

MARKETING IN DIVERSITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF TWO CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the evolution of marketing in Nigeria. It lays the foundation for a two culture comparison (Nigeria and the UK) with the aim of working out a framework for assessing the problems and prospects of marketing within the Nigerian multicultural context.

INTRODUCTION

The last couple of years witnessed a renewed interest in marketing theory (Thomas 1994, Brownlie et al 1994, Firat et al 1995). The discernible move towards 'rethinking marketing' (Hunt 1994) is, in part, prompted by the challenges which different cultural environments are throwing up as conventional marketing principles are applied to contexts for which they were not originally conceived. Perceivably, from its much acclaimed 'revolution' (Keith 1960) to becoming established as 'everything' (McKenna 1992) and now in 'chaos or transition' (Thomas 1994), it seems that the 'identity crisis' in marketing (Bartels 1974) is yet to be resolved. Marketing theory, therefore, is at a cross-roads. How it successfully emerges from the current 'mid-life crisis' (Kotler 1994) will so much depend on how it accommodates the emerging paradoxes as new frontiers and contexts are focused.

This paper, the first of a three-part series, highlights the development of marketing in Nigeria. The second part will move on to evaluate the evolution of marketing in two environments (Nigeria and the UK) with multicultural settings and dissimilar marketing contexts. The reason for attempting the cross-cultural study is to underline the importance of socio-cultural processes which embed the practice of marketing in different settings and which are often ignored by marketing theorists. Thereafter, the study will focus on the three principal sub-cultures in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). The overall aim is to present marketing from a different perspective and to highlight its different myths and realities of marketing in diverse cultural environments.

Development of Marketing in Nigeria:

The state of marketing in Nigeria is shrouded in controversy as a result of the multitudinous conceptions of the subject. It has been argued that marketing is only identified with an economy of abundance, where a nation produces far beyond subsistence level (Deng 1994). If this holds, it implies that Nigeria and most of African countries cannot be represented on the 'marketing map' of the world. However, if Kotler's (1972) proposition is adopted - which suggests that marketing should be seen as the task of creating and offering values for the purpose of achieving a desired response - marketing in Nigeria cannot be regarded as under-developed. The country is commercially vibrant - for a profile of Nigeria's business environment, including its approach to economic adjustment, see Sawyer (1993) and Nwankwo (1994).

Understanding the development of marketing in Nigeria requires some insights into commercial practices among the ethnic groups. From the point of view of socio-economic development, the importance of trade and marketing can be traced to the critical role they played in the distribution of commodities within and between communities. Essentially, the pattern of distribution and interaction of marketing institutions and activities in various centres provide a key to the space economy of an area. The development of commerce in Nigeria has been closely linked with foreign religion. Until the first quarter of this century, Moslem religion in the Hausa/Fulani North and parts of Yorubaland in the West exerted considerable influence on the pattern and direction of trade, creating commercial and cultural links with countries across the Sahara desert. In the same way, Christian religion in Igboland (East) and Southern territories influenced the flow of trade towards and across the Atlantic (these aspects are developed in the next paper).

At the local level, marketing was a mass participatory activity involving complementary exchange of agricultural products and local crafts among the people alternating in the roles of sellers and buyers. Thus, the pivotal marketing facility was the market place - a venue for face-to-face interaction between buyers and sellers. One remarkable feature of the local market was their periodicity. The periodic markets, particularly in Igboland, developed out of custom of 'rest day'. By this custom, different villages have different days within the period of a four-day week on which they abstained from their routine occupation. The people simply stayed at home to do household chores, practice crafts and hobbies, relax and entertain one another (Ukwu 1967). More importantly, they use the occasion to market their products - farm products or crafts. Obviously, the market system found a ready-made institutional framework, with each village controlling the market developed on its land.

Traditional concept of marketing: The traditional concept of marketing was based on the exchange system. The exchange system (mainly trade by barter) required that each market participant should produce products acceptable to others, and knowing that s/he may not be the only person who will come to the market with such products, value-adding activities received careful attention. Aesthetic variables were the major determinants of what the product (especially crafts) could be exchanged for. The traditional concept of marketing is analogous to the 'commodity focus' (Kotler 1972) or product orientation.

The traditional markets represented an effective adaptation of the needs and facilities of the people to the cultural setting of the land. In addition to serving as centres for facilitating exchange transactions, the market squares became places for hosting festivals, local ceremonies, offering sacrifices to the gods, administration and dispensation of justice and making peace among antagonistic groups, villages or clans. The location and periodicity of the traditional markets in each villages depended on factors internal to the village and in accordance with prevailing sociological imperatives and nothing whatsoever to do with the dynamics of competition.

By the middle of the 19th century, the presence of the Europeans were felt in the hinterland. History recorded the overwhelming impact of trade as a result of contact between Nigerians and, notably, the Arabs and the Europeans (Afigbo 1973). Contacts with the Arab merchants from North Africa and the Middle East increased the tempo of commerce, thus establishing the trans-saharan trade - the pattern was re-enacted with the Europeans when they came, hence the trans-Atlantic trade. This is the genesis of international trade and marketing in Nigeria.

The scope of exchange became broadened and more sophisticated. Production and sale of goods were no longer based on the socio-economic milieu of the immediate environment of the producer. The Nigerian producer became aware that his/her product will have to be sold in cultures other than his/hers. Consequently, producers were compelled to gather information about other producers, markets and patterns of exchange. By this time, the middleman concept has started to gain grounds.

Middleman Concept: This concept, similar to Kotler's (1972) 'institutional focus', found impetus in the agricultural sector, which was the major concern of the Europeans who were scouting for raw materials for their local industries. As a result of the activities of the masses of local producers and consumers, as well as traders of various kinds, the trade in agricultural produce generated the greatest number of marketing trips and determined the general pattern of movement to rural market places.

Since the local producers cannot attend to all the markets where their product may be sold, they sold to people who can afford the time and have sufficient knowledge of the long distant markets. Commodities for export (eg. palm products, groundnuts, cocoa, timber, cotton, rubber) were bought by large trading companies or by the government marketing boards through intermediaries. The middlemen knew where the goods sold best and in what market to make the best buy. Give-aways like the 'hot-drinks' (whisky), tobacco, trinkets, looking glasses to the kings and elders were discount

mechanisms which sharpened the agency middleman concept. The refinement of the middleman concept as a process of consummating exchange relations led to the next phase in the development of marketing thought in Nigeria..

Distributive trade/Dealership concept:

The growth of cash-oriented economic activities stimulated greater opportunities for sale and expansion of demand due to widening choice of new goods. Consequently, the need to improve infrastructural facilities became urgent as railways were constructed between 1941 and 1917. These developments resulted in the accelerated growth of urban towns. The stage was, therefore, set for the big foreign firms (eg. UAC, SCOA, UTC, PZ, Liver Brothers, Leventis) to play a more active role in the development of marketing. Since most of these trading firms were based in urban centres, small scale traders from the rural areas bought their articles of trade from them and then re-distributed to markets hitherto not accessible or serviced by the big merchant companies. Structurally, markets are divided into organised sectors and sellers of similar products grouped together. Prices are usually settled through haggling. Displays are meticulously arranged so that each item is visible enough to attract the attention of shoppers. Bargaining is the general rule and personal selling has remained the main feature. Sales promoters operating from vans with mounted loud-speakers paints a picture of aggressive selling in a hotly competitive situation. Radio remains a particularly effective advertising medium since its effectiveness cannot be hampered by low literacy level.

Selling concept/marketing orientation: It is arguable whether Nigeria has progressed beyond the selling concept. Some cynics would even argue that the country is still very much at the product oriented era largely because the present marketing system is deeply characterised by market imperfections/failures - hardly a condition for marketing orientation. Shortages are key features of the economy today. It might be the case that the development of marketing has recessed over the past decade in line with the retrogressive movement of the economy. However, in sectors such as textile, alcoholic and no-alcoholic beverages, the prevailing condition is one of buyers' market.

Under the current dispensation, the needs of the seller are more emphasized rather than those of the consumer. The primary concern of the seller is to convert products and services into cash rather than putting together a package of satisfaction to the consumer. At a micro level, short-termism in managerial approach has tended to stifle marketing development. At present, marketers are not interested in marketing. Scarcity and shortages cannot provide the stimulus for a marketing orientation.

Perspectives for the future: Overall, the situation is changing for good. Product differentiation, market segmentation, innovation in terms of products and marketing skills and customer orientation will become critical success factors in the evolving environment. Nigerian consumers are very informed and discerning. Hence, real competition for customer loyalty will govern the lives of many companies as we go through the 1990s. A 'total approach' to marketing, refining the conventional marketing concept to incorporate environment-specific paradoxes, will become a core managerial skills as we approach the next millennium.

Conclusion: The pattern of evolution and the challenges facing marketers are likely to differ from one marketing environment to another. In the case of Nigeria, the development of marketing has been inter-linked with local customs and tradition. These aspects have not been given prominence in the literature. The nearest parallels are the approaches described by Kotler (1972) and Bartel (1974). Generally, attention has been, almost exclusively, focused on product and market development at the expense of the important socio-cultural processes which embed the practice of marketing. A generalised framework of marketing 'transitions' may be fundamentally weak in describing the subtleties and paradoxes prevalent in diverse cultural environments. Nevertheless, such a framework might usefully provide the conceptual mooring within which context-specific factors may be fleshed out. This is how this paper will develop. The focus will be on the impact of environmental factors on marketing decisions, how managers cope, how they perceive the future of the discipline, and the skills needed to 'make it happen' in the context of a comparative analysis between Nigeria and the UK on the one hand and the dominant Nigerian sub-cultures on the other.

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