



Children and business: pluralistic ethics of marketers

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Michelle Bergadaà

*Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, HEC – University of Geneva,
Geneva, Switzerland*

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Abstract

Purpose – Marketers have increased decision-making responsibility when they work either directly or indirectly with children and adolescents; a vulnerable sector of the population. These young consumers are the target of much-criticised practices. The objective of this paper is to lay the foundations of a code of ethics for the marketing industry.

Design/methodology/approach – First, the stakes for marketers are outlined, in addition to an overview of the epistemological and historic foundations of the marketing discipline; materialism, pragmatic utilitarianism and liberalist individualism.

Findings – Finds that each of these concepts is subject to allegations of suspicious and outright immoral marketing practices.

Originality/value – The paper gives food for thought on morality, professional deontology, ethics and individual decision-making responsibility. This code of ethics is designed to serve as a pragmatic paradigm and it is destined for marketers who are both decision-makers and social stakeholders.

Keywords Youth, Ethics, Decision making, Marketing

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Although marketing first emerged in a communication paradigm, in less than a century, powerful tools have been developed in the areas of research, logistics and communication to put products and services on the market. The field of corporate marketing operates at the interface between companies and society and this same society maintains a predominantly love-hate relationship with the field under discussion. Today, advocates for an alternative globalisation, postmodernist initiatives and a whole range of consumer protection associations are expressing harsh criticism towards this field. Marketers, the people who create and implement marketing tools and concepts, cannot ignore this criticism even if they often believe that ethics is the domain of CEOs and that marketers are not accountable. In this paper, we have chosen to adopt the marketer's perspective to analyse the most common criticism in order to speculate on what possible responses might be used to rebut this criticism.

Marketers have increased decision-making responsibility either they work either directly or indirectly with a vulnerable population like children and adolescents. These young consumers are the target of much-criticised practices. Indeed, children have neither the knowledge nor the mature analytical skills to properly deal with over-tempting offers from corporate enterprises. Far from constituting just a simple segment sector of the population, our youth represent our country's future. The solution to this dilemma cannot lie in isolating these children by banning advertising targeted at young children. The ultimate aim is to ensure that our youth become enlightened consumers. Let us remember that it is the practice of consumerism that exposes children to the necessary socialisation process for them to develop into aware adults.



Using a simple analytical framework, this paper will address the main criticisms levelled at marketing practices, ranging from the materialistic viewpoint through to the utilitarian, liberalistic and societal aspects of marketing.

As a response to this criticism, big companies generally produce a set of rules for ethical practice in order to establish a framework for action. However, in general, this type of charter confuses morality, organisational ethics and professional deontology under the single umbrella term, “ethics” (Isaac, 2000). Yet “ethics” can be translated differently depending on the decision-maker’s perspective. Because marketers are both human and decision-makers, they must be capable of analysing criticism and of taking subsequent action. In this paper, we will clarify our approach to organisational ethics by addressing those problems which pose a dilemma for the marketer, as a person, as someone in the field of marketing, as the accountable person within a company and as a social player in future society. We will refer to a recent analytical table (Bergadaà 2004). Let us recall the basis of this analytical approach. Faced with known risks, like the dangers of smoking, some video games or the much-criticised practice of bombarding children with advertising, marketers cannot remain neutral but rather they should turn to their conscience for the answers. Because marketers work in specific organisations and represent a certain role, they need to have professional ethical benchmarks. They should also be prepared to admit their responsibility for the emerging portrait of future society.

However, marketers never have the absolute liberty of taking a decision in line with their ideal morality (Moussé 2001). They must consider the various stakes, like the survival and development of their companies, clients and partners. This thought process, to our mind, is even more important, given that they are dealing with a population that is, in essence, tomorrow’s society. It is important to help these young people develop into responsible citizens and human beings. Whether he is manager, a student or a researcher, needs pragmatic guidelines, which outline clear underlying principles, objectives and stakes of the marketer’s profession. We will conclude this paper with just some of the still pressing issues for those marketers who are prepared to consider a collective responsibility towards youth.

2. Marketers and materialistic criticism

2.1 The evolution of materialistic exchange

The owning of objects seems to have long framed social relationships in Western society. In many societies, the ritual exchange of objects has structured family ties and the links between social classes (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982; Garabua-Moussaoui and Desjeux, 2000). The term “materialism” generally refers to the ostentatious character of material goods, unlike those for spiritual sustenance. Objects were rare until the twentieth century. They served to unite people as they were passed from one generation to the next. After World War II, individuals saw their buying power increase tenfold in the space of just a few years. The advent en masse of widely-consumed products would lead to major changes in people’s daily lives, their family relationships and their social relationships (McCracken, 1988). A new kind of materialism developed, based on the belief that owning objects was the path to happiness. This materialism would take hold as a socialising force (Clark *et al.*, 2001; Moschis and Churchill, 1978). This also marked the emergence of individualism via sheer hedonism along with narcissism and selfishness, which were all conducive to the

appeal of marketing (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Marketing has become a tool to spread capitalist materialism and is often considered in a suspicious light, particularly when it is successful (Fournier and Richins, 1991; Richins and Rudmin, 1994) to the detriment of other moral or environmental factors (Muncy and Eastman, 1998).

In this context, the first type of criticism levelled at marketers is the claim that marketing practices encourage young people to consume in an increasingly trivial manner. Today, this criticism comes from many schools of thought, which question the idea that owning material goods is commensurate with an individual's happiness. Children in the USA spend more than 24 billion dollars on direct purchases (McNeal, 1998), which represents a sizeable market share. Some authors from the field of functionalist psychology have considered this issue from a social materialist point of view, incorporating individual differences based on the personality traits of a materialist (Richins, 1994; Richins and Dawson, 1992; d'Astous and Jacob, 2000). Notwithstanding, aside from these individual, psychological and cultural differences, it seems that children are more materialistic at an early age than when they move up the ladder of primary school (McNeal, 1992). Whatever the object, in this context, it becomes an extension of one's self (Belk, 1988; Belk *et al.*, 1989). Sometimes, it even takes on a sacred nature because of the specific nature of the product or because of the social ties that it allow to owner to forge (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). This trend establishes itself at an early age because materialism is an integral part of the development of an individual in our society (Twitchell, 1999). Products specifically designed for young people for the last 20 years have developed "social status" the attaining of which has become one of the strongest priorities in our society. Chain stores like ZARA for girls and teenagers, for example, seek new trends throughout the world to urge the very young to consume. In this case, it is not the purchase of the product itself that is the most important factor but the stress of experience in buying it that makes the buyer feel like they belong to a certain tribe.

The second type of harsh criticism levelled against the marketer is the claim that marketing targets young people in the sale of hazardous products. Throughout the image of both alcohol and tobacco is manipulated the rite of passage into adulthood. Those marketers who work for associated industries cannot hide behind the claim that this association is just a social phenomena. These marketers need to reflect on this from a human perspective. For cigarette manufacturers, young people are a vital target. Economic survival depends on the youth market once the traditional market has become saturated, as witnessed in the cigarette industry, for example. For the market to survive, one must rejuvenate customers and find new market sectors. Given that it is rare for 30 or 40 year olds to begin smoking, one must begin upstream to win over clients in new segment of customer. Cigarette manufacturers thus create special products whose packaging, advertising and even content, is targeted at young people. For example, Camel Lights used this strategy in an expert manner to meet their objective. Afterwards, it is just a matter of letting the clients get addicted to the product so that they become loyal customers and ultimately captive clients. The same strategy is employed by alcohol manufacturers who try to stimulate young people to become addicted. This explains why wine coolers have the mildest taste and why the bitter taste of alcohol is masked. This strategy is an excellent way of gradually weaning young people onto alcohol (Goldberg *et al.*, 1996). Thus, the point of targeting young

people is not just to increase sales in the present day but also to secure future sales. Yet, everyone knows that alcohol and tobacco are a health hazard. Thus, this type of criticism is of a moral nature. How can marketers calmly accept their role in implementing a strategy designed to incite addiction amongst young people to harmful products?

The third type of criticism often levelled against society's materialism derives from an absence of moral benchmarks engendered by this same materialism. Many observers signal the advent of a selfish and playful consumer who seeks variety and pleasure and is sensitive to unpredictable stimuli. This type of shrewd consumer is far more influenced by their emotions than by their reasoning (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Cova, 1997; Cova and Badot, 1995). Placing a higher importance on the present moment and on emotion has its price; individualism, and consequently, short-term selfishness (Maffesoli, 1996). Many have criticized the destructive nature of this type of narcissistic individualism which denies any social, political or religious belief (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1979; Lipovetsky, 1983). When freedom becomes the underlying principal of an individual's moral values, young boys who pirate CDs on the internet to then swap them with their friends, do not fear the long arm of the law. They do not see anything amoral in stealing royalties from producers and artists. Even when there is no attempt to resell them, this same person may well consider it logical and morally acceptable for others to do so. As for respect for the companies who distribute these products, the media is so full of claims that these companies indulge in unethical practices that these young pirates conclude that stealing from companies cannot possibly constitute a serious crime. In this type of situation, it is very difficult for the marketer to uphold moral values in a world of business.

2.2 The role of the marketer and morality

Having analysed consumer splitting of behaviour and the loss of reference points, let us now clarify the concept of morality. Indeed, it seems that any behaviour in the future will be considered acceptable, provided it does not harm anyone else. Yet how do we define what constitutes harming someone else? Those who work as marketers should be in a position to consider the following: can anyone really claim she/he upholds moral values in his/her private life in front of his/her children/neighbours/parents and yet who behaves in an immoral fashion in his/her professional life?

The etymology of the word "morality" comes from the Latin *mores*, which means "character". This is a flexible concept. A universal morality that Socrates or Jesus defended to protect the weak does not seem to have permeated into materialistic marketing. Kant (1724-1804) considered morality as proof of someone's ability to think logically. Morality does not derive from an external law imposed on an individual. Morality has a universal nature. "Always behave according to principles that can be found in universal laws." Thus, the moral legitimacy of business practices rests with the person working in the field. Kant has the luxury of adopting an "ethical perspective" however, marketers have to be pragmatists. They are constantly confronted with situations plagued with contradictory moral dimensions. For example, what are the moral standards justifying a ban on 12 years-old working in a poor country to feed their family? "Right?" "Fair?" "Politically correct?" On the other hand, are marketers free to have an opinion? When Moussé (2001) speaks about the conditions of corruption, he argues that it was easy for Kant to propose a universal

morality, given he did not have to make a business work, make profits and satisfy clients in a climate of fierce competition.

Ricoeur (1992) stresses that practical wisdom is required to deal with tangible situations in which conviction must take precedent over basic moral rules. This perspective, which is considered to be intrinsically linked to the freedom of being human, is based on the relationship human beings have with their environment. This author considers morality in the form of a hard nucleus, embodying what the individual is allowed and not allowed to do and, at the same time, the nucleus also reveals someone's individual stance on these norms. This scenario allows marketers to make up their own minds, when faced with delicate situations instead of automatically trusting the arguments put forward by their organisation. In this way, marketers who sell toys and who seek the cheapest possible supplier should personally inspect these Chinese production houses which sometimes employ their employees under inhumane working conditions (Toy Coalition, 1999). In this way, marketers can choose a strategy to respond to their critics, armed with genuine arguments. Marketers should not settle for anything less than truly genuine, "unprocessed" information if they are to confront criticism. However, taking this stance requires marketers to really rethink their perspective and this is a formidable challenge for those who have always considered consumers as subjects for research, potential clients and market shares, instead of recognising them as people plagued by the same doubts and the same questions as the marketers themselves.

3. Marketers and utilitarian criticism

3.1 *The pragmatic and utilitarian underpinnings*

Classic utilitarian pragmatism was developed in the context of Bentham's work (1748-1832), whose first principle states that actions must be motivated by the search for the greatest happiness for a maximum of one's fellow citizens. Greater happiness becomes the golden rule and equality, more than freedom, has been the cornerstone of an American society built on utilitarian pragmatism. Bentham distinguishes others formal principles of utilitarian pragmatism. A second social principle acknowledges that a selfish desire for individual happiness is a predominant force which motivates people to either become very wealthy or to resign themselves to remaining miserable. A third principle is the attempt by political authorities to artificially harmonise society with the individual. Armed with these foundations, marketers' role is to put goods and services on the market. Their profession is one born of pragmatism, as the "ing" in "marketing" implies. In praise of pragmatic reasoning, Peirce (1839-1914) claims that however attractive an idea may seem, it is successful action that should be the ultimate judge of the idea. Thus, an idea, a decision or a term whose implementation does not lead to any change, ultimately is devoid of meaning (Peirce, 1984). Thus, marketers fuel action. This marriage of pragmatism and utilitarian pragmatism has supported the expansion of marketing and its spread throughout society.

The first criticism regarding this utilitarian and pragmatic philosophy is levelled at the practice of using young people as purchasing advisors in order to influence and increase family purchases. The post-war period and the remaining half of the twentieth century facilitated the effective implementation of the "American Way of Life". The role of marketers is to understand and trigger the underlying motivations behind individuals and their families by offering them the prospect of a sought-after or ideal

“quality of life” (Sirgy and Morris, 1986; Sirgy and Lee, 1996). From this perspective, marketers consider their work to reflect both their vision of what is “fair” for society (greater happiness for a maximum number of people) and what is “right” depending on one’s dominant individual morality (those who work can buy themselves products and services to guarantee happiness). In this way, American marketers do not run the risk of being confronted with the dilemma of deciding what is “fair” and “right” in the practice of their profession because consumerism is considered to be “right” both from a social and economic point of view (Rawls, 1993). However, according to the authors of *KidInfluence* (Sutherland and Thompson, 2001), children represent a buying power of 15 million dollars in pocket money. This massive amount gives them considerable leverage in the business world. Moreover, even if they do not always make the decisions on major family purchases, they are still capable of harassing their parents, after exposure to the advertising strategies which target them directly. This influence exerted by children is, firstly, a way for children to approach their future role as consumer. It is also a way for these children to test the leverage they have over their parents by deploying manipulative strategies (McNeal, 1998, 1999; Rust, 1993; Palan and Wilkes, 1997). Under these conditions, it becomes very difficult to decide whether or not it is “fair” and “right” to let children acquire this type of special behaviour.

The second type of utilitarian-related criticism is levelled against manipulative techniques that goad young people into consuming to appear more “cool”. From a “culturalist” point of view, purchasing objects is less a way of distinguishing between social classes (Bourdieu, 1984) and more a symbol of recognition between individuals within a society (Holt, 1998). From a phenomenological point of view, owning objects is less important for the consumer than the value of the experience; buying and consuming the product in certain places, which are imbued with meaning, the interaction with other people, feeling a rush of emotions, etc (Holbrook, 1999). Today, western children and young people are confronted with more propaganda and advertising in one day than their predecessors experienced in a lifetime (Rohatyn, 1990). To create a niche for one’s product in the maze of mass advertising, it is vital to be proactive in the area of young people’s fashion because young people are fickle. Firstly, there are those who pick up on the latest trends inspired by ZARA and continually create new products. The “coolest” products are targeted at young people in order to hit the most vulnerable sector. Secondly, the web, youth magazines and viral marketing are especially effective (McNeal, 1999). Moreover, some companies have no qualms about using youngsters who are considered particularly cool by their peers, as purchasing advisors for other children. Although this might be perceived as an endeavour to engender greater happiness, it is without a doubt to the detriment of “natural” behaviour. Many observers are concerned about sexually-provocative fashion that is targeted at increasingly younger children by the year.

The third major utilitarian-related criticism levelled at our society concerns misleading advertising and the ensuing behavioural changes it triggers. Indeed, in addition to the practice of mass advertising, direct marketing techniques are becoming increasingly sophisticated and the creation of giant databases is a source of additional despair to parents. The prospect of winning a prize or being drawn from a raffle if one correctly fills out a questionnaire inexorably attracts children who are often willing victims in this vicious cycle. Manufacturers of cigarettes, alcohol and instant coffee who distribute free samples during children’s parties are well aware that they are

trying to attract clients in a vulnerable sector. Young people are not always discerning enough to realise that advertising contains empty promises. They perceive it as informative and reliable (Ward, 1972). It is relatively easy to convince those whose judgement skills are undeveloped. For example, inserting brand names in films is a way of launching a trend. Placing these brand names in children's favourite series is an underhand way of exposing children to the product without their knowledge (Clark *et al.*, 2001). It is important to know how to reconcile the rule of maximising profits, which governs the daily work of marketers, with a respect for the young consumer's free will.

3.2 The role of marketers and their professional deontology

Those who do not question their role and who define themselves as servants in the logic of the system demonstrate the reaction of someone who is unwilling to question the ethical nature of his/her work. The marketer is urged to begin by defining the social purpose of his/her profession before wondering about where she/he will work.

To clarify the ethical issue governing public decisions, Bentham introduced the concept of professional deontology. He considered this to be a more expressive term than "ethics". According to Bentham, professional deontology refers to a movement or actions which accompany the exercise of one's duty. Whereas moral values involve the individual's conscience, professional deontology derives from the conflicts that emerge in the course of one's job. Etymologically speaking, the word "deontology" derives from the Greek words *deon*, meaning "duty" and *logos*, meaning "speech". Today, it is defined as the entirety of rules and responsibilities governing a profession, the conduct of those who practice it, the relationships between these people and their clients and with the public at large. Professional deontology is distinct from morality because the ensuing obligations are exclusively linked to work (for example, a doctor is obliged to care for people and respect life but is not obliged to be honest). Thus, professional deontology can only exist in a work environment, whereas morality is, logically, based on personal principles.

Professional deontology was developed in the service industry to reduce certain risks signalled by clients and workers. These codes of ethics give workers limits they should not cross when carrying out their job (Nilles, 2001). From 1945, a state decree enshrining a code of ethics was issued for the practice of medicine in France. Subsequently, other health-related professions benefited from such a code along with the fields of architecture, accounting and notaries. In addition to outlining the relationship between the professional and his/her clients, these codes also stipulate a duty of solidarity between colleagues with a view to consolidating the profession. Moreover, a colleague-run monitoring body is a way of limiting outside monitoring, either by the state or by consumers. To protect their sector from certain such problems, Belgian direct marketing companies availed themselves of a code of ethics to which members had to subscribe. Failure to do so resulted in sanctions and a monitoring body. The Canadian marketing association also availed themselves of a similar code (ACM, 2001). Nevertheless, it is more like an ethical charter because it addresses more general problems that the company encounters with the public, rather than the specific professional deontology of its decision-makers. Moreover, it does not provide for a monitoring body.

This raises the question – why is professional deontology still lacking in the business sector? All those who work in marketing, advertising, research, sales, consumers, etc.

could consult such a code of ethics when taking decisions. Perhaps, marketers do not consider that their profession involves important decisions? Or perhaps companies do not want their managers discussing their job with managers of other companies? Or is there a lack of consensus to generate the cornerstone of a code of ethics? A think-tank on the drafting of codes of ethics might help the profession to better keep pace with society's evolution.

4. Marketers and criticism of liberalism

4.1 *The economics underpinnings*

Those working in the marketing sector in western society use marketing tools to serve the economy. Economic theory has developed more in the last century than over the course of the ten preceding centuries. The advent of the twentieth century brought with it a modern society to replace the more traditional one. *Homo economicus* is defined as an intelligent being, driven by the objective of progress (Weber, 2002). The rules of the game are to maximize profit for all players working in the market economy, both for companies and for consumers. For classical economists, the driving force for economic growth is investment in goods and services (Smith, Friedman, Hayek, etc.). In theory, economic growth is supposed to guarantee an increase in working time, which in turn results in an increase in individual revenue, which ultimately triggers an increase in buying power. In a radical manner, Hayek (1953) presents liberal economists with the principal of democratic and methodological individualism which should be practiced with the least possible intervention from the state. The anonymous buyer becomes a consumer, who, in turn accelerates the process of economic growth due to his/her sophisticated demands, which are a product of the increasingly targeted marketing mechanisms (Campbell, 1987; Galbraith, 1998). In this context, marketing success will depend on how efficient the exchange is between the producers and the consumers (Kotler, 1972; Levy and Zaltman, 1975).

The first criticism directed at *de rigueur* liberalism concerns the leverage of corporate entities and their influence on parents and the way parents bring up their children. A problem emerged in the liberal economic paradigm concerning the power relations between producers and consumers. Based on "might is right" consumers demand fair and egalitarian relations with producers. During the 1960s, J.F. Kennedy emphasized consumers' "right to security" "right to be heard" "right to be informed" "right to choose". A young lawyer, Nader (1965), launched the consumer movement by publicly denouncing the faults of the Corvair of General Motors. Many consumer associations published comparative studies conducted in the field on market products. These efforts succeeded in substantially improving the position of consumers by giving them objective information and real protection against abusive practices. These studies also served to educate buyers (Thorelli and Thorelli, 1977). However, political and economic power wielded by the big companies was so powerful that it was illusory to believe one could resist it. These global companies are perfectly aware of the way children and teenagers's minds work because they employ the best psychoanalysts, neuropsychologists, anthropologists and child psychiatrists, in addition to the best market researchers available. Television programs for children are broken up with commercials lauding the merits of trendy gadgets and McDonalds continues to appeal to children (Schor, 2004). Faced with so many tempting offers, it is almost impossible for the American child to resist. Thus, it would perhaps seem appropriate for the state

to now step in and exert a counterweight to the power of these companies. However, the 1978 proposal tabled by the Federal Trade Commission to ban all advertising targeted at under eight-year-olds was unsuccessful (Roedder, 1999). The liberalist dilemma is the following: how can we accept state intervention in a prosperous economic sector?

A second type of recurring criticism concerns product dematerialization with respect to the phenomena of brand names. According to Klein (2001), this shift occurred at the beginning of the 1980s when brand names like Nike and Calvin Klein began to focus on brand capital and no longer on the products themselves. The added value for young people was clearly the tribal recognition awarded them when they sported the brand name. This creates a framework whereby from a very early age, children begin their attachment to the brand. From a preschool age, children know “their” brands and enjoy recognizing them on television. Savings gleaned from relocated production houses have meant these companies can further invest in mass advertising. First, the brand name used to refer to the product. Later it was used to distinguish one brand’s products from another’s. Now, the brand name has become the objective of the purchase in itself. The objective is simple: dematerialise the product as much as possible by teleporting children out of the tangible and into the virtual world of brand names.

All colour tests, associated images, positive reinforcement words are well-known advertising strategies to manipulate people’s attachment to a brand name (Macklin, 1996). Once this is achieved, the young consumer will never learn how to compare products and choose which one has the best quality-price ratio (McNeal, 1992). Instead, this consumer will buy a virtual symbol which will make him/her feel they belong to something, whatever the price may be. Young consumers firstly learn the symbolic status of the brand and from that moment on, they recognize the inferences between a brand someone wears and the value of this person. Anyone using an old-fashioned brand is to be disregarded. In this way, everyone gets trapped by their own image, reflected by the brand names they wear. This process of manipulation carries on to an adult age. Brand names justify their prices by investing heavily in advertising to impose/establish their image. In this manner, over the course of the twentieth century, the economy has distanced itself somewhat from the reality of tangible production. This phenomena is destined to accelerate further with a generation of young people whose use of new communication technology only increases the virtual nature of their everyday life. How well does this process equip them to deal with real life once they reach adulthood?

The third main criticism levelled at liberalism concerns the fact that the economy is no longer “immersed” in social aspects and that the return on market investment will not be equitable in nature (Audi, 2000). Capitalism has not managed to lead all economic players to more wealth. Many studies show that poor populations are much more prone to problems of obesity and to widespread use of addictive products. A WHO study in April 2004 strongly condemned the tirade of advertising for high-energy foods as contributing to obesity. At the same time, spending on advertising for children has increased five-fold in the last ten years and two thirds of commercials during child television programs are for food products. Biscuits top the list, along with lollies, fast food chains, sweet desserts. For the manufacturers, it is the parents’ responsibility to monitor what their children buy. However, the solution is not

that simple when one considers that the most affluent families share information among each other, particularly about the service industry, whereas those less well-off families spend more of their budget on tangible items. The wealthier families purchase abstract goods that can be transferred from generation to generation whereas the poorer families purchase perishable goods, primarily food products. This practice clearly distinguishes one social class from another (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Children, predominantly those from the lower social classes, thus constitute a special target for the food industry. Obesity and other health-related problems have become symptomatic of the social divide.

4.2 The role of the marketer and the organisational ethics of a company

When attacking big brand names and leverage exerted by multinational companies, publications like *No Logo* (Klein, 2001) are not specifically holding individual marketers responsible. However, the impact of these initiatives is already a positive one because it gives internal management a basis on which they can discuss organisational ethics and they can then become the levers for change from within a company.

Morality tells the decision-maker what to do, via his/her conscience. Professional deontology clarifies the reasoning behind actions. Organisational ethics give the decision-maker a basis on which to take one course of action over another, based on the type of action at hand. Etymologically speaking, the word “ethics” comes from the Greek *ethos*, which means “values” and ways of taking action. Although this word has a similar origin to that of morality, organisational ethics encourages the decision-maker to act based on a utilitarian objective, that of the well-being of the group they belong to. For example, Socrates (469-399 BC) considered organisational ethics to be a political instrument allowing a government to lead citizens access to a happy life. Organisational ethics, theoretical reflection on the origin of the *raison d’être* of corporate morality then led to the establishment of formal corporate charters. From this point of view, the bottom line for advocates of an alternative globalisation and for the environmentalists is ultimately a happy life. However, corporate codes of ethics give marketers an excuse not to think about this type of issue, far removed from their everyday work.

The rules of corporate organisational ethics are established by each organisation depending on its culture, its specific objectives and the resources invested before these rules are written down and made public (Mercier, 1999). The role of these rules is both to make a certain number of decisions applicable to daily life and also to bear witness to the values of the organisation. Indeed, corporate entities need a more defined role as the interface between companies and the market. This refers to the interface between purchase and sales and between trading relations and general management. This principle is designed to cover both child labour as well as the practice of bribes in certain countries. Sometimes workers have to sign charters of organisational ethics which clearly indicate what type of behaviour is unacceptable which allows a company to use the charter as a legal document to defend their decision-making responsibility in case their employees engage in illegal practices. In this way, these Anglo-Saxon inspired codes of ethics ultimately “frame” the efficiency of individuals and, more importantly, facilitate the development of similar behaviour of subsidiary colleagues who might work in countries with a very different business practices (Hunt *et al.*, 1989).

These codes of ethics have thus become a tool in assimilating cultures, which in turn, can dictate relations between business partners, avoid surprises and time-wasting (Isaac, 2000).

Although these codes of ethics are generally well-accepted, implementing them poses certain problems. In the case where a code of ethics is too specific, it can end up paralysing a company and flexibility and creativity will suffer. Marketers who work within big corporate structures are under constant pressure because new ways of transmitting key ideas to the economic order and international market have taken hold in the last few years. Many international companies, concerned about their image and the constant risk of being the target of rumours and criticism, place a high value on these codes. However, it is legitimate to wonder to what extent these ethical frameworks published by certain companies are really ethical and to what extent they are just a way of transmitting a positive image. Laws, after all, often exist to be broken by those who really want to break them. Thus, it may be somewhat utopian to believe that everything can be “framed”. The most recent scandals, like the Enron affair, lead us to wonder whether it is more important to reinforce the principle of codes of ethics or to reinforce their subsequent monitoring and sanctioning value.

5. Marketers and criticism of society

5.1 *The societal underpinnings*

Marketing agents' societal decision-making responsibility is reflected in the practice of democracy, the basis for our society. For a long time, marketing has exerted its power in the political arena. The practice of marketing ideas is a growing phenomenon with a variety of choice and is expertly used by politicians for whom the spirit of “marketing” sometimes actually replaces the desire of actually playing a role in the democratic sphere (de La Haye and Miège, 1984; Gingras, 1995). The basis of democratic individualism is the assumption that all people are equal and have the right to expression their opinion whenever she/he feels it is in his/her best interests, and thus, in the best interests of his/her country (de Tocqueville, 1992). People's freedom to choose their future expresses itself via opinions expressed through the voting system, which is why each individual has one vote, given that all individuals are equal. This experience of individual democracy has changed over time to become a purely sales production of electoral opinions, engineered by cleverly orchestrated marketing strategies (Perry, 1984; Habermas, 1978, 2000). Politically-based emotions aside, no observer of the early twenty-first century can be surprised that Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of the state of California. This victory was the product of a well-oiled marketing campaign, able to carry out accurate opinion polls, to put together punchy electoral speeches and finally to predict the results with a very small error margin.

From this perspective, the first societal-based criticism is directed against the way marketers advertise products. Submitting to the wishes of the viewing audience is essential because profits generated by advertising are part of an accepted economic and social reality. Soap operas may have been created by washing powder companies but today it is the programs themselves whose dubious cultural content is designed to advertise products with a maximum impact. The marketing philosophy is very simple: stop viewers from thinking too much during the program so that they are as alert as possible to take in the commercials. These commercials influence both the format and

the content of the program and those who design them are supposed to take both into account when designing their commercials. Choosing to satisfy companies means new cultural products emerge, triggered by those who designed the television reality shows and junk TV. From an ethical point of view, there can be no objection because politicians and marketers are simply responding to the demands of the television viewers, which will depend on the outcome of competing cultural products. However, the advent of this type of “cultural” product is eroding the more profound culture. Faced with this sub-culture, children do not have any real freedom because they are surrounded by it. From the age of nine, on average, they stop watching programs designed for children and get addicted to series (Hansen, 1997). From then onwards, the decision-making responsibility of marketing agents is definitely involved because sophisticated techniques mean that causality is reversed. Emotions, showy effects and short-term interest may well trigger the purchase of products whose impact on the education of children has not yet been measured.

The second criticism regards ambiguity, which involves waiting for the authorities to intervene whenever decision-making responsibility is involved. According to Cross (2002) one of the biggest contradictions (in the USA in particular and in the western world in general) is the desire to protect vulnerable populations from vice and corruption using a basis of solid moral traditions. At the same time, sales of health-hazardous products (alcohol, cigarettes) develop freely without much disapproval. The other paradox that parents claim, in terms of individual liberty, is the fact that their children are free to purchase snacks and soft drinks in their schools where they are not protected from impulse buying. Thus, in this situation, advertising should begin by targeting the parents. From 1971 onwards, Kotler and Zaltman proposed a functionalist definition for social marketing. The creation, the implementation and the monitoring of programs are designed to influence the acceptability of certain social ideas. If one invests time and energy in “societal progress” one is expressing a desire to change people’s long-term behaviour, which is often rooted in cultural habits (Lefebvre and Flora, 1988; Lefebvre, 1996), by using the most classic procedures for product marketing (Lawther and Lowry, 1995; Hastings and Haywood, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 2002). This utilitarian response of a political and social nature may seem tautologous. Marketers may be called on to put in place an efficient policy to dissuade smokers or soft-drink lovers in order to compensate for overly-successful marketing strategies for these products.

The third criticism regards awareness of youth consumer behaviour. A huge number of market research studies have analysed the effect of the socialisation process on youth consumerism (Roedder, 1999). The study of this process focuses on the address, knowledge and attitudes that develop over childhood which give young people the tools to deal with the market. It has been shown, for example, that the stages of child conceptual development (Selman, 1980), allow the child to deal with increasingly complex situations. Indeed, these developmental stages are perfectly exploited by advertising which targets children under seven and older children in a different manner. Advertising campaigns for Christmas toys, for example, illustrate these ploys. Our stance is neutral on this type of research work on the developmental stages of a child, which serves less to teach children how to consume responsibly and more to encourage them to buy what the manufacturers tell them to. On the contrary, the main danger with child protection advocates is that they often tout business as evil

(Cross, 2002). If children develop a more acute awareness of the objective of advertising with age (Donahue *et al.*, 1978, 1983) and if most older children are convinced that advertising lies to them (Watkins *et al.*, 1980), one wonders what is the point of teaching children what they already know, i.e. that companies cheat their consumers. The decision-making responsibility of parents and teachers is to assist their children in developing a sceptical attitude to the information in advertising. However, the decision-making responsibility of marketers is to acknowledge that children become social beings through their consumer role because purchasing products is a fundamental part of social life. Thus, marketers should get involved in the education of these future citizens.

5.2 The role of marketers and their decision-making responsibility

Let us now disambiguate the issue. The point is not to protect children because they are weak, nor to hide them away by banning child-directed advertising (Ruth-Blandina, 2002). It would be absurd to sideline an entire sector of the population from society's future.

One of the clearest proposals in terms of decision-making responsibility comes from Jonas (1979). The author speaks about the phenomenon of separation that our changing civilisation is confronted with. According to this philosophy, an unprecedented context of change that we are currently witnessing prevents us from relying on objectivity to take decisions. The author steeps his concept of proactive responsibility by recommending that people should reflect on their fears, not their desires before taking a decision. This formula for our own fears enables us to find out what is really important to us. Everything can be bought on the internet these days, firearms, ingredients to make a home-made bomb (with instructions), child sex-worker photos, surrogate mothers, etc. Jonas' question on technical "utopia" is just as throbbing an issue for the field of marketing, in which it clashes with the freedom of hedonistic and independent children that we have observed. Responsibility has become an association between fear and hope, combined with a constant awareness of our vulnerability and thus, the vulnerability of our future. Today, there can be no excuse for not wanting to express one's doubts and questions.

This decision-making responsibility is radically different from personal morality and from the aforementioned professional deontology. No one can mitigate the consequences of what we do and fail to do. Being responsible means being accountable, both for action taken and also for failing to take action. As Moussé (2001) states, "being responsible" requires the decision-maker to putting his/her own vision in perspective and putting himself/herself in someone else's shoes, all the while retaining his/her own position and force of conviction. Following this logic, marketers no longer have the choice and it becomes clear that they cannot possibly claim to uphold a certain morality if they act with indifference towards children manufacturing carpets at the other end of the world or towards his/her grandchildren who will inherit the planet. Thus, after half a century of excessive consumer individualism, marketing is facing a new challenge.

According to Lévinas (1978, 1981, 1987), the term "responsibility" refers to two meanings. Firstly, it refers to the building of relationships and links between people (members of a family, for example, are responsible for each other and more so if they are close). Secondly, this link also refers to what imprisons the individual and reminds

us that we only become ourselves through the presence of others. This concept of decision-making responsibility has sparked initiatives like, for example, recycling waste in cities. Marketing does not seem to have been very efficient since Webster's (1975) first work, defining socially-responsible consumers as those who take the social consequences of their consumer behaviour into account and who try to use their buying power to spark changes in society. It appears that the declared intentions of consumers have little relation with the actual behaviour based on utilitarian criteria (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Thus, we are still a long way off, in practice, to successfully educating our future citizens of the world to care about global warming, recycling waste and protecting endangered species from an early age.

6. Discussion, avenues for further research and conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed how the marketer, as an individual, as a professional, a partner of their company and finally a marketer – shares the responsibility for the ethical philosophy of our society. In order to develop a constructivist proposal allowing the marketer to decide with all the information at hand, we have used this paper to define four facets of the decision-maker. Firstly, their personal character and morality, secondly their professional know-how and professional deontology, thirdly, their role in the company and the company's professional ethics and fourthly, their social role and their decision-making responsibility. However, we are not presenting these four facets in opposition to each other because the ultimate decision-maker is one and the same person and they continue to be a father while they do their job, nor do they stop being an enlightened marketer when they are doing the family shopping. We have somewhat simplified what is a complex reality in order to shed light on the situation and represent it in a simplified yet comprehensive model (Table I).

Marketers exercise their free will within a specific institutional framework. However, a company does not just have to be accountable to its own shareholders but also to society whose development it is in a position to be able to influence (Griffin and Mahon, 1997). Because their work is at the centre of the debate, marketers should be able to give corporate leaders an idea of a company's performance while incorporating this decision-making responsibility. Defining evaluation tools to include other tools than the strictly financial ones could well facilitate consumer-company relations and thus avoid a cloud of suspicion. Rawls (1971, 1999) proposal is the pursuit of a fair life, an ethical framework which seeks to reduce initial inequalities. These proposals go way beyond the traditional ethical rules on inappropriate business conduct. Their aim is to really reduce inequalities between business partners. By putting this idea of the social contract firmly on the agenda, Rawls gives companies some serious food for thought. Being a marketer is not easy these days because we cannot make radical changes to market-based, utilitarian business philosophy that follows more than a century of modernism and a rationale of power-play. In fact, if people do not realise they are in potential danger, it is hard to believe they would be sufficiently motivated to overturn the basic playing rules and that these changes might then have a real impact on ethical practice in companies for business related careers.

However, the biggest challenge facing the marketer is with regard to society. This refers to the apparent generalised lack of organisational ethics in young people. It seems that many young people are no longer sure of their place in our society.

Table I.
The extent of the
marketer's pluralist
ethics

	Materialistic criticism	Utilitarian criticism	Liberal criticism	Societal criticism
Main criticism levelled at the marketing industry	Incite children to materialism and increased consumerism of gadgets and targeted products Hazardous products targeted at young people (e.g. Cigarettes, alcohol, fast food) to get them addicted A lack of understanding of moral benchmarks among young people (e.g. pirating music on the internet)	American way of life: using young people as purchasing advisors to affect parents Practices which encourage young people to consume to be "cool" Misleading advertising to young people who have not yet acquired skills in discernment	The influence of companies and their leverage on parents and teachers The dematerialisation of consumerism and the impact of brand names which is distinct from tangible products Advertising directed at vulnerable sectors and an increase in inequality	Implementation of an impoverished TV culture to sell commercial space Expectations of parents that problems of child education should be resolved by the government Awareness of youth consumerism Learning the meaning of social and environmental solidarity Decision-making responsibility Their social role in the marketing field Act in a way so as not to destroy human life on Earth
Levers	Morality	Professional deontology	Corporate organisational ethics	
Actor-marketer	Human beings, their personal character and their happiness The set of obligations that we impose on our-selves of our own free will. The intention takes precedence over the outcome of action	Human beings of a field, their expertise Professional morality which is <i>de rigueur</i> in some jobs. A common concept to several organisations.	The decision-maker in their role in a company Definition of "good" and "bad" according to the company's perspective	
Purpose	Action carried out through personal desire and not to meet an objective Morality as the individual nucleus reflects what we believe we are allowed to do (Ricoeur)	Code of guarantees for partners and consolidation of corporate spirit Professional deontology as a monitoring force and one which makes the profession evolve	Organisational culture organised according to published codes of ethics The fair solution (to eliminate arbitrariness) should take precedence over what is "right" (Rawls)	Completed action with a view to forging links with society
Stakes				The theory of fear for humanity's future will enlighten the issues of the present (Jonas)

Indeed, they learn how to kill people or torture animals via video games. Afterwards it is difficult to ask children to develop their discriminatory reflexes. We still do not yet know enough about video games to know what impact they will have on the ethical values of adults. In fact, every time that a teenager kills his friends in cold blood, where is the decision-making responsibility? The firearm outlet? Violent video games? The distributors of these games? The holistic view of a society that suffocates personal free will is not a view that will expand rapidly just anywhere or in any old conditions. This view spreads within an apolitical and individualistic, classless society in which citizens has lost his/her sense of community. People who are one of the masses no longer distinguish themselves from the crowd and no longer consider themselves part of a given social class and feel uprooted, lost and thus incapable of establishing who is accountable for certain actions (Arendt, 1977). However, how can we ask young people to develop morality and to adhere to certain codes of professional deontology if their only example is to witness decision-making responsibility being evaded?

This brings us to the concept of decision-making responsibility, particularly with regard to market researchers. Marketing is a field riddled with deep-set contradictions. On one hand, it is defined as the entirety of techniques capable of modifying a society for its own well-being. On the other hand, market researchers are vexed when their loyalty to a single liberal creed is questioned. Researchers have presented the field of marketing using several different metaphors, like that of a management project, a quantitative science, a behavioural science, a decision-making science or an integrated science (Kerin, 1996). Today, they claim to be able to address all modes of thought, positivist and phenomenological. But the researcher cannot ignore that he defines himself as the representative of a role which is often painted evil. The concerns of the consumer are often the result of their ignorance of economic growth and its effects on daily life. Nevertheless, this criticism has generated very little critical and constructivist thinking on morality, organisational ethics, professional deontology or decision-making responsibility. What do we think of a field like marketing which does not take the time to build on its foundations and these implications of applied ethics? If we are to consider individuals as producers of well-being and thus of personal and interpersonal values, the proposal of a “new” marketing approach of an interpersonal nature must have an ethical basis and not just be situated at the level of relations between the company and the clients. Thus, we must define our field as the interface between human society and economic systems, and we must continue to explore the frameworks in which marketers take decisions today by analysing the economic and social evolution of our western and global society.

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About the author

Michelle Bergadaà is a Professor of Marketing at the HEC, University of Geneva. Her research focuses on the cultural aspects of consumer behavior and on constructivist research methods. She is also the Director of the Marketing Strategy and Sales Observatory (OVSM) which is a research and pedagogical platform initiated together with 13 international companies. Strongly involved in ethics she drives an online community platform (<http://responsable.unige.ch>). She has published several books and more than 100 articles in international scholarly journals such as *the Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Business Research* or *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, and in proceedings of international conferences. Michelle Bergadaà can be contacted at: michelle.bergadaa@hec.unige.ch