production oriented", in that it was preoccupied with the manufacturing process, with new products being launched to dispose of manufacturing by-products rather than serve a market need. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Pillsbury was characterized by a "sales orientation", where a sophisticated sales organization, backed up with advertising and market analysis, was assembled to dispose of the company's product lines. The subsequent era, however, was "marketing oriented", in that the purpose of Pillsbury was no longer to mill flour, nor to manufacture and sell a wide range of products, but to satisfy the needs and desires of its customers. This tripartite periodizing schema, though deeply flawed as a general model, has since become the mainstay of marketing ideology (its belief system, in other words). As the content analyses conducted by Hollander (1986) and Fullerton (1988) have shown, variants of the production era, sales era, marketing era schema are indiscriminately recycled in almost every introductory textbook (not to mention short courses and consultancy reports and the like).

Alongside Keith's much-vaunted marketing revolution, Levitt (1960) highlighted the dangers of "marketing myopia": companies' failure to respond to the changing requirements of consumers; their preoccupation with the products they produce rather than the markets they serve; a tendency to define their purpose and customer needs too narrowly (railroads rather than transportation, movies as opposed to entertainment, etc.); and an inability to recognize that all industries, even the then rapidly growing chemicals and electronics industries, would one day decline like the corner grocery stores, dry cleaners and buggy whip manufacturers before them. He emphasized, in addition, that businesses must develop "backwards", commencing with the customer's needs, through the delivery of customer satisfaction, and the creation of new products, to finding the raw materials

from which these needs are ultimately satisfied. The whole purpose of the exercise, in effect, was not to produce goods and services but to buy customers. Although Levitt's polemic has since been dismissed as contradictory, ambiguous and misleading (e.g. Marion, 1993), his article undoubtedly encapsulated the essence of modern marketing, succeeded in setting the agenda for a generation of marketing academics and practitioners and, even today, it has lost little of its extraordinary resonance and rhetorical power.

The criticisms of Levitt and Keith should not disguise the fact that, along with several other enthusiasts (McKitterick, 1957, in particular), they were responsible for the propagation of the modern marketing concept. Albeit expressed in a variety of colourful apophthegms – "customer satisfaction engineering", "creating and keeping profitable customers", "selling goods that don't come back to people that do", etc. – the original marketing concept comprised three elements: an awareness of customer wants, which are considered to be the point of departure for a marketing-led organization; the integration and co-ordination of all the activities of the firm around this basic customer orientation; and regarding profit rather than sales volume as the measure of success of the organization's marketing activities (Hollander, 1986). As we shall presently discover, not everyone subscribes to this particular definition and distinctions are sometimes drawn between the associated family of terms (e.g. marketing concept, marketing philosophy, marketing orientation, market orientation and customer orientation), but the essential point is that the early post-war era was characterized by an increasingly widespread belief that marketing and the marketing concept respectively comprised the single most important management function and the key to success in business.

The broadening debate

If, thanks to the endeavours of Levitt and his fellow evangelists, the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the efflorescence of the modern marketing concept, the subsequent decades have been characterized by periodic, occasionally polemical and undeniably provocative debate. Two issues have proved to be of particular importance:

- (1) marketing's domain, the area over which the concept is deemed to extend; and
- (2) the precise character of the marketing concept itself.

The debate over marketing's proper domain was initiated by Kotler and Levy (1969) when they contended that marketing was an all-pervasive activity which applied as much to the selling of politicians, universities and charities as it did to toothpaste, soap and steel. As a consequence of dramatic, post-war social changes and the emergence of large, complex, professionally managed

non-business organizations, such as museums, police departments and trades unions, it had become necessary to broaden the concept of marketing. Traditional notions of the "product", the "consumer" and the marketing "toolkit" had to be redefined in non-business terms and attempts made to transfer the principles of effective marketing management – generic product definition, target groups identification, customer behaviour analysis, integrated marketing planning, continuous feedback and so on – to the marketing of services, persons and ideas. In effect, "the choice facing those who manage non-business organizations is not whether to market or not to market, for no organization can avoid marketing. The choice is whether to do it well or poorly" (Kotler and Levy, 1969, p. 15).

Developing this theme, Kotler (1972) went on to argue that it was necessary to extend the concept even further. There were, he maintained, three stages of marketing consciousness. The first represented the traditional view of marketing that it was essentially a business subject involving market transactions, the economic exchange of goods and services. Consciousness stage two held that marketing was applicable to all organizations that had customers or clients, even though payment in the normal sense may not take place. However, the third level of consciousness, deemed the "generic" concept, contended that marketing was not only relevant to all organizations, be they churches, political parties or government departments, but to the relations between an organization and all of its publics, not just the consuming public. In fact, Kotler went even further still, extending the concept beyond organizations to transactions between any two parties or "social units" (e.g. watching television) and, in what can only be described as a rush of blood to the head, he concluded that "marketing can be viewed as a category of human action, distinguishable from other categories of human action such as voting, loving, consuming and fighting".

Needless to say, not everyone shared Kotler's marketing megalomania and several critics warned of the dangers of over-extending the concept. Luck (1969) believed that marketing should be confined to considerations of market transactions and decried the "semantic jungle" that broadening entailed. Laczniak and Michie (1979) held that it was becoming all but impossible to distinguish between marketing and non-marketing transactions. Furthermore, in a particularly prescient article, Bartels (1974) predicted that broadening would only serve to direct attention away from important but neglected areas of marketing activity (like physical distribution), lead to an emphasis on methodology rather than issues of substance, and give rise to an increasingly esoteric and abstract marketing literature. Set against this, however, Kotler's (1972) denunciation of his critics as "myopic" (which, thanks to Levitt, is the most damning indictment

in marketing's lexicon), his declaration that failure to rethink marketing at a time of great social change ran the risk of marginalization and irrelevance (which dovetailed neatly with contemporaneous concern about the nature of the relationship between marketing and society) and, not least, the simple fact that the marketing message was deemed relevant, and hence enthusiastically embraced by, individuals and organizations outwith the traditional marketing arena, rapidly rendered the "broadening" debate irrelevant. Only five years later, Hunt (1976) could declare the battle won by the broadeners and all that remained was the need to go forth and multiply by "marketing marketing to non-marketers".

Conceptual construction

Just as marketing's domain has proved to be an intellectual battleground, so too the modern marketing concept has been the subject of extensive debate and periodic modification (see Houston, 1986). Apart from intractable, albeit comparatively minor, issues like the operationalization of the measure of profit or the relationship between profit and market share, the all-important stress placed on meeting customer needs has been criticized, first, for its failure to take the offerings of competitors into account. Success in marketing, so the argument goes, is gained not by meeting customer needs *per se*, but by meeting them better than the competition (Sachs and Benson, 1978). Second, the emphasis on customer orientation has been condemned for diverting attention away from the product and its manufacture. By focusing attention on the consumer's perceived needs, the marketing concept has served to stifle innovation as, in many situations, consumers are incapable of articulating latent needs and talk in terms of the familiar. This gives rise to the proliferation of minor twist, "me too" products and the eventual loss of technological leadership (Bennett and Cooper, 1981; Tauber, 1974). Third, and most importantly, it has often been contended that the marketing concept should transcend mere customer orientation and deal instead with broader societal concerns (Bell and Emory, 1971; Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). The key question, in other words, is not whether products or services can be developed to meet consumer needs, but whether they should be developed in light of the attendant social consequences (environmental pollution, depletion of natural resources, global warming, neo-colonialism, etc.).

Marketers, not unnaturally, have responded vigorously to the attacks on and controversies surrounding the marketing concept. Interestingly, however, the defenders of the faith did not react to the challenge by arguing – in line with Drucker's original exposition – that marketing's domain did not extend to innovation and that the concept was being criticized unfairly. Such a stance was clearly impossible given marketing's Kotlerite claims to universality. Instead, the response has been to extend the

marketing concept to incorporate the competitive context, technological innovation, societal concerns and so on. For example, most latter-day definitions of the marketing concept in mainstream textbooks specifically mention the need to meet customer needs more efficiently and effectively than competitors, and great store is placed on strategic considerations generally (Kotler, 1988; O'Shaughnessy, 1992). Many theorists also include "technological push" as well as "market pull" in their conceptualizations, even though the former places marketers in the paradoxical position of appearing to advocate the once-reviled "product orientation" (Samli *et al.*, 1987). Similarly, societal concerns have been embraced with some vigour, especially by the macromarketing fraternity and notwithstanding the fact that to non-marketers this altruism smacks of "poacher turned gamekeeper" at best and breathtaking cynicism at worst (Sheth *et al.*, 1988).

Although often bitter and polemical, the above debates concerning the concept's domain and composition should not disguise the fact that marketing has developed considerably in the post-war era. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this process of development can be described in terms of Ansoff's celebrated and much-cited product-market matrix. The first cell, penetration, comprises the attempts to demonstrate the veracity of the modern marketing concept, to highlight its superiority over the sales and product orientations that once prevailed, and to promote its acceptance throughout the business community. The second cell, market development, refers to the revolution, initiated by Kotler and Levy, involving the application of the marketing concept to all manner of non-business organizations, from charities to high schools, and to all of an organization's

constituents. Product development, the third cell, pertains to the subsequent modifications of the original marketing concept, which was expanded to embrace the competitive environment, strategic concerns, technological push etc.. The final cell, diversification, alludes to the societal concept of marketing, in so far as this involved a reformulation of both the product/concept itself (the key issue is not consumer needs or profit but societal concerns) and the market/domain to which it pertained – public policy, consumerism, resource exploitation, the deficiencies of the marketing system and so on.

Crisis, what crisis?

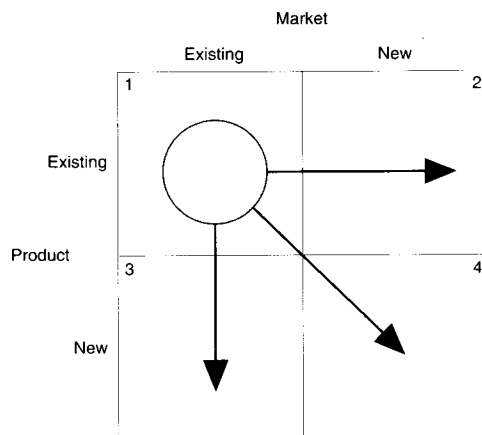
Marketing's middle-aged spread

In their recent book, *Competitive Positioning*, Hooley and Saunders (1993, p. 3) contend that the marketing concept has come of age. Whereas a decade or two ago marketing was misunderstood by most senior managers and typically considered to be a new name for old-fashioned selling, marketing is now "on everyone's lips". Certainly, there is much to support this contention. As Kheir-El-Din's (1991) detailed review of the literature amply demonstrates, there is considerable empirical evidence that a marketing orientation is the key to long-term business success. To cite but three examples:

- (1) Hooley and Lynch's (1985) detailed analysis of 1,504 British companies found that "high fliers" exhibited a significantly greater market orientation, as measured by their use of market research in all its forms, strategic sensibility and concern with product quality and design, than the "also rans".
- (2) Narver and Slater (1990) examined the marketing orientation of the top managers of 140 strategic business units (SBUs) in the USA, using a comprehensive multiple-item scale, and discovered not only a clear relationship between marketing orientation and profitability but also that the highest degree of marketing orientation was exhibited by managers of the most profitable companies.
- (3) Wong and Saunders' (1993) multivariate study of matched Japanese, American and British companies demonstrated that organizations classified as "innovators", "quality marketeers" and "mature marketeers" were significantly more successful in terms of profits, sales and market share than those classified as "price promoters", "product makers" and "aggressive pushers".

Many other ringing endorsements of the marketing philosophy could be paraded but suffice it to say that the relationship between marketing and business success appears to hold regardless of company size, sector or geographical context (Baker and Hart, 1989). Conversely,

Figure 1. *The evolution of the modern marketing concept*



Source: Adapted from Ansoff (1957)

some of the principal reasons for failure in business are weaknesses in marketing performance – inability to develop a distinctive image, a lack of understanding of company strengths and weaknesses and unwillingness to adjust to changing times and consumer needs. Doyle (1985), for instance, contends that inept marketing is the primary cause of British industry's continuing lack of international competitiveness and, rather than seeking macro-economic solutions to the country's commercial ills, much greater attention should be paid to improving the marketing competence of individual companies.

Marketing is in the ascendent as an academic discipline □

More fundamentally perhaps than the empirical evidence that can be marshalled on marketing's behalf – after all, innumerable surveys of senior management attest to its continuing importance (Wong, 1993) – there is the simple but inescapable fact that marketing has been successful in the marketplace of ideas. The marketing concept has been deemed relevant to fields as diverse as health care, public administration, the not-for-profit sector, aesthetic accomplishments, individual people and religious experiences (Doyle, 1993; Hirschman 1983; 1987; Jennings and Saunders, 1993; Walsh, 1993). It is rapidly colonizing the erstwhile command economies of eastern Europe where the market is supplanting Marxism as the societal touchstone, albeit not without privation (see Thomas, 1993). The proliferation of publications, professorships, degree programmes and autonomous university departments testifies to the fact that marketing is in the ascendent as an academic discipline. And, as Huczynski (1993, p. 35) has recently shown, the diverse writings of the new generation of management gurus – Tom Peters, Michael Porter, Kenneth Blanchard, etc. – concur on one point, “that the central fact of business today [is] the emergence of consumer sovereignty”. In these circumstances, indeed, it is fair to surmise that 40 years after Drucker's original exposition, approximately 35 years after Levitt's codification and a quarter of a century after Kotler and Levy's endeavours to broaden its base, the modern marketing concept has fully matured and, if anything, is exhibiting evidence of incipient middle-aged spread.

Marketing's mid-life crisis

Despite the undeniable achievements of modern marketing, an undercurrent of existential concern is equally apparent. Many latter-day commentators on the

marketing condition have concluded that something is amiss, that the concept is deeply, perhaps irredeemably, flawed, that its seemingly solid theoretical foundations are by no means secure and that marketing is teetering on the brink of a serious intellectual crisis (Marion, 1993; Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993). Indeed, such is the pervasiveness of the current unease – the 1993 Academy of Marketing Science conference, for example, devoted a special session, featuring some of America's foremost marketing scholars, to the issue and a contemporaneous European conference entitled “Rethinking Marketing” was also considered necessary – and so prominent are the practitioners, consultants and academics concerned, that even the staunchest defenders of modern marketing seem prepared to concede that the field is facing a crisis of representation (e.g. McDonald, 1994; Thomas, 1994; Wensley, 1994).

- Piercy (1992, p. 15), for example, maintains that the traditional marketing concept, “assumes and relies on the existence of a world which is alien and unrecognisable to many of the executives who actually have to manage marketing for real”.
- Gummesson (1987, p. 10) states that “the present marketing concept...is unrealistic and needs to be replaced”.
- Nilson (1992, p. 4) contends that “a revision of the marketing concept is necessary”.
- Rapp and Collins (1990, p. 3) suggest that “the traditional methods...simply aren't working as well anymore”.
- Brownlie and Saren (1992, p. 38) argue that “it is questionable whether the marketing concept as it has been propagated can provide the basis for successful business at the end of the twentieth century”.
- McKenna (1991, p. 67) concludes that “there is less and less reason to believe that the traditional approach can keep up with real customer wishes and demands or with the rigors of competition”.
- Professor Michael Thomas (1993), one of the most respected marketing academics in Britain, has recently made the frank, and frankly astonishing, confession that after 30 years of propagating the marketing message, he is having serious doubts about its continuing efficacy.

These expressions of concern, it must be emphasized, could be extended almost indefinitely. It is not just a question of the overarching marketing concept or philosophy, but the very functioning of marketing on a daily basis (Mitchell, 1993, 1994), the re-organization of organizations and the place of marketing departments therein (Gummesson, 1991), the ever-increasing fragmentation and sheer unpredictability of markets and competition (Mueller-Heumann, 1992), the seeming

irrelevance of long-established marketing theories like the Boston Matrix and product life cycle (Brown, 1993), and, not least, the proliferation of marketing cure-alls which are little more than re-hashed versions of the original marketing concept (Baker, 1994). It would appear, if the nay-sayers are to be believed, that the complexity and flux of today's socio-economic environment has rendered marketing mutant and unable to adapt. Extant strategic frameworks seem directionless and dangerous. The marketing mix is all mixed-up. We suffer from unprincipled principles. Marketing philosophers increasingly indulge in unphilosophical mud-slinging. Tried and trusted research techniques are both untrustworthy and trying. Even marketing intelligence is oxymoronic.

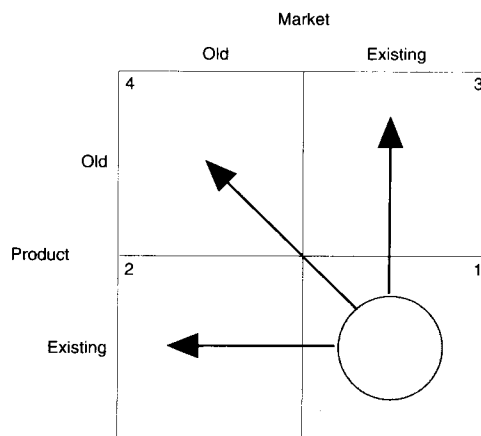
Conceptual deconstruction

If, as many authoritative individuals maintain, marketing is in the throes of its "mid-life crisis", there is less consensus on the most suitable means of surmounting this state of affairs and the future direction that the specialism should take. For the sake of argument, however, these various suggestions can be summarized in the four-cell matrix, illustrated in Figure 2, which involves the inversion or reversal of our earlier product-market typology. The first position, realization, subscribes to the view that the modern marketing concept is basically sound, but that the problem is one of implementation. In other words, the traditional difficulties of getting the concept accepted by top management, of distinguishing successfully between marketing philosophy and function, trappings and substance, rhetoric and reality etc., have been superseded by a concern with making marketing work through a

heightened understanding of organizational politics and inter-functional rivalry. To this end, a programme of internal marketing – marketing the marketing concept within organizations – is often advocated. Typically, this involves a series of decisions on organization, information gathering, planning, budgeting, control procedures and, above all, action, ensuring that the transformation process actually takes place (see Piercy, 1992; Whittington and Whipp, 1992).

The second position, retrenchment, also regards the marketing concept as reasonably acceptable in itself, but acknowledges that there are certain circumstances where it is either inappropriate or of minor rather than major relevance. For some people, it is irrelevant in high-tech industries where discontinuous innovation is the norm and traditional marketing research can inhibit rather than enhance the process (Workman, 1993). For others, it is unsuitable in basic commodity markets where the opportunities for meaningful differentiation are less clearly marked than is the case elsewhere (Narver and Slater, 1990). For yet others, the concept has shortcomings when applied to certain sectors, such as services, public administration and not-for-profit (Wensley, 1990); in certain countries, most notably eastern Europe (Thomas, 1993); for certain companies depending on their specific organizational, competitive and market circumstances (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990); and, in certain macro-economic conditions (Foxall, 1984). These uncertainties, it must be emphasized, do not represent a re-run of the old questions "how does marketing differ in various settings – industrial versus consumer, domestic versus international, goods versus services and so on?". The key point is not that the nature of marketing differs, but that the marketing concept itself is deemed inappropriate when applied in certain contexts.

Figure 2. *Marketing's mid-life crisis*



Source: Adapted from Ansoff (1957)

Rearrangement, the third position, does not so much take issue with marketing's domain as the nature of the (broadened) marketing concept, and how it needs to be modified to meet today's marketing realities. According to Webster (1988), for example, it has become necessary to "rediscover" marketing, to scrape away the encrustations of strategic management, which have led to an unhealthy and myopic preoccupation with competitor activity and market share, and replace it with a renewed focus on the customer. To get back, in effect, to the basics of the original marketing concept – customer orientation. Baker (1989), by contrast, contends that too much emphasis has been placed on the consumer, consumerism and societal concerns generally. Marketing, he argues is about exchanges that are mutually satisfying for both consumers and providers. More fundamentally perhaps, many authorities maintain that attention should increasingly focus on a very specific aspect of the marketing concept, namely, "relationships" (Christopher *et al.*, 1991). In other words, to the establishment and

maintenance of long-term marketing relationships rather than the former preoccupation with one-off transactions. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that, at the time of writing, relationship marketing is the single most popular topic on the academic research agenda, though it is noteworthy that most of the studies thus far are concerned with relationships in the profit sector. Broadening the concept of relationship marketing to the not-for-profit and non-business sectors has yet to be meaningfully addressed (Butler and Brown, 1994).

Reappraisal, the final and by far the most radical position, comprises an acknowledgement of the simple fact that the marketing concept has not succeeded and is unlikely to prove successful in its present form. Despite the latter-day triumph of marketing, the failure rate of new products is as high as it ever was – possibly higher. Consumerism, the so-called “shame of marketing”, is still rampant, especially in its virulent “green” mutation. Selling has not, contra the marketing concept, been rendered redundant because few products actually sell themselves.

The failure rate of new products is as high as ever

Companies in countries where the marketing message has not been received loud and clear, such as Japan and Germany, continue to outperform their Anglo-American counterparts and, even in the latter milieu, businesses can still succeed without the aid of modern marketing. Piercy (1992) cites The Body Shop, Amstrad, Ratners, and Marks and Spencer as prime examples[2].

In these circumstances, it has been suggested that marketing should revert to pre-marketing era marketing; in other words, to adopt what could be described as a “neo-sales” or “post-product” orientation. Dickinson *et al.* (1986), for instance, stress that marketing is basically manipulative and monopoly seeking, that customers in many instances are totally unaware of their needs, and that marketing’s task is to shape consumer wants, determine their perceptions and persuade them of the attractiveness of what the company has on sale. Likewise, Chen *et al.* (1992, p. 441) have recently made a case for the pre-eminence of production, concluding with the words “the conventional wisdom that marketing is expected to play a major role in formulating corporate strategies, with manufacturing simply responding to these strategies, is no longer affordable”. An alternative form of reversion, to an intuitive, creative, flexible, idiographic,

essentially “non-scientific” marketing concept, has also been suggested. This approach recognizes that “each marketing situation should be treated as unique and in its own right, drawing on all the available knowledge that may help in handling the situation” (Gummesson, 1987, p. 19). Another, and potentially the most extreme position of all, highlights that marketing-oriented management is a historical artefact which emerged in certain countries under a particular set of socio-economic conditions (Baker, 1989; Foxall, 1984). Just as the sales and product orientations were appropriate to their own particular historical eras, so too a marketing orientation is a product of its time. For a growing number of commentators, that time has passed and we are facing nothing less than the end of marketing (Brownlie, *et al.* 1994; Hoyt, 1991; Lynch, 1994).

Evaluation

Clearly, these are very serious concerns which cannot be lightly dismissed or swept under the carpet. Indeed, the significance of these issues is reinforced when it is recalled that the individuals expressing their disquiet are prominent members of the mainstream marketing community. They are not outsiders with an axe to grind about “unscrupulous” or “exploitative” marketing practices – an unwarranted and misguided charge with which we are all too familiar – but people who are marketers by inclination, who subscribe to the marketing concept and who have devoted a great deal of their lives to disseminating the marketing message. The irony, of course, is that at a time when marketers are becoming increasingly uncertain about marketing, marketing is more widely accepted than ever before and being enthusiastically embraced in fields, like health care and the civil service, that have long been impervious to the notion of customer orientation. It even appears to have attained the grail of academic respectability, in so far as researchers from adjoining disciplines – including those oppositionally-inclined scholars on the left of the political spectrum, who have traditionally regarded marketing with suspicion, derision and disdain – now treat it with grudging admiration and accord it the academic recognition it undoubtedly deserves (see Brown, 1994).

Contemporary marketing is thus in the paradoxical (if typically mid-life) position of ostensible public success, achievement and acclaim, coupled with private *angst*, uncertainty and ennui. In these circumstances, it is necessary to try to take stock, to attempt to make sense of this paradox and come to terms with marketing’s crisis-prone situation. With this in mind, it may be worthwhile emphasizing the following ten key points, which for the sake of convenience will be discussed under the three broad headings of marketing past, marketing present and marketing future.

Marketing past

It is important, first and foremost, to recognize that "crises" in marketing are not new. Over 30 years ago, for example, Bartels (1962) was discussing the crisis in marketing. Twenty years or so ago, Bell and Emory (1971) were saying something similar; and, it is more than ten years now since Bennett and Cooper (1981) were also crying crisis. In fact, when we look back on these previous episodes of crisis (which, incidently, induced as much concern among the commentators of the time as can be discerned among observers of the current marketing scene), it is clear that they were precipitated by essentially "uncontrollable" events in the external marketing environment – economic turbulence, political instability, technological change, new forms of competition and so on. Moreover, with the eventual passage of time we are often inclined to forget just how "serious" these environmentally induced crises actually were (consider the electricity strikes, three-day weeks, oil embargoes and middle eastern conflicts of the early 1970s). Although practitioners, in particular, like to believe that marketing management is becoming more and more difficult with every passing year, the business environment is probably no more turbulent at present than it has been at certain times in the past and will no doubt be at certain times in the future. It follows that marketing's current crisis of representation is probably neither more nor less profound than those we have faced on previous occasions. The crucial point, therefore, is that we have been here before.

Second, perceived crises invariably prompt a response, several responses in fact. Thus, for instance, the crisis that afflicted marketing in the early 1970s spawned the societal marketing concept, the macro-marketing school of thought and several other perceived panaceas (e.g. "imbricative marketing") which have failed to stand the test of time as a result, presumably, of their ultimate inappropriateness to the crucial concerns of the day. Similarly, the "trappings and substance" inspired crisis of the early 1980s paved the way for that decade's preoccupation with marketing implementation and strategy, and, moreover, with the deeper philosophical underpinnings of the discipline itself (i.e. the ferocious debates between "realists" and "relativists", "positivists" and "post-positivists", etc.). The present crisis has also stimulated all manner of marketing cure-alls - neo-marketing, micro-marketing, turbo-marketing and maxi-marketing, to name but a few – of which "relationship marketing" seems most suited to the contemporary marketing environment of strategic alliances, joint ventures and boundaryless corporations, though it is perhaps too early to pass final judgement.

Third, it is arguable in light of the foregoing points that periodic crises are beneficial rather than detrimental to the marketing cause. Like it or not, a "crisis" forces

everyone to take stock of their own position; to evaluate their achievements thus far; to consider the marketing alternatives on offer; and, possibly, to transfer their loyalties to a completely different perspective, paradigm, worldview or way of doing things. The often bitter debates surrounding such convulsions may seem unseemly and counterproductive – and they probably are in the short term – but the eventual upshot of these periodic infusions of polemic, and predictions of impending disciplinary apocalypse, is an all-round improvement in overall marketing standards. Few of us, I suspect, would deny that the "broadening" debate was good for marketing, though it probably seemed debilitating at the time, or that the philosophical crisis instigated by Paul Anderson in the early 1980s and which launched a decade of personal vilification among the discipline's leading academic lights, was a milestone in late twentieth century marketing scholarship (Kavanagh, 1994). Mud-slinging may be unsavoury, but it certainly draws a crowd. Contrary, therefore, to what is sometimes suggested, the time spent in debate, diatribe, self-reflection and above all in crying crisis, is not time wasted. On the contrary, crises are necessary, crises are healthy, crises help keep marketing sclerosis at bay.

**It is arguable
that periodic crises
are beneficial** ☐

A fourth, and in some ways the most intriguing, aspect of modern marketing's 40-year history, is that the various crises and their putative solutions always seem to centre on, or revolve around, the same broad issues. Although the terminology employed appears to change with each individual episode of uncertainty, the discussion invariably focuses on a small number of key questions such as "art or science", the core construct ("exchange", "transvections", etc.) and, as noted earlier, the extent of marketing's domain and the characteristics of the marketing concept. Thus, for example, the current debate concerning the degree to which the marketing concept is applicable in certain contexts, is actually a re-run of the "broadening" debate of about 20 years ago (admittedly in reverse and notwithstanding the fact that no one seems to have recognized it as such). The precise composition of the marketing concept is also in the throes of re-conceptualization, though few advocates of (say) the micro-marketing or relationship marketing paradigms seem ready to acknowledge that they are merely reheating and serving up certain aspects of the original notion of customer orientation. Relationships, as Baker (1994) and Wensley (1994) have recently pointed out, have

always been an important aspect of marketing. It is arguable, therefore, that just as marketing crises constantly recur, so too the same concerns tend to be addressed and the same solutions suggested, albeit with a different terminological twist on each occasion.

Marketing present

Fifth, we are not alone. It is all too easy at times of "crisis" to become unduly introspective, to regard marketing's problems as more profound or intractable than those that obtain elsewhere. The fact of the matter, however, is that many academic specialisms – most of which are longer established and more mature than marketing – are currently expressing uncertainty about their certitudes, suffering from unprincipled principles, floundering in conceptual quandaries and experiencing existential doubts. Consider the recent declaration by Henry Mintzberg (1994) of the demise of strategic planning. The death of economics has also been announced (Ormerod, 1994) as has the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), the disintegration of organization studies (Clegg, 1993), the failure of both philosophy and physics (Scruton, 1994; Smith, 1989), and even psychoanalysis appears to be in need of extensive therapy (Gellner, 1993). Imagine, moreover, the self-doubt that the collapse of Marxism has precipitated among left-wing, oppositionally inclined sociologists, geographers and political scientists (Bennett, 1993), or the profound implications of latter-day postmodern challenges to the interpretive authority of social anthropologists and legal precedent for jurisprudence (Rosenau, 1992). Thus, although our preoccupation with marketing's problems is perfectly understandable – after all, it is up to us to solve them – it is necessary to try to keep things in perspective, to recognize that crises of representation are not confined to ourselves and, not least, to appreciate that, compared with the problems facing other disciplines, the travails of marketing are fairly trivial.

The travails of marketing are fairly trivial

Sixth, when we examine the present state of marketing through the lens of its turbulent past, it is all too easy to focus on the pattern of seemingly perpetual schism and see – mixed metaphor notwithstanding – a glass that is half-empty instead of one that is half-full. Conflict, crises and periodic bouts of introspective self-abasement may well be healthy – a necessary stimulus – but it is enormously important to enter middle age with an

appreciation of just how much has been achieved hitherto. Apart from its adoption, nominally at least, by innumerable business and non-business organizations, its recognition as a reputable professional body (blessed since 1989 with a Royal Charter) and its emergence as a legitimate, if not exactly Nobel Prize garlanded, social science with specialized degree programmes, university departments and the accompanying academic paraphernalia, the all-round standards of marketing research and scholarship have improved markedly in the 40 years since Drucker's seminal contribution. You only have to glance through the back issues of major marketing journals to appreciate the technical, methodological and philosophical upgrading that has taken place. Technically, a host of sophisticated statistical procedures and mathematical models are regularly deployed. Methodologically, the issues of internal and external validity, reliability, generalizability, split-run testing, experimental designs and so on are routinely discussed; and, philosophically, the appropriateness or otherwise of various positions – realism versus relativism, empiricism versus subjectivism, positivism versus instrumentalism, etc. – are frequently debated. We have indeed come a long way!

Seventh, if you do choose to peruse the back issues of marketing's premier journals, you will probably be struck by at least two other closely-related facts. The first of these is that many marketing "classics", as they are referred to in the anthologies, would simply be unpublishable today. Although the quality of contemporary academic arguments may be no better – possibly worse – than a generation ago, the standards of marketing scholarship have increased so much in the interim that the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research* and the like no longer appear to have room for articles, such as Kotler and Levy's (1969) prize-winner, of six pages and four references. Second, some of the most enthusiastic contributors to the journals of the 1950s and 1960s were marketing practitioners (e.g. Keith, McKitterick, Lavidge and Steiner). Today, it is almost inconceivable that an article by a marketing practitioner would appear in the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, or the *Journal of Consumer Research* and sightings of practitioners are becoming increasingly rare in British and European journals, which have long prided themselves on horny-handed empiricism, relevance and applicability. On the contrary, the complaint is frequently heard that marketing's journals contain little that is of relevance to practitioners. It is arguable, therefore, that the fundamental schism within contemporary marketing is not between the advocates of "relationships" and "transactions", "realism" and "relativism" or whatever, but between academics and practitioners. Indeed, some highly respected scholars, such as Holbrook and Hirschman (1993), are suggesting that the traditional connection with practising marketing

managers should be severed, since association with a particular social group undermines any disciplinary claims to academic objectivity and disinterestedness. To this end, the secessionists invariably quote, with approval, Tucker's (1974) celebrated analogy that marketers study consumers as fishermen study fish (rather than as dispassionate marine biologists). Such élitism, however, overlooks the simple fact that experienced fishermen often know as much, if not more, about piscine habits and behaviour than a shoal of academically inclined biologists. Instead of seeking to abandon our links with the everyday world of practising managers, academics should redouble their efforts to keep in touch with marketing "reality".

Marketing future

Eighth, in light of the foregoing, it would be easy to conclude that the future of marketing lies in its past (of practising managers). Getting back to basics is all very well, but it is also necessary to re-assess the nature, characteristics and strength of the original foundations. In other words, it is necessary to explore modern marketing's apparent aversion to paradox, its seeming preoccupation with either/or scenarios (low cost or differentiation strategies, premium or penetration pricing, restricted or extensive distribution, etc.), and its all-important, but rarely questioned, assumption that marketing can be analysed, planned, implemented and controlled. Many contemporary commentators are contending that we live in a "postmodern" world, characterized by paradox, disorder, difference, contingency, chaos, imprecision, incoherence, fragmentation and fuzzy logic. They urge us to accept that knowledge is bounded, that our capacity to develop meaningful generalizations is limited and that we should substitute the modern emphasis on reason, objectivity and control with a postmodern emphasis on unreason, subjectivity and emancipation – with a rationale that rejects rationality. Clearly, these are heretical thoughts, which call into question the very premisses of "modern" marketing understanding. Nevertheless, they seem to be in tune with today's contradictory business environment, where organizations are variously urged to be both global and local, centralized and decentralized, large and small, and planned yet flexible; where workers are expected to be autonomous team players and managers deemed capable of delegating authority while remaining in complete charge; and, where efficiency and effectiveness prevail, consistency and flexibility attained, product variety and standardization combined, and both mass and niche markets served (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1994; Handy, 1994; Naisbitt, 1994).

A ninth, and closely related point, concerns this small but rapidly growing group of "postmodern" marketers. For these researchers, marketing's "mid-life crisis" represents an opportunity not a threat, in that it enables them to

eschew the discipline's conceptual heritage, to "re-think" the nature of marketing thinking, to position themselves in the intellectual vanguard and, as keepers of the marketing flame, to make their personal reputations (and possibly fortune). Naturally, none of them would recognize this description, arguing that they are motivated by intellectual curiosity or the greater good of the specialism rather than base self-interest. But, in fact, such self-serving behaviours are a very common occurrence. Numerous studies of avant-garde movements in the arts, academic disciplines and many walks of life, reveal that the engineering of some sort of "crisis" or radical break (often involving new terminologies) is vitally necessary for the "outsider" or challenging group, as – ideally – is a vitriolic response from the establishment (Bürger, 1984; Featherstone, 1991). Not only does this help provide the challenging group with a sense of cohesion and shared purpose, but the subsequent process of accommodation eventually places the (usually) younger generation of "radical" thinkers at the centre of power as the "establishment" ages and disengages. In other words, although most commentators seem to agree that marketing is currently in the throes of a crisis of representation, it is equally important to explore these "representations of crisis" and ask, *who* is crying crisis?; *what* is in it for them?; just how widespread *is* this sense of crisis?[3]

The marketing concept is not the be-all and end-all of management

Regardless of the aspirations of its advocates, the emergence of postmodernism, with its emphasis on ambiguity and rejection of grand universal theories, leads directly to the tenth and by far the most important point. Successful though our specialism has been over the last 40 years, it is necessary to acknowledge that marketing cannot change the world. The marketing concept is not the be-all and end-all of management, it is not the philosophers' stone, the ultimate secret of success in business. Make no mistake, marketing is extremely important and it has accomplished a very great deal, but it is bounded, it has limitations, it has its place. Many contemporary commentators seem to believe that if we beat the marketing drum loudly enough, if we all pull together, if marketing is fully embraced, properly implemented and relentlessly pursued (and, of course, if we wish hard enough and really, really believe in it), then all will be well, sweetness and light shall prevail, joy will be unbounded and, although dancing in the streets might be too much to expect, vigorous toe tapping remains a

very strong possibility. The reality, however, is that this utopian state of affairs is unlikely to come to pass. The louder we beat the marketing drum, the less it will be heard. As Willmott (1993) rightly points out, most accountants, human resource managers and operations researchers do not share or endorse the marketing concept, and they are not going to be convinced by energetic tub thumping. Too many marketers are still living in a Kotlerite universe where marketing has all the answers. Supreme self-belief is all very well in the adolescence of an academic specialism. Indeed, it is vitally necessary and, as the experience of other emergent disciplines demonstrates, a very common occurrence (see Brown, 1995). Such self-aggrandizement, however, is inappropriate when adulthood is eventually attained.

Marketing, in sum, may be mature but it has not grown up. Marketing, in fact, has been pursuing its own avant-garde strategy (engineering a break, "naming", claiming novel insights, etc.), yet comparatively few people seem to realize that marketing is now part of the establishment (cf. the interest and respect of outsiders), where megalomaniac assertions are not only unnecessary but counter-productive. Marketing's days as a teenage rebel are over; it is a respectable member of academic society; it has responsibilities; it has its limitations. Marketing needs to eschew self-promotion, to get back to basics, and to demonstrate to others, through hard work and creative thinking (in our own small field of expertise), that we have earned our elevated status. Marketers may not be able to save the world, but they still have some very interesting things to say.

A concluding model

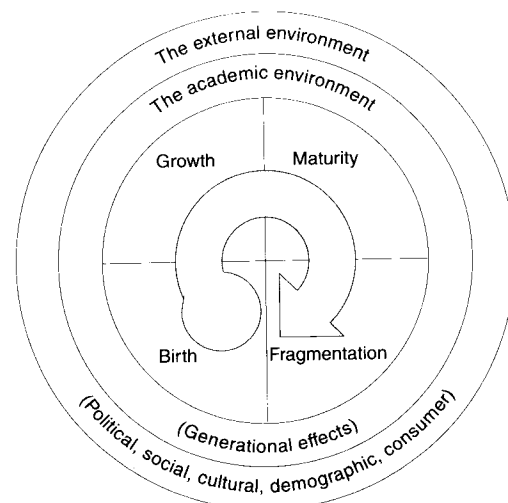
Forty years after Peter Drucker's encapsulation and endorsement, modern marketing is widely considered to be in the throes of a "mid-life crisis". This article has argued that the propagators of this much-publicized crisis are being unduly pessimistic and are themselves suffering from a form of marketing myopia, an inability to see marketing sufficiently clearly. As a consequence of environmental turbulence, marketing has faced crises of representation in the past. Not only have these crises been overcome, but they have acted as a stimulus to further marketing achievements. Marketing has accomplished a great deal in its 40-year history; it has proved immensely popular among its principal constituents of students, practitioners and policy makers; and, provided it is prepared to recognize its limitations and re-examine some basic assumptions, the future of marketing seems assured. Indeed, regardless of whether we are dealing with marketing in crisis or the marketing of crisis (i.e. the carefully-engineered creation of ambitious avant-garde academics or consultants with an expensive placebo to sell), the present sense of uncertainty seems to have spawned a number of candidate solutions to marketing's

current malaise. Although the terminology differs, these solutions invariably represent a contemporary endorsement of marketing's long-standing concerns. They re-present, in other words, the original marketing concept.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is arguable that the trajectory of marketing in the post-war era exhibits a clear-cut pattern, and that this pattern can be described in terms of a modified "wheel of retailing" theory (see Brown, 1991). Illustrated in Figure 3, this states that four stages in the evolution of retailing innovations can be discerned. At the outset, the institution is characterized by the sale of a narrow range of cut-price merchandise. This is followed by the broadening of the range of goods on offer and, subsequently, by all-round improvements in the standards, quality and sophistication of the operation. The fourth phase, however, is typified by retrenchment, contraction, intense competition, fragmentation of the offer and the emergence of a new generation of narrowly focused, price-oriented specialists.

Interpreted in these terms, the modern marketing concept emerged in the 1950s as a simple, radical and (at that time) seemingly counterintuitive approach to doing business, which proved to be enormously appealing, highly successful and relevant to the needs of practising managers. Through time, and thanks largely to the endeavours of Kotler and Levy, marketing progressively broadened its domain to include all manner of non-commercial fields from health care and politics to education and organized religion. This expansion was accompanied by growing technical, methodological and philosophical sophistication which, as predicted by Bartels (1974), led inevitably to academic esotericism, the

Figure 3. *The wheel of marketing development*



pre-eminence of technique over applications and delusions of scholarship, universality and scientific status. Most importantly perhaps, this process of progressive trading up was characterized by a failure to keep in touch with marketing's principal constituents, practising managers and prospective managers, who faced a business environment which was markedly different (albeit probably no more difficult) from that encountered by their predecessors of 40 years beforehand. Marketing scholarship, in short, became increasingly divorced from reality and this has been followed by the fragmentation of the discipline into a multiplicity of hostile factions, retrenchment and a search for a new guiding paradigm.

Interesting though it is, there are two important points arising from this model. The first of these is that the onset of each individual stage appears to have been characterized by "crisis" tendencies – severe bouts of introspection and internal debate. It follows, therefore, that the present crisis of representation is not life-threatening at all, but a perfectly normal, if temporarily disconcerting, occurrence. Second, and more importantly, the contemporary crisis seems to have precipitated another turn of the wheel with the recent emergence of back-to-basics reformulations, most notably relationship marketing. Indeed, in keeping with the first stage of the wheel model, the relationship marketing paradigm eschews esoterism, is highly focused (on the business sector), is experiencing extraordinarily rapid growth, appears to be relevant to and popular with the current generation of practising marketing managers and, not least, the overwhelming optimism of its proponents contrasts starkly with the pessimism that is evident in so many other areas of marketing endeavour – strategy, consumer research, retailing and services marketing, to name but a few. It remains to be seen whether the relationship marketing paradigm will stand the test of time, but even if, as some people claim, marketing is dead, we can still safely conclude with the cry – long live marketing!

Notes

1. Lest any mathematically inclined readers are driven to distraction by the author's evident innumeracy, it should perhaps be pointed out that Drucker's book was first published in the USA in 1954 and the British edition appeared the following year. As this article was written in 1994, and published in 1995, the "fortieth anniversary" claim is not unreasonable.
2. Most of these "successes" have since come to grief and many might conclude that they did so because of their failure to embrace the marketing concept. While this may or may not be the case, the problem with this argument is that it elevates the marketing concept to an irrefutable dogma. All successes are attributed to the operation of the concept and all failures are a consequence of straying

from the path of marketing righteousness. We cannot continue to count our "hits" but ignore our "misses".

3. It goes without saying that the author's analyses of the marketing "crisis" are motivated entirely by a dispassionate search for the truth rather than grubby careerism!

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