

**THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS:
A SUMMARY OF THE 8TH CONFERENCE ON HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN MARKETING
AND MARKETING THOUGHT**

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INTRODUCTION

The papers presented at the 8th Conference on Historical Research in Marketing and Marketing Thought can be viewed as a complete text. Indeed, they take on the physical form of a text when they are compiled as conference proceedings. This summary is a reflective critique of initial interpretations of the conference papers which examines some common themes emerging from the text. While the wide and diverse range of papers presented appropriately reflect the conference theme, "Marketing History Knows No Boundaries," three dominant themes ostensibly emerge: the implications of post-modernity for marketing history, history and the teaching of marketing, and social construction of unfair competition.

IMPLICATIONS OF POST-MODERNITY

Does the arrival of post-modernity spell the end of history? Clearly the post-modern era poses problems for marketing history as a field of study. Robert Owen raised the concern that the knowledge and lessons from the past evaporate in an era where everything exists in virtuosity. Stephen Brown in his exploration of River Dance as a post-modern phenomenon pointed out that its lack of correspondence with historical record does not detract from the value of the interpretation presented in the work. Thus the past does not exist as a concrete reality, but our interpretation of the past can provide insight into our current understanding. Similarly our current understanding can influence our interpretation of the past. For example, Terry Witkowski in his discussion of gendered consumption in frontier America, provides new insight into the notions of sacred and profane consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1988). In the frontier, production was performed by males thus being sacred while consumption, performed by females was profane. The key point is that knowledge is nothing more than a stream of interpretation.

HISTORY AND THE TEACHING OF MARKETING

Much more was said of history and the teaching of marketing. Many presenters including Boothman and Tamilla expressed the concern that the current marketing curriculum avoided the lessons of the past, focusing only on the most recent findings. Their concern is similar to that voiced in the humanities in the mid 1980's by those who felt that the foundational canon of western thought was being pushed out of the curriculum in favor of current works and perspectives (Bloom, 1987; D'Souza, 1991). Marketing historians may well agree that a "canon" of marketing thought exists and that students ought to be exposed to a historical evolution of marketing thought because it sets the context for both current research and practice. There appeared to be numerous views on how this evolutionary perspective can be incorporated into the curriculum. Nancy Spears and Richard Germain, for example explored the metaphor and analogy as theory building tools in marketing and other disciplines. Brian Jones further examined the early evolution of the machine metaphor in the functional school of marketing.

O. C. Ferrell and Bob Jewell discussed the evolution of marketing text books. There was general agreement that texts designed for a first course in marketing have become more homogeneous over a 40 year period. Jewell pointed out that earlier texts were heterogeneous, idiosyncratic works which reflected unique paradigms or points of view. They tended to be 1) normative (solving marketing problems) or descriptive (establishing marketing's role in business); 2) concerned with marketing channels of distribution, or 3) focused on the buyer or seller. By contrast, the later textbooks all 1) are rather homogenous, 2) are very comprehensive incorporating many concepts issues and paradigms, 3) emphasize marketing processes and systems, and 4) differentiate themselves from each other through the utilization of current trends. Ferrell summarized the evolution of marketing texts in a comprehensive listing, including the principal authors, noting that the trend of co-authorship had become well established by the 1970s.

Stan Hollander postulated that modern marketing texts are written more to please students and thus sell texts than to further serious marketing thought. He wondered if student doltishness was a result of this trend, or the reverse. This would appear to result in isomorphism (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983) for which there are a number of other competing explanations

including coercion, mimetic and normative effects. Coercive forces arise in the form of publishers who force authors to create products that are salable. Mimetic forces may produce isomorphism as faculty look up and around (Cialdini, 1993) in order to determine the type of text used at more prestigious institutions in making text adoption decisions. Normative forces may have caused homogeneity of form in the basic marketing text through the emergence of a dominant paradigm in marketing thought. A more thorough examination of these competing explanations may lead to definitive answers about isomorphic change in basic marketing texts.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF UNFAIR COMPETITION

Finally, a number of authors (Coles, Landry, Keep and Dickinson, Marber) presented papers where the regulation of unfair competition was an important theme in the work. Apparent in these talks was that the regulation of "unfair" competition was an important concern for government in a number of geographic and historical settings. The long-term trend since medieval times has been to regulate marketing activities. Mike Landry's paper, for example, addressed the regulation of specific industries of "common calling" which had their genesis in the guilds, specifically the travel industries, i.e. wharves, ferries, innkeepers, etc. The term "common calling" appeared in the 18th century to refer to transportation firms (common carriers) which were vital to the public interest. These came to be regulated by the states, and Congress established the Interstate Commerce Commission in the 1890s.

Frequently, micro-economic explanations were cited as mechanism through which the regulation of "unfair" activities was legitimated. Tim Coles traced the origins and growth of large-scale retailing in Germany in the 1800s, questioning whether the emergence of these businesses with all their convenience and economies of scale constituted innovations in marketing, or unfair competition. Similarly, Bill Keep and Roger Dickinson discussed the regulation of retail chains through the Federal Trade Commission, and the Robinson-Patman Act, with Dickinson questioning (and answering) whether the regulations benefited the small retailers (no) or the large retail chains (yes). All of these regulations were presumably enacted to minimize abuses and to protect the so-called public interest.

It is interesting to note that in Japan, there exists regulation called the large-scale retailing law which has historically hindered the development of large retailers and this in turn, has impacted consumers, forcing them to pay higher prices and perhaps enjoy less variety in goods than might otherwise occur in the absence of such law. Yet, the unemployment rate in Japan has been very low since World War II, and this has undoubtedly been helped by the protections that smaller, family-owned retailers enjoy, possibly preserving village and town life.

At the end of the millennium, which way is the pendulum swinging? Have we now reached a state of too much regulation? Does regulation do more harm than good? As Landry and others observed, this has modern-day and future implications, specifically in light of concerns over the Internet.

It may be debatable whether *any* competitive activity is objectively unfair. "Fairness" is a social construct and those with the loudest voices and deepest pockets get their definition of "fairness" placed in a position of privilege over competing definitions. Historical analyses of these types enable us to question the legitimating power of micro-economic theory. These are only three of the themes and interpretations which may emerge from a reading of the text. A number of others occur, including socio-cultural, distribution, consumption and consumer theory, and international topics.

ADDITIONAL THEMES

Maureen Hupfer, to no one's surprise, was awarded the most outstanding student paper with her discussion of "Anything in Skirts Stands a Chance: Marketing the Canadian North-West to British Women, 1880-1914". This was a interesting exploration into the use of marketing and public policy to rectify gender imbalance in both countries. Britain had too many women, the Canadian West too few. Marketing promotion, and distribution were ultimately responsible for helping to populate a nation. Still other cultural aspects emerged from Ann Colbert's review of the historical role of dolls as emissaries of fashion, tracing their use from traveling dolls of European courts to the switch to paper dolls, and fashion magazines. One wonders how technological advances such as virtual reality might ultimately contribute to this continued saga.

Margot Adams-Webber, Richard Stone and Mary Graham, Donald Dixon, and Coles each covered some aspect of retailing. Adams-Webber's was a discussion of the Larkin company, a firm about which little is commonly known, which

rivaled J. C. Penny and Sears Roebuck. Larkin employed a promotional scheme of attaching lavish premiums to its products which eventually exceeded the appeal of the soap products themselves. Stone and Graham brought an interdisciplinary perspective to their discussion of retail locational strategies in Baltimore. Dixon explained the role of warrior-merchants in the development of the Russian State, noting that extensive commercial activity occurred in Russia during the same time as the European Dark Ages. Nobles from this culture created the first Russian state, and used war and military force to expand the boundaries of their commercial activity. Coles elaborated on the emergence of department stores in Germany

The value of a conference is in the discourse which takes place during and after the presentation of a paper. Each attendee is invited to develop his or her own interpretations of the text.

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