

Fred W. Shibley: Ocularcentrism, Marketing Management and the Marketing Concept in the Early Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Recently there has been much criticism of financial institutions and their role in the economic crisis that has reverberated around the world. These institutions play a prominent role in driving the economic and marketing system and very little attention has been devoted – historically speaking – to the connections between marketing and finance. As Dholakia points out, within the marketing discipline we frequently neglect the role of external agencies on the shaping of marketing activities. More strongly, he asserts that “The link between finance and commercial life...is not explored much in marketing literature” (Dholakia, 2012, p. 453-454), and yet it has profoundly shaped marketing throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries (e.g. Dholakia, 2012; Germain, 1996).

However, after Black Friday in 1929, marketing scholars were quick to direct their critical lances at this group for turning the business community against core marketing values. This antipathy was reflected in the pages of the *American Marketing Journal* – the predecessor to the *Journal of Marketing* – in which the President of the American Marketing Society, Frank Coutant, placed the blame for the Great Depression squarely on the shoulders of the financial community. As he put it,

“Perhaps we had better leave the moral lessons of the depression to the preachers and to Providence, but we are not likely to escape the indictment that it was caused by the most lopsided kind of thinking that business ever committed. Financiers filled the front offices. They inspired production experts to turn out goods faster and cheaper, but marketing has always been a mystery to the counting house. Men who understood marketing were herded outside with the other hired help” (Coutant, 1936a, p. 105)

It is the contention of this paper that Coutant (1936, 1937) provides a one dimensional perspective of the connection between marketing and the financial community. This article will highlight how Fred Shibley (1864-1944) – a Vice President at Bankers Trust, an institution that was rated as the thirteenth most powerful in the United States during the 1920s (Germain, 1996) – grew increasingly interested in financing business operations, forming close bonds with his new commerce oriented clientele; a position which contrasted markedly with the disdain exhibited for business and marketing related industries prior to the twentieth century (Rukeyser, 1926).

We will use the hitherto ignored scholarly writings of Shibley to illuminate our argument. Via his writings, Shibley contributed to marketing management thought (Cowan, 1927) by calling for greater recognition of the importance of marketing, market research and the centrality of the consumer in product and service planning. As is obvious, Shibley had a unique perspective as a banker and commentator on marketing by trying to stress that it should be financially responsible. Beyond this, Shibley’s writings were refracted with an ocularcentric discourse (Jay, 1988, Kavanagh, 2004), that is, it made a plea for greater levels of marketplace surveillance via market research; greater levels of corporate visibility through financial record keeping; and the increased visibility of all employees through various disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1977/1991) such as the quota system and what Shibley called the “sales dollar”.

Shibley’s contributions remain important for scholars today because they differ from those published during the 1920s and 1930s on the marketing concept (e.g. White, 1927), by promoting a

clearly ocularcentric discourse which is made absolutely *explicit*. For Shibley, power relations were mediated by an axiology predicated on visibility combined with an epistemology driven by a marketing management agenda of analysis, planning, implementation and financial control. Shibley's work, therefore, shifts our understanding of the rise of marketing management approaches, links it to a key paradigmatic tradition of Western science (ocularcentrism, knowledge as vision centred) and offers a compelling alternative narrative to Foucaultian studies which claim that the power relations manifested in organisational-agent relations were more often implicit when Shibley was writing, and used by managers in subtle ways in managing their organisations (e.g. Fougère and Skálén, 2013).

We think there is theoretical middle-ground here: Shibley's writings were not characteristic of a disciplinary power that represses and they were anything but implicit (Fougère and Skálén, 2013). And the power that was exerted was a positive, affirmative one. This is why people obey forms of power that are unobtrusive; they obey because what they stand to gain is pleasurable (e.g. financial rewards and organisational recognition and prestige). As Shibley points out, people might initially resist his system of power, but he was clear that all would benefit from his prescriptions ranging from the CEO to the sales worker in the field. What we see in his analysis is a complex study that is attentive to power relations and yet the message underlying his system is "obey", it is in your own best interests as producers and consumers. Finally, his work remains important today not simply because of the difference between his position and that of his contemporaries, but in view of the fact that he stresses the financial responsibility of marketing – a topic that has merited continued reflection throughout our discipline for nearly a century and continues today.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, brief attention is turned to Shibley's career. We subsequently engage in a close reading of all his sources to explicate our argument that he presents an advanced picture of marketing practice. Our method of investigation follows that of mainstream Western European and American historical research. Primary source material is that which was created during the period under investigation, in this case all of Shibley's known writing during the 1920s. That material was studied, synthesised, and interpreted in a systematic and critical way in order to explain his views about marketing during the 1920s. Our close reading of Shibley's writings was critical in the sense of trying to determine his perspective on marketing and why he held that point of view. Context, interpretation, and explanation are the keys to good historical research (Fullerton, 2011) and are the essence of our analysis of Shibley's writings on marketing. We parse our discussion of his work into its core parts: scientific administration, the marketing concept, market research, sales estimation and the "sales dollar", cooperation and coordination of supply chains, turning to his visibility and control axiology and concluding with the critiques of his work.

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