

Felton, Keith and McKitterick: Early Leaders of the Fifty-Year Revolution

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For more than fifty years, marketing theory, practice, and literature have been guided, motivated, challenged, and perplexed by the business philosophy known as "The Marketing Concept." In order to fully appreciate the marketing concept, one must review the perspectives of those who contribute to philosophy as it emerges. In order to accomplish this reflection, the authors will briefly introduce the work of three early marketing leaders: Arthur P. Felton, Robert J. Keith and John B. McKitterick. A more substantive examination of these individuals and their historical relevance to the marketing concept is the subject of ongoing research and writing.

Many researchers, academics, and practitioners have attempted to define, clarify, make operational, and empirically test some aspect of the elusive, yet intuitively persuasive theoretical premise known as the Marketing Concept. The concept is the singular notion that organizational success emerges from a customer focus is simple, comprehensive, and elegant. It is also highly controversial and difficult to prove. Still, there exist a number of theories, articles, anecdotes, case studies, and investigations that almost unanimously support and champion this concept.

In order to appreciate the power and problems associated with the marketing concept, one must occasionally step back, review, and re-evaluate the perspectives and the perceptions of any philosophy as it emerges. Unfortunately, for marketing academics and practitioners alike, the contributions of many significant marketers, academic and practitioner alike, go unexplored. In order to accomplish this considered reflection, the author will briefly introduce the work of three early marketing leaders. A more substantive examination of these individuals is the subject of ongoing research and writing.

The intent of this introduction is not to claim that the marketing concept emerged as a direct result of the individual work or collective genius of Keith, Felton, and/or McKitterick. Rather, it is to illuminate the contribution of three otherwise unheralded champions of this remarkable

business philosophy. The authors completely acknowledge that the contributions of these three are not the starting point for the marketing concept anymore than the Lewis and Clark expedition was the first adventure into the western wilderness. However, the effort of McKitterick, Felton and Keith are some of the earliest specifications of the organizational attributes associated with the marketing concept chronicled during their time, just as the exploits of Lewis and Clark are some of the earliest specifications of the opportunity that existed west of the Mississippi.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The first pioneer is Arthur P. Felton. His contributions to the art and science of marketing first emerged in 1956 through the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article titled "Conditions of Marketing Leadership." This initial work was closely followed in 1957 by another HBR publication titled "Making the Marketing Concept Work."

The second early contributor is Robert J. Keith. Keith's career path is unclear. Initial investigation suggests that Mr. Keith ascended to the presidency of The Pillsbury Company, while the admittedly loose archive material from Pillsbury indicates that he only managed the company's consumer research division and rose to no higher level than Senior Vice President. What is unquestioned and clear is that the American Marketing Association named Keith the 1969 recipient of the prestigious "Charles Coolidge Parlin Marketing Research Award". His early contribution to the marketing concept is embodied in the 1960 *Journal of Marketing* article titled "The Marketing Revolution."

Finally is an introduction to the contribution of John B. McKitterick. His most noted work is titled "What is the Marketing Concept?" written in 1957 and presented during an *American Marketing Association Conference* whose focus theme was "The Frontiers of Marketing Thought and Science." During his career, Mr. McKitterick served as the President of The General Electric Company, and through his leadership is credited with innovating the management structure of GE, which in large part has resulted in the company's growth and global success.

The discussions of the marketing discipline were in part lead or participated-in by these marketing

practitioners during a period of transition from the pre-war production orientation into the post-war emergence of the marketing orientation. While others may claim authorship to terms and theoretical specification of the marketing concept, these three provided the "on-the-ground" leadership for its corporate integration at a time when the American industrial machine emerged as the most prominent in the world.

In 1950, most American corporations were organized around the "sales effort" (Anonymous-Business Week 1950, p. 24). It was during this post WW II period that GE had a couple of its subsidiary firms alter this traditional organizational model, placing the marketing function squarely at the top of the decision making process. Under this radically different organizational structure, product-planning managers worked directly with marketing managers, a concept heretofore untried on a corporate scale. At this very early stage, the fledgling marketing concept consisted of two fundamental notions: 1) the consumer should be the focal point for all business activity, and 2) profit rather than sales volume would be specified as the criterion for evaluating business activities. Previous to this enunciation of the marketing concept, early marketing theorists and economists emphasized the fundamental purpose of marketing as providing functional utilities for consumers (Priem 1992; Bell and Emory 1971; Alderson 1965; Alderson 1957). Utility in this sense is specified as the "absence of need." With this in mind, early academic publications presented a customer centered argument for the functions of business based on a purely utilitarian viewpoint.

Arthur P. Felton

Arthur P. Felton's *Harvard Business Review* articles focused on organizational structure and executive leadership obligations. According to Felton, the marketing concept begins with what he termed a "corporate state of mind;" an organizational mindset that insists on fully inculcating the marketing efforts of the firm deeply into the cultural fabric of the firm. Marketing strategy, to this point, depended largely on a hierarchical governance to insure control of relevant marketing assets. Organizations were structured in a rather functional form: sales sold, managers managed, accountants accounted-for, without much consideration for how each, otherwise functionally independent component, interacted with the customer or the impact that each had individually or collectively on the satisfaction of the customer and the creation of value and the ability to for the firm to claim such value.

Felton's prerequisite for an integrated organizational effort suggested that beginning with corporate executives and throughout the entire business organization, everyone had to understand, adopt, and assist in the creation of a culture that held customer satisfaction as the highest measure of success. His warning is as valid today as it was then. "A business organized along the lines

of a proven success formula will fail, or at least operate far below proper efficiency, if the corporation does not develop the proper marketing state of mind." This promoted marketing strategy dependent upon relationships, internal and external, thereby enhancing value creation.

Robert J. Keith

Robert J. Keith joined Pillsbury Company in 1935 when it was still referred to as Pillsbury Mills, Inc. He had also been an executive with Northern States Power Company, and the National Pressure Cooker Company. His career achievements would also include director positions with Brooks-Scanlon, Inc., McQuay-Perfex, Inc., and retail giant Dayton Hudson Corporation. Additionally, Keith was the 1969 recipient of the "Charles Coolidge Parlin Marketing Research Award;" an award presented by the *American Marketing Association* established to recognize achievements and contributions to the academic and practice of marketing research. Other recipients include Shelby Hunt, Jagdesh Sheth, and most recently Gilbert Churchill Jr. and Richard M. Johnson. Keith may be the most academically noted of the three contributors considered herein.

Using his experience with Pillsbury, Keith's marketing vision first appears in the January 1960 issue of the *Journal of Marketing*. In this remarkably eloquent article, Keith specified stages that he termed "The Marketing Revolution." Keith believed that successful marketing organizations would evolve through four distinct eras until ultimately "...marketing will become the basic motivating force for the entire corporation." He coined terms that defined evolutionary eras for American business. He termed these eras 1) the production orientated era, 2) the sales orientated era, 3) the marketing oriented era and finally 4) the marketing control era wherein it would be the influence of marketing that would drive the long-range strategic planning for all successful firms. Today, most if not all, principles of marketing texts and many substantial strategy works have acknowledged this notion that Keith fathered more than forty years ago.

John B. McKitterick

John B. McKitterick ascended to the Presidency of the General Electric Corporation and in 1957, having been in part responsible for the organizational restructuring of GE, which was the focus of an early *Business Week* magazine article (Anonymous-Business Week 1950, p. 24). His most noteworthy contribution to the marketing literature emerged while addressing the *American Marketing Association*, McKitterick asserted that the marketing concept "...is a customer oriented, integrated, profit oriented philosophy of business". While these three essential elements remain as the most fundamental underpinnings of the marketing concept, McKitterick believed that the most important aspect for enterprise was

that this concept would produce greater, more predictable levels and sources of profit, if and only if profit were measured, monitored, and remained as the reward for maintaining the customer focus within an organization that integrates all functions toward creating customer satisfaction. McKitterick's tone provided a more practical reason for following this rapidly emerging philosophy.

CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

While many know the contributions of these three, what appears remarkable to the authors is the absence of these three pioneers in the developmental literature. As an example, scanning the indices of historical theory work, there is little if any mention of Felton, Keith, or McKitterick. This indicates that perhaps more inquiry would be beneficial both to the history of marketing thought and to the development of such important philosophies as the marketing concept. Hence the authors are inviting, through this introductory piece, additional insight and information that would detail the lives and times of these three; Arthur P. Felton, John B. McKitterick, and Robert J. Keith.

A more in-depth study of these three individuals will shed additional light on the rich history and controversy that continues to surround the on-going marketing revolution. While it may be argued that sophisticated marketing and therein the marketing concept may predate the 1950's it cannot be argued that many, including these three, helped to elevate marketing, academically and practically.

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