A SUGGESTION FOR FORMAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN MARKETING EDUCATION

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Abstract

The author takes a lighthearted look at one aspect of marketing theory that has been confused by the transfer of language habits from conversational usage to theoretical exposition. A suggested clarification is offered which the author feels might help ameliorate the negative societal image of marketing efforts, or, at least, reduce the incidence of the charge that "marketers make people want things they don't need."

Introduction

With the advent of the first Marketing Doctor of Philosophy, it was inevitable that the field would eventually receive a higher level conceptual treatment and avail itself of more sophisticated techniques. Equally inevitable, but less obvious, was the likelihood that some ivory tower type would trace back through the early cerebral giants for a candidate philosopher to serve as the revered progenitor of marketing philosophy.

Plato is unlikely, as the following quote from his Republic attests. In speaking about storekeepers and salesmen, he said, (Jowett 1937)

> ...In well-ordered states they are commonly those who are the weakest in bodily strength, and therefore of little use for any other purpose.

Aristotle is, likewise, unacceptable. His opinions of the profession were less than complimentary. For example, he denounced retail trade as, (Baker 1952)

> ...justly censured, because the gain which results is not naturally made, but is made at the expense of other men.

However, all is not lost. The obvious solution is to pick a more "sophisticated" philosopher. Protagoras gets my nomination. He is the oldest known Sophist. You can't get more philosophically sophisticated than that.

Unfortunately, for around 2300 years, the Sophists were despised as unscrupulous distorters of facts. Nevertheless, by 1900 they had been accorded standing as a legitimate philosophical school of thought. Protagoras believed that every sensation that is perceived is true for the perceiver, and that only such individual truths exist. Thus, if a person perceives a difference between Shell gasoline and Mobil, then that constitutes a true difference for him and is the only test necessary. You can see why Protagoras just has to be tailor-made for Marketing.

Marketing has the same problem as did the Sophists, and for the same reasons (Steiner 1976: Bogart 1978). Unlike the Sophists, however, Marketers did not consider themselves philosophers (until lately). Consequently, their vindication is yet to come, and only after they truly achieve the ability to clarify their perspective.

A useful prerogative of philosophers is to produce impressions of novelty, while rescuing familiar terms from the neglect and misapplication caused by their universal acceptance. This origination consists in the use of words which are already a familiar medium of communication in such a way as to clarify and enlarge the understanding of their meaning. It is this transformation of common sense into precise definitions that is part and parcel of the "discipline" of an academic discipline. Nowhere is this more necessary or useful than in marketing theory.

Discussion

Educators in the field of marketing have a doubly difficult task. They must convey the knowledge of their discipline, while counteracting a predominant social gestalt. Marketing activities are commonly perceived as untruthful, wasteful, too materialistic, and as causing people to buy things they don't need. For example, a study by Ernest Larkin summarized the attitudes of college students toward advertising (Larkin 1977). The consensus was:

1. Advertising persuades people to buy things they don't need.
2. Too much of today's advertising attempts to create a trivial or imaginary difference between products that are identical or very similar in composition.
3. There is too much exaggeration in advertising.
4. Advertising should be more realistic.

These are probably not unusual conceptions of our field. Larkin summed up the challenge to Marketing educators (1977):

> What may be needed to improve advertising education in the future is a more thorough and comprehensive program of information concerning the social and economic effects of advertising so that advertising students can better answer the questions raised by their peers, and a broader, more comprehensive program designed to inform non-advertising majors of these areas of interest.

Most of the students in Larkin's study indicated an appreciation for the beneficial economic effects of advertising. However, the social effects were most often construed as anti-social. This is an unfortunate impression of advertising that is all too common. This impression, bouyed up by "common sense" arguments employing assumptions in the

economic theory of consumer behavior, will not be easy to change. The criticisms reflected in Larkin's study would in fact, be accurate IF man truly were a rational being instead of a rationalizing one; and IF man's goods and services performed purely physical and not social or psychological functions. Those "IF'S" comprise the "realities" that economic theories assume away, "common sense" critics ignore, and which, contrary to the predominant view, make advertising efforts truly "realistic".

Advertiser's recognize that common knowledge and experience form the basis of all social communication. Common language is both an essential element of that communication and a major source of misunderstanding. Discipline, in an academic sense, is learning to express common experiences in precise, unambiuous terms to form internally consistent concepts within the framework of a given field of study. In the words of an eminent scientist (Einstein 1954)

> ...where frequent use is made of so-called abstract concepts, language becomes an instrument of reasoning in the true sense of the word. But it is also this development which turns language into a dangerous source of error and deception. Everything depends on the degree to which words and word-combinations correspond to the world of impression.

In advertising practice, we are trained to use a common parlance which is the most effective means of communication with the large masses of humanity. When doing this, we are effective because the general meaning is consistently perceived and precise definition of the words has no importance. Nevertheless, when we, as academics, entrap ourselves in this common lack of precision, our students are poorly prepared to understand and correct the misconceptions of their peers. A psychologist, for example, would not describe the intricacies of a specific mental illness to his colleagues (or students) in the same terms he would use with the family of a patient. Unfortunately, marketing educators seem less inhibited. Perhaps it is merely that our discipline has not yet become fully "disciplined."

Shelby Hunt makes a detailed case for vigorously developing theory in marketing (Hunt 1976; Johnson 1974). In particular, he points to the necessity for a formal language component in a theoretical system. In his words, (p. 111)

> ...An axiomatic formal language system becomes a fully formalized theoretical system when a complete set of appropriate semantical rules of interpretation for the elements or terms in the formal language system have been developed.

While marketing theory is a long way from the discipline and rigor suggested by Hunt, it seems worthwhile to seek clarity in terms which might alter the way the common man comes to understand marketing's role.

One of the reasons the common man misunderstands marketing's role is the all-too-common lack of distinction between needs and wants: We all make an inherent distinction between needs and wants without drawing any significance from the difference. While this is acceptable in ordinary conversation, it is not precise enought to facilitate an understanding of marketing's role in society.

Needs and wants play fundamental roles in demand. Marketing activities are instrumental in influencing those roles. In fact, marketing activities, in the main, are directed toward producing wants from needs to elicit demand. When a need is associated with an external object (need satisfier) a want exists. When the willingness and ability to buy is exercised this is reflected in our system as demand. We should clarify this relationship.

A lack of clarity in this area is at the heart of the consensus that advertising is an unrealistic, exaggerated effort to promote trivial differences between products for the purpose of getting people to want things they don't need. To a behavioral scientist the preceding statement should be a contradiction in terms. Unfortunately, the contradiction is not obvious. The contradiction manifests in the complex process of human motivation. Needs and wants are intimately linked with the phenomenon of motivation. However, no phenomenon is less clear, as described by one source (Kendler 1973),

> No major topic in psychology has inspired more theory than motivation. In fact, theories of motivation are so varied and so mutually contradictory that it is impossible either to summarize or to integrate them.

We need not presume to accomplish the impossible to define needs and wants in the way they "correspond to the world of impression" (Olson 1971).

One explication was produced by Stanton (1975):

> A need is the lack of anything that is required, desired, or useful. We do not limit needs to the narrow physiological requirements of food, clothing, and shelter essential for survival. The potentially limitless number of needs offers unbounded opportunities for market growth. Satisfying wants may be interpreted as the first step toward satisfying needs. We want something that will answer our needs.

The essence of the roles played by needs and wants is contained in the preceding, but it is not as explicit as we might make it. Want-satisfaction is a necessary step in need-satisfaction. Therefore, we should view the creation of a want as the method whereby advertising offers need-satisfaction to consumers. Clarification of this notion demands a precise definition of needs and wants.

Needs are states of disequilibrium within a human being. They represent a tipping of the scales on some spectrum of physiological or psychological functioning. If the imbalance is physiological it is classed as an organic or homeostatic need (Kendler 1973). If the lack of equilibrium is not organic, then it can be called a psychological need. In either case, the condition is an internal imbalance or lack. Needs, therefore, involve only conditions within the human being. The specific status

of blood sugar, water content, feelings of acceptance, love, comfort, and so on, will determine the need state of an individual.

A want is a learned drive state which is directed toward something external to the human being (Kendler 1973). This external something is perceived as having the capability of satisfying some internal need or group of needs, organic and/or psychological. It is this perception of need-satisfying ability which causes an individual to want an object or a specific state. Wants, therefore, derive from needs and involve something external to a human being. They are created through the learning of associations between need-satisfaction and certain objects or states. They motivate behavior when the need or needs with which the object is most strongly associated attain priority in an individual.

Human beings can be seen, therefore, as carrying within themselves an internal repetoire of unsatisfactory conditions (needs) ordered into priorities for correction and a set of learned associations (wants) between externalities (need satisfiers) and these needs. The point, however, is that the condition of wanting anything is dependent on needing what the something is perceived as capable of satisfying. In short, a want presumes a need.

Armed with these definitions, the misconceptions of marketing's role in society can be ameliorated. Certainly, the logical inconsistency in the charge that we "make people want what they don't need" is made clearer. However, marketing is definitely involved with needs and wants...by the creation of associations, by influencing need priorities, and by making need-satisfiers available. Nevertheless, our involvement does not enable us to alter or determine (or create) the needs of our consumers.

For example. suppose an ad campaign for deodorant leaves the impression that you can avoid social disapproval by reducing offensive body odor when you use this deodorant. If that is the only need-satisfying characteristic, then only those who need that tacit form of social approval are likely to want the deodorant. An individual who has no such social need cannot be made to want the deodorant. He would go on stinking and offending others, even if God designed the ad's appeal for that particular characteristic.

Marketing can, however, try to influence the perceptions of need-satisfiers (goods and services) for any given need or group of needs, (i.e., which products are perceived to satisfy which needs). Thus, marketing can create wants. We can also try to influence the priorities of need satisfaction, (i.e., which of the unlimited number of needs will be satisfied with the limited resources at any point in time).

We are social creatures, and our products perform social and psychological functions, as well as, physical functions. Let's consider again, the need for social approval. If an individual strongly feels a lack of social approval, for whatever reason, this is indeed a need condition. It is an internal psychological insufficiency, and is, therefore, a need.

Let us further suppose that through his previous experiences this individual has learned that he can get social approval by owning the latest model of a particular automobile. Leaving aside questions of the suitability of this solution to his problem, it is a solution that, in the past, has worked for him. Knowing that he can satisfy his need for social approval in this manner, whenever he feels a lack of social approval, he will want the latest model of that particular automobile. The fact that his current car is in excellent condition would not negate his need, nor invalidate his want. He determines his own priorities of need satisfaction. In this case, his psychological need has priority. He needs social approval, not just a car in excellent condition. Therefore, he wants the latest model.

Psychological needs are not subordinate to or less consequential than organic needs. Many POW's in Korea died because their psychological needs were not satisfied, even though their physical well-being was provided for adequately by their captors. This only points up the obvious fact that the priorities we set for need satisfaction are dependent upon our circumstances. Under less stressful circumstances, however, as Maslow's (1943) theory suggests, the more affluent we are, the less important are the lower (organic) needs and the more important are the social or psychological needs.

In a complex and affluent society, such as ours, the social and psychological needs predominate. The ability to achieve satisfaction of these needs depends, in large measure, on the societal significance and symbolism of the various objects and activities in the society. The development of this significance and symbolism is a complex and interactive process in every culture. However, it must be admitted that, in our culture, Marketing plays a definitive role in that development.

Irving White defined three sources of influence on the relationship of a social object (product) to the individuals in society. In his words (1975)

> ...For any advertiser, there is a certain amount of realistic humility inherent in the knowledge that advertising is only one of the several sources of stimulation that a product contains for the individual in society. The influences of culture and of private sensations modify and intermingle with the stimuli of advertising to achieve the final pattern of relationship between the seller's product (or ideas and services) and the consumer.

Culture is the most pervasive influence on product meaning. All children learn to respond to social objects in terms of the responses of adult society. Prior to the advent of mass communications, the predominant forces in social training were localized in the specific communities. Individuals learned the social significance of and associations with various elements within their environment from immediate sources, (i.e., Uncle Harry, Aunt Margaret, the preacher, their teachers, their peers, and so on).

Mass communication provides a much broader exposure and a much larger base from which to select means

of satisfying our needs. The social learning inherent in such exposure actually creates, by virtue of the large numbers of people reached, social significance for a broad spectrum of social objects. Just what proportion of the total social impact of mass communication can be attributed to advertising efforts is undetermined. But, certainly, it is bound to be significant because of the amount of advertising present in all forms of mass communication.

The cultural impact of commercial products is described by White (1975),

> ...A commercial product becomes culturally defined by the broad history of interaction with its market. In particular, the definition is determined by the social, biological, and psychic needs the product fulfills for its user. Thus, when a product achieves a niche in its cultural context, it is an object which denotes consistent (not unalterable) and predictable behavior within the social structure.

Marketing selects and reinforces certain values and needs inherent in the culturally defined role of a product. It integrates a product into its niche in the existing value structure of society. Advertising helps to define this niche, the need structures associated with it, and the behavioral connotations within the bounds of the cultural context. Therefore, while it would be incorrect to ascribe the widespread use of deodorant or perfumed products to advertising influence, it would be equally incorrect to assume that we are simply evolving into a more odor-conscious species.

The relationship between culture and mass communications activities is highly interactive, and, because of its self-perpetuating aspects, represents a true "chicken or egg" problem in isolating cause and effect. However, common sense would suggest that there is resident in mass communications activities some capacity for establishing or altering social significance. This ability carries with it an inherent responsibility which should be recognized by all participants. This, indeed, is the lever underlying the movement to limit or eliminate violence, illicit sex, and so on, in television programming.

Nevertheless, whether or not the mass communications industry should more carefully control and screen their offerings, the beneficial effects of the commercial element (Marketing) should not be overlooked. The critics of our materialistic emphasis on possession of goods and services seem not to realize that, for many of us, this abundance of social objects and accoutrements, available at the drop of a few dollars, is a veritable mecca of social and psychological satisfactions. Too many of us do not possess the necessary god-given equipment, (e.g., talent, pleasing face and body structure, personality, courage, aggressiveness, and so forth) that is necessary to the achievement of socially-based satisfactions for the bulk of our psychological needs. Without our extensive consumer goods advertising efforts, these inadequacies could condemn all of us social handicaps to a lifetime of unfulfilled needs. That cannot be a healthy situation for any society.

Fortunately, the images and social significance of the myriad consumer goods available provide a tremendous reservoir of need-satisfiers. By the simple act of purchase, millions of human beings can supplement their god-given social equipment with man-made objects. These objects enable their owners to actually feel the satisfactions inherent in the social meanings onveyed by the objects. These satisfactions are not illusory. Most of us recognize that the treatment we receive from others is dependent, in part, upon our appearance, dress, mannerisms, and so on. An individual attired in a manner indicating affluence, success, etc. will receive considerably different treatment from one who is barefoot, in cut-off jeans, and a body shirt. This phenomenon holds for all categories of social objects and situations. However, the effects are most readily noticed in matters of dress.

It would be difficult to ignore so pervasive a social phenomenon or its relationship to marketing efforts. In addition, the social effects claimed for products cannot readily be falsified by advertisers. Only when and if the impact of advertising for a social object succeeds in clarifying and firmly establishing its social gestalt, is the object wanted. A successfully marketed object is wanted because it is, for the majority of consumers, truly perceived to be a need-satisfier. Consumers, if they are fooled, are not fooled for very long. We do not continue to want (and exercise our wants through the expenditures of hard-earned dollars) objects or services which do not satisfy our needs. Each individual determines what those needs are.

The preceding whitewash might seem to be just that, semantic sleight-of-mind to refute the notion that we can make anyone want something they don't need. We still can fool someone into believing our product will satisfy his needs, even if it doesn't "really" perform. We would thereby have, in essence, caused him to want something he really didn't need. To the extent that we are guilty of such misrepresentations of our products, we would be deserving of the image we bear. However, for the majority of consumer products this is probably not the case.

In the first place, the bulk of the claims and implied benefits for consumer products tend to involve social and psychological needs. The achievement of satisfaction in those areas is largely determined by subjective processes. For example, how does one objectively determine whether or not one's lips have become more "luscious" after application of a new lip gloss?

Repeated advertising can, in fact, "create" the claimed effects by influencing the perceptual set (Gestalt) evoked by products. Let's face it, chewing gum is a completely neutral substance. However, advertised long enough in the appropriate settings, and so on, one becomes..."Big Red", a macho chew, while another, Wrigley's Spearmint, becomes a "friendly hello." At some point in time (for successful campaigns) the cumulative effects of advertising exposure will literally cause the previously neutral product to take on the social significance suggested. Successful advertising of "social significance" is a true self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unfortunately, there seems to be an innate bias in our intellectual appraisals of the "acceptable" needs to satisfy with products. Social and psycho-

logical needs are somehow inferior, or demeaning, or we are playing upon "human frailties" by succoring such needs!

The critics always seem to operate on the premise that products are created to satisfy only some primary "functional" group of needs in any given category, (e.g., automobiles are for safe, economical transportation). This has never been true of human consumption. Even in primitive cultures we would see differences in "products" that perform social or psychological functions.

For example, the local counterpart of General Motors in a primitive village, the canoe maker, might carve intricate symbols and designs onto the canoes and paddles for the chief, witch doctor, and the tribal hero. Everyone else in the tribe would get plain, standard models. These designs do not alter the physical functioning of the canoes, even though elaborate claims might be made concerning the "powers" that have been carved into them to "ward off devils", "make their owners powerful and fearless", and so on. These "powers" are social and psychological. It would make no sense at all for a "consumer advocate", for example, to tell the chief that "consumer tests" of canoe performance indicated no superiority for canoes and paddles with the carvings!

In point of fact, the canoes might actually be less functional because the carvings have weakened the hull or they might cause turbulence in the flow of water, etc. Nevertheless, the owners "know" that the (imaginary) "devils" are being warded off by the "powers" (Imaginary) and they, indeed, feel more powerful and more fearless! The carvings also serve to identify the status of the owners relative to the other members of the tribe, and so on.

In short, we only want what we need, and no amount of external influence can alter that. It only seems as though a product can be wanted without being needed because we assume that we know what needs a given product should satisfy for our fellow human beings. Like the consumer advocate testing canoes and paddles, when we operate on that assumption, we too often miss the boat.

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