

WHAT'S IN A DEFINITION? DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN DEFINITIONS AND OBJECTIVES OF "MARKETING" IN THE HISTORIES OF MARKETING AND MARKETING THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Fullerton (1988) demonstrates that the commonly held view of three eras of marketing history (production, selling and marketing control) cannot be supported by the available evidence as an adequate framework for understanding the history of marketing thought. Still, scholars continue to use this as the common lens through which to understand marketing thought. Why? The thesis of this paper is that "marketing" as a discipline--that is, marketing thought--is defined from one generation to the next within the constraints of each generation's contemporary environment, while the objective of marketing--the benchmark of the history of marketing--can be seen as consistent over time. The definition of "marketing" and of marketing thought evolves, while the objective of marketing, which drives marketing's history-in-fact, endures. Reasons for this confusion are proposed, and consequences are considered.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing thought, the academic study and systematic description of a discipline of marketing, dates only to the turn of this century, though the practice of marketing has existed as long as humans have engaged in trade. Markets and marketing have played important roles in the formation of everything from religious doctrine (Watt 1960; Gilchrist 1982) to social order (Mulvihill 1987; Neveitt and Neveitt 1987; Lord 1987), and each successive generation has described what it has observed in the market place. The question arises, has the meaning of "marketing" changed with the formation and systematic study of markets (i.e., marketing thought), or is our understanding of the meaning of marketing dominated by the enduring phenomena of the marketplace?

Two views have been proposed in the past. On the one hand, Keith (1960) argued that the phenomena of marketing has passed through three eras: "production," "selling" and "marketing control." This perspective underlies an evolving definition of marketing in marketing thought, culminating in some form of "modern marketing." This is the perspective of marketing history offered in most undergraduate marketing textbooks. Here, the activities of the market place and marketing thought are synonymous, as should be their histories.

On the other hand, Fullerton (1988) demonstrated that this commonly held view of three eras of marketing thought cannot be supported by the available evidence as an adequate framework for understanding the history of marketing, nor of marketing thought. He proposed that the practice of marketing has evolved over time in a "complex flux," rather than in a series of "revolutions," as proposed by Keith (1960).

Still, many scholars continue to view marketing through Keith's (1960) prism. Why? The thesis of this paper is that "marketing" as a discipline (that is, marketing thought) is defined from one generation to the next within the constraints of each generation's contemporary environment, while the fundamental purpose of marketing has been consistent over time. That is, the definition and theory of "marketing" have

evolved, while the objective of marketing has endured. While the "Marketing Concept" is not the *new* idea suggested in most undergraduate marketing textbooks, what for scholars of marketing has constituted marketing thought has, in fact, changed over time.

The argument in this paper will be built in the following manner. First, Fullerton's critique of Keith's "Marketing Revolution" will be reviewed briefly. Second, definitions of marketing from a handful of marketing texts dating back to the 1910's will be presented and discussed. These examples will show that the definition of marketing within the discipline has changed over time. (These examples are intended to be demonstrative, and not comprehensive, in nature.) While the definition of marketing has changed over time, it will be shown that the objective of marketing is consistent across generations. Thus, a distinction needs to be drawn between the history of marketing thought, on the one hand, and the history of markets and marketing on the other. This distinction will be justified within the framework of commonly accepted standards of scientific contribution, and finally, the potential contributions to this understanding of marketing thought will be detailed.

THE ERROR OF ERAS

The idea of the "Production," "Selling" and "Marketing Control" eras of marketing was first proposed by Robert Keith (1960). Keith used his twenty-five years of experience with Pillsbury to build the case that marketing had changed in its orientation from production, to selling, to marketing based on customer needs. A sampling of current introductory marketing textbooks (Berkowitz, Kerin, Hartley and Rudelius 1994; Boone and Kurtz 1995; Kinnear, Bernhardt and Krentler 1995; Kotler 1994; Pride and Ferrell 1995) indicates that this is the dominant view of the history of marketing thought presented to marketing students today.

By examining the practice and objectives of businesses in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, Fullerton (1988) demonstrated that the concept of a "Production" era ignores the business conditions, efforts to stimulate demand among consumers and other marketing efforts of the time, and the growth of marketing firms outside the manufacturing realm during the period commonly referred to as the "Production" era. It appeared that the "Marketing Concept" was a driving force behind marketing decision making well before Keith's "Marketing" era. A similar analysis of the "Selling" era was presented. Fullerton concluded that there was no basis in historical marketing fact for the development of these eras in historical marketing thought.

Fullerton (1988) proposed an alternative view to that offered by Keith (1960). He calls his paradigm "complex flux," a model of evolution based on a complicated process involving patterns of revolutionary change, evolutionary change and continuity. Within this paradigm, four alternative periods of marketing emerge: eras of Marketing Antecedents, Marketing Origins, Institutional Development, and Marketing Refinements and Formalization. Each era builds on the previous one. As such, he offered a competing view of marketing thought, more consistent with the evidence of marketing history.

THE PRIMA FACIE APPEARANCE OF MARKETING ERAS

Still, if one examines the manner in which marketing texts from the 1910's to the present have defined "marketing," one sees why Keith, as well as others, would be predisposed to the notion that marketing has changed dramatically over time. These definitions represent a history of marketing thought, as opposed to a history of the phenomena of the practice of marketing itself. Fullerton (1988) did not make this distinction in his evaluation of Keith (1960) and used the history of marketing fact to indict the history of marketing thought.¹ That is, the answer to the question, "what is marketing?" is not consistent from one generation of scholars to the next.

For example, early texts define marketing in terms of distribution. Arch Shaw, in his book, Some Problems in Market Distribution (1915), did not use the term "marketing," but found the essential element of business "to be the application of motion to material." [p. 5] Shaw divided this "motion" of business into the activities of production, distribution and facilitating, with the focus of his discussion of what we would identify today as "marketing" falling in the second category.

Fred E. Clark (1922) defined marketing as:

"Those efforts which effect transfers in the ownership of goods and care for their physical distribution. The need for marketing grows out of the division of labor, particularly as it is manifested in specialized and large-scale production and in localization of industry." [p. 1]

In Clark's view, not only were modern production and its division of labor the activities comprising marketing, but they were the primary causes of the need for marketing.

Paul Converse (1936) defined marketing in terms of distribution:

"Distribution, or marketing is the most important part of business... 'Whatever can be sold can be made. The big problem is distribution.' Such statements are common and may be accepted as generally true in normal times.

"This condition has not always existed. Up until comparatively recent times, the big task of the race was to produce enough goods--food, clothing, and shelter--to satisfy its needs. During the past 150 years the problem has been altered by the use of labor-saving machinery; by the discoveries and inventions of chemistry, agriculture, physics and engineering; and by the development of scientific management and accounting." [p. 1]

Here, the focus of marketing thought was on distribution. A "Production" Era was recognized, but the function of marketing, in Converse's view, had moved from the production of goods to the distribution of the goods produced.

In 1961, a group of 72 marketing professors called the "Committee on Marketing" endeavored to write a standardized marketing text for a one semester introductory marketing class.² In their opinion, marketing was:

"[T]he composite of activities involved in transferring title and in moving goods from producer to consumer, including buying, selling, storing, transporting, standardizing, financing, risk-bearing, and supplying market information." [p. 2]

This definition is a list of activities constituting the domain of marketing. It is apparent that the scope of marketing thought had expanded beyond just the problem of distribution. The expansion of this definition reflected advances in technology in areas of storage, transportation, and especially supplying of market information.

Current texts offer definitions which are broader in scope and intention than those of previous generations. For example, Berkowitz, Kerin, Hartley and Rudelius (1994) define marketing as:

"[T]he process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives." [p. 10]

Like all of the definitions presented above, this definition describes the phenomena of marketing, and thus the domain of marketing thought, in terms of the activities engaged in by marketers. This recent definition reflects the attitude of contemporary marketing thinkers to see marketing as a process rather than

an event, and the use of each of the identified managerial tools available to marketers (the marketing mix variables) when making resource allocation decisions.

What each of these definitions shares in common is that each is an academic description of the phenomena of marketing, set in terms of the behavior of marketing managers, and each defines the domain of marketing thought through the lens of contemporaneous business technology.

Early definitions of marketing from Shaw (1915), Clark (1922) and Converse (1936)--all from a time remembered by Keith (1960) as at the transition between the Production and Selling Eras--focused on producing goods and getting them to market, the first important step in selling. All three definitions reflect on the historic importance of production, and the role of marketing in light of advances in production technology. Later definitions, such as that from the Committee on Marketing (1961), or from authors like Berkowitz, et al. (1994), view marketing in its expanded role of decision processes, and the marketing mix variables available to marketing decision makers. Here, one might conclude that the evolution of marketing reflects accurately the development of marketing fact. If not for the important work of Fullerton (1988), it would be easy to view these definitional differences as evidence of differences in marketing eras, and to conclude that Keith was, in fact, correct.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN DEFINITIONS AND OBJECTIVES IN MARKETING

One way to reconcile the critical scholarship of Fullerton (1988) with the *prima facie* evidence that, in fact, marketing has changed over time -- if not in practice at least in definition--is to distinguish between how scholars have defined "marketing," and how they have described its purpose. While descriptions of marketing activity have changed with time, the consistent, fundamental objective of marketing has been to satisfy the wants and needs of consumers (Shaw 1915; Clark 1922; Converse 1936; Committee on Marketing 1961; Berkowitz, Kerin, Hartley and Rudelius 1994).

For example, Shaw (1915) argued that a systematic study of the means of production in the 19th Century had been necessitated by ever increasing consumer demand, while Converse (1936) argued that, "The objective of market distribution, as well as of production (farming and manufacturing), is to supply human wants--food, clothing and shelter" [p. 3]. These historical examples are consistent with contemporary views of the purpose and function of marketing: satisfaction of human wants and needs. Thus, it appears that while the functional definition of marketing has evolved as the activities of marketers have changed, the fundamental purpose for engaging in what we call marketing has not.

We might ask why it is important to distinguish between definitions and objectives of marketing? Definitions are tools used by academics to describe the world around them. Definitions are the building blocks of any science, including the scientific study of the market place. Consequently, a history of definitions of marketing is a history of the development of marketing thought. Objectives, on the other hand, are constructs we use to describe the motivations of the phenomena we have chosen to study. A history of objectives reflects the motivational development of the phenomena of interest, in this case markets. Thus, by distinguishing between the definitions and objectives of marketing, we distinguish between the history of marketing thought, on the one hand, and the history of the market place, on the other. This distinction is important to both historians of marketing and historians of marketing thought.

Why is it important not to confuse these two? Because we must take care not to confuse paradigm shifts in our understanding of the world around us with actual changes in the phenomena we choose to observe. To do so would be like confusing a shift from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican world view with an actual catastrophic change in the order of the universe, from one centered about the earth to one centered about the sun. It is our view of the world that changes, not the world itself. Each has its own history, complete but frequently independent.

Is it possible for marketing thought to change as the technologies of marketing practice change? Funkhouser (1984) used historical sources (Boorstin 1974; Chandler 1977) to show that the development of the practice of marketing was technologically determined. If, historically, marketers have tended to think of marketing in terms of its activities, it is the contention of this paper that the evolution of the description of marketing--that is, the history of marketing thought--is linked to some historical process as well.

The conclusion of this analysis is that we must be careful to distinguish between the definition and the objective of marketing when examining marketing thought in a historical context. Fullerton (1988) used descriptions of marketing objectives to undermine Keith's (1960) historical development of definitions of marketing, showing that the objective of marketing in the supposed "Production" era was what we call today the "Marketing Concept." This criticism of Keith is based on a purposeful objection, not a definitional objection. The consequence is that the evolution of marketing thought is not synonymous with the historical development of the phenomena of marketing.

EVALUATING THE SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF SUCH A DISTINCTION

It can be argued, then, that the definition of "marketing" in marketing thought has evolved over time, consistent with the state-of-the-art of marketing technology, while the basic objective of marketing (satisfying the wants and needs of consumers) has remained the same. By what standards is this distinction a contribution to the history of marketing thought?

First, Kuhn (1970) argued that any new scientific paradigm for a discipline should explain both the phenomena described by the previous paradigm and the unexplained, but observed, anomalies to the existing paradigm. Distinguishing between the *definition* and *objective* of marketing (the former the basis of evolving marketing thought, the latter based on enduring purpose of marketing itself) explains both the observed phenomena of "Eras" in historical thought discussed by Keith (1960), and the anomalies identified in historical fact identified by Fullerton (1988).

Second, this distinction offers incremental validation for Fullerton's (1988) "complex flux" model. Fullerton explains the "what" of the observed flux in marketing over time, but does not lend much insight into "why" this flux occurs. Why, for example, does the Era of Institutional Development last until 1929 in both Europe and the United States, when the Era of Refinement and Formalization begins? Did the fundamental objective of marketing change? No, but the environment faced by marketers did change the activities through which marketing could occur. This distinction between definitions and objectives contributes to our understanding of marketing thought by providing a "why" to explain the transition among Fullerton's "Four eras of complex flux."

Does this distinction converge with other advances in our understanding of marketing thought? Yes. The perspective in this paper is consistent with Mittelstaedt and Madden's (1980) argument regarding the development of perceptions of consumer behavior. They demonstrated that as psychology evolved, so did marketers' perceptions of the observed behavior of consumers. They showed that the lens through which marketers observed the behavior of consumers--the perception of consumer behavior--was more influential on the behavior of marketing decision makers than consumers' behavior itself; the consumers' behavior endured, while the perception of their behavior evolved. Thus, there is convergent validation for this paper with the previous work of Mittelstaedt and Madden (1980).

THE CONSEQUENCES BEYOND MARKETING THOUGHT

This distinction between definitions and objectives of marketing offers contributions to our understanding of marketing beyond the field of marketing thought.

First, it provides a framework for understanding pre-Antecedent Era (Fullerton 1988) evidence of marketing fact. For example, Nevett and Nevett (1987) described the market place of Greece in the Fifth Century before Christ. In this time period, the goods traded, their production and their distribution differed from those of later historic periods, but the objective of marketing was the same as today--satisfying the wants, needs, tastes and preferences of consumers in the marketplace. Ibn Khaldun's description of the life of the 14th Century Middle Eastern merchant reflected the enduring objective of marketing (Mulvihill 1987), while the commercial practices of such merchants--through which they defined marketing--differ greatly from the behavior of modern markets (Saleh 1986). Thus, the distinction between definitions and objectives of marketing allows us to extend Fullerton's (1988) framework backward from the temporal limits he sets by focusing attention on the historic activities of marketing, not marketing thought.

Second, it provides a useful tool for explaining (and limiting) the evolution of marketing thought in an age of database marketing. Scholars writing on the technology and implications of database marketing describe this revolution with the same enthusiasm Keith (1960) used to describe the "marketing revolution" he observed in the 1950's and 1960's (Curry 1993; Holtz 1992; Hughes 1994). What are the limits of this revolution? The paradigm presented in this paper would lead us to recognize that the technologies of a database revolution will affect the manner in which we describe the activities of marketing and marketers, as well as how we think about the phenomena of marketing, but will have no effect on the enduring objective of marketing--to satisfy the wants and needs of consumers. By employing this distinction one can ask, does the use of computerized databases constitute a revolution in marketing technology? Yes. Does it constitute a revolution in our understanding of the purpose of marketing? No.

Finally, this distinction provides a useful framework for understanding how to define the "Marketing Concept" in an international market place, where marketers wish to do business in countries at various stages of economic development. The conclusion is that the fundamental business of marketing should be the same regardless of levels of economic development; it is the activities engaged in to meet that fundamental objective that will differ from country to country, and from culture to culture.

CONCLUSION

It is incumbent upon academics in any field to understand the development of their discipline, and to track the discipline's progress, in order to identify issues and questions that must be answered in order to advance human understanding of the phenomena in question. When observing the development of marketing thought, two extremes in historical understanding have been identified. On the one hand, it is possible that marketing thought and marketing activity have changed dramatically over time, and that the development of marketing thought mirrors changes in marketing activity. This was the view espoused by Keith (1960), who proposed revolutionary "eras" of marketing thought, consistent with changes in marketing activity he observed at Pillsbury. On the other hand, it is possible that marketing thought and marketing activity have developed independent of one another, with marketing thought evolving substantially in the last century, while the objectives of the market place have not changed at all since humans first engaged in marketing activity. The contrast is sharp, because it questions whether marketing thought should reflect advances in human understanding of the world around us, or whether it should reflect the enduring purpose of the market place. This paper has proposed that the definition of marketing, the cornerstone of marketing thought, has evolved over time, consistent with the technology and environment in which marketing academics have found themselves. At the same time, the fundamental objective of marketing, the cornerstone of the history of marketing itself, has endured. Critical scholarship on the history of marketing and the history of marketing thought needs to make this distinction. The distinction is consistent with the work of previous scholars, and offers insight into understanding the past, present and future of marketing.

ENDNOTES

1. It was appropriate for Fullerton (1988) to use the facts of marketing history to criticize Keith's vision of the history of marketing thought. This is because Keith himself used examples from the history of marketing, not marketing thought, to construct his theory of eras in marketing.
2. This was one of several such committees. Stan Hollander suggested that this was not formed as a collaborative scholarly effort, but instead formed by the book's publisher as a ploy to enhance distribution. This may be an example of reading more into the importance of an historical document than it deserves. Still, it appears to represent "marketing thought" condoned at the time.

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