

What **is new** in Marketing not **a lot**

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Will marketing move to the centre stage of business or continue lamenting its lack of status and influence? Unless we change, I know where I put my bet.

I have been waiting to reach the age when I can drone on about how ‘things were better in my day’ and how ‘all this change has not made things better’. Well I am now there and find myself thinking, and increasingly saying the opposite, “why has so little changed”. While it galls me to say it, marketing is the prime target for this criticism.

Merlin Stone (*IBM Professor of Business Transformation at Surrey University*) recently wrote an article in which he remarked ‘that for all but a few companies marketing is much as it was 20 or 30 years ago’. I totally agree. The multiple waves of IT innovations have reshaped, refined and expanded the channels to customers - not always with the expected levels of success. But, the core theories of marketing and the relationship it has to the other business functions remains little changed.

There is another issue that is as concerning, if not more so. For as long as I can remember the cry from marketers has been the injustice that marketing has not achieved its rightful place at the top of the business agenda. I shudder at the number of times I have pleaded with my clients to understand the pivotal role of marketing as the way to achieve business success. And, why marketers should have the level of power commensurate with their responsibilities.

So why do marketers still feel their profession lacks its rightful position of influence? Whether measured by the lack of main board marketing directors with FTSE 100 companies (20%) or the sentiment expressed whenever a group of marketers get together, you have to conclude that something is wrong. Why O why has my generation of marketers been so unsuccessful at marketing Marketing?

There are two possible explanations.

The first one is characterised by the ‘one more push and we are free’ mentality. This explanation assumes that we need to become smarter at collecting and presenting the information that proves the correlation between marketing and business success. If we expend more time and energy and use the right analytical tools then the battle to position marketing in its rightful place will be won.

The foundations of marketing theory and organisation are sound. It is an issue of tactics, energy and time. As management becomes more professional they are better equipped to recognise marketing’s importance and how to exploit its full potential. With the demise of the short-termist, pragmatic, ‘fly by the seat of the pants’ manager, marketing will come of age. Maybe this is true, but I have my doubts.

The second explanation is that we have been trying to achieve the impossible. No different than going faster than the speed of light, producing a perpetual motion machine or breaking the first law of thermodynamics.

Could it be that there is an equivalent rule governing marketing? So let’s forget the trivia of the 4Ps and consider Stroud’s First Law of Marketing, which states that ‘Marketing, as we currently define it, becomes less important to an organisation the better it is at understanding its role’.

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definition of marketing ‘the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably’. Note, that it does not say the ‘management group’ or the ‘business function’ or the ‘department’ it talks about the process.

This rule seems to be opposite to everything we have been taught. Let’s go back to CIM’s

You might think this is becoming a turgid argument about the semantics of the definition but it goes to the very heart of what marketing means to the organisation. Put in its simplest form, the better an organisation understands and practices the concepts of marketing the less need it has for any group that it labels ‘Marketing’.

If you accept this explanation, the marketing department, group, function or whatever you want to call it is a transitory thing that is needed to change the organisation’s

culture to embrace the philosophy of marketing. Once that has been done it serves no further purpose. At this point I can almost smell the excommunication candles being lit by my friends in corporate and academic marketing!

The most obvious argument against this proposition is that some part of the organisation has to manage the tasks we associate with marketing and it doesn't matter what you call this group it has the role of marketing. How true is this statement?

In a truly 'marketing aware' organisation, other functional groups should manage many of the tasks we associate with the marketing department. Isn't it an artificial demarcation between product development and product marketing? Wouldn't it be better to formulate business and marketing strategy at the same time? Wouldn't a marketing aware finance group be better equipped to evaluate the effectiveness of different product pricing and communications options?

There is a limit to how far you can fragment marketing and distribute it other business areas. Where in the organisation should the management of the customer channels reside? Would it be sensible to distribute the responsibility for external communications?

Maybe these two functions are all that would remain of the original marketing department. In the 'post marketing department' world these tasks would be handled in a totally different way. Technology is now a vital part of these activities and perhaps a new breed of quasi-marketing- IT staff, working across the other business functions, is how they should be organised.

Marketing is a change agent that broadens the vision and skills of the organisation – it is not an end in its own right.

The few hundred words of this article can only give the vaguest of descriptions about the shape of the post-marketing company and its organisation. The important issue is the proposition that the role of marketing is a change agent that broadens the vision and skills of other parts of the organisation and gives birth to new business functions. It is not an end in its own right.

Is this argument 'worth a bag of beans'?

Firstly, thanks for sticking with the article this far. I appreciate the subject is rather abstract and not one that provides any quick fixes for the busy marketer.

I hope it has raised some of the issues to be resolved if we are to move marketing forward rather than trying to improve some of the old tried and failed techniques of the past.

I sense the uneasiness about the role of marketing is greater than can be explained by the cyclical way that marketing gyrates between being sinner and saviour. When times are good, budgets expand and all is well with marketing –followed by economic slowdown, slashed budgets and soul-searching. This time I think things are different.

So how can we start to initiate some real change? Well debating these questions is not a bad place

- ❖ Is marketing a ‘way of life’ for a company rather than part of its organisation. If so, the most marketing aware company would not have a marketing department.
- ❖ If Marketing’s objectives are partly or completely as a change agent how should it be organised and what skills should it have?
- ❖ Why has the intellectual framework of marketing and its role in the company changed so little in the last 25 years?

I am not sure if this theory about marketing is right or wrong. What I do know is bright, motivated people have spent years trying to promote the cause of marketing and have not done been too successful. Something is wrong that is more fundamental than the measurement techniques we have used or our powers of communications.

Let’s hope the role, objectives and vision of marketing is set for a decade of radical change – it has a lot of catching up to do.

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