A WRITER'S GUIDE TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN MARKETING

Terrence H. Witkowski
California State University, Long Beach

ABSTRACT

Drawing from historical research in marketing journals, the literature on historiography, and the author's experiences with the review process, this paper identifies five important issues in writing marketing history: the mix of data sources, the narrative structure, the incorporation of relevant literature, the formal methods section, and the implications of historical findings.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Ronald Savitt's (1980) seminal article, marketing academics have given much greater emphasis to historical research in marketing and its subdisciplines of advertising, retailing, and consumer behavior (Jones and Monieson 1990b). These investigations have covered substantive history as well as the evolution of marketing thought, primarily, but not exclusively, from the nineteenth century to the present. In addition to the many papers appearing in the five proceedings volumes from this conference, a number of articles have been published in other venues including some in major journals such as the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

Historians who seek to publish in marketing journals, need to consider how to best present the findings of their research. This goes well beyond paying close attention to editors' pages, manuscript guidelines, acceptance criteria, and statements of review philosophy. Marketing historians should seriously question how closely their writing should adhere to existing models of historiography. There are good reasons to believe that the specialty would be well-served if it developed its own prototypes. How marketing history is written determines not only the likelihood of acceptance by top journals in the field, but ultimately its contribution to the advancement of marketing thought.

This paper discusses five issues in the writing of marketing history: the appropriate mix of data sources, the narrative structure, the incorporation of relevant literature, the need for a formal methods section, and the implications of historical findings. The emphasis will be on writing histories of substantive marketing practice and consumption behavior somewhat more than on histories of marketing ideas. The purpose is twofold: first, to share a few ideas and experiences that may help marketing historians improve the written presentation of their research and, second, to inform journal editors and reviewers about these issues as well as the diversity of acceptable historiographic formats. This paper does not presume to offer the final word in marketing historiography, but rather to submit a few ideas suitable for further debate.

THE MIX OF DATA SOURCES

The collection, analysis, and synthesis of data sources is a very important topic in historiography and sometimes a matter of great controversy. This section considers the appropriate blend of primary and secondary data sources in the writing of marketing history. Some writers (Jones and Monieson 1990a; Savitt 1983) apparently favor heavy reliance on primary data; others (Fullerton 1988; Hollander 1986b) have made good use of both types; and still others (Witkowski 1989) have based their histories upon a reinterpretation of existing literatures. Because relatively few marketing academics are professionally trained historians, some current writing in the field might be overemphasizing the use of secondary sources.

Clearly, there is a danger when historical research in marketing relies too heavily on secondary data sources. They are sometimes based on haphazard or poorly conceived research that may not have subjected the evidence to internal criticism. The written presentation may be incomplete and rely too heavily on other secondary sources or the writer's imagination. Secondary sources do not always present both sides of a story with equal weight. The biases of a given generation, historical school, or individual writer with a specific purpose in mind inexorably enter into a discussion.

Outside of material culture studies (Schlereth 1982), historians use written evidence far more than any other primary data source. Written sources can range from a wide variety of business, legal, and governmental records, to popular writing and literature, to personal letters and diaries. Even the heavily descriptive works of early (pre-1930) academic marketers can now be considered a primary source (Fullerton 1988). Marketing historians have not often consulted physical evidence, such as art, artifacts, and architecture, although these alternative sources appear to have some potential for documenting the products actually sold, what they looked like, and how they may have been used (Witkowski 1989b). Advertising, typically a combination of both written and pictorial evidence, has been one of the most frequently consulted primary sources (see, for example, Belk and Pollay 1985; Gross and Sheth 1989; Pollay 1985). A fair number of primary sources have been published and are widely available. Many university libraries have good microfilm or microprint collections of newspapers and magazines dating back to the American colonial era.

Sources in manuscript form, on the other hand, are geographically restricted. For example, business records from the first part of the nineteenth century and before typically reside in east coast institutions such as the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware. Although many historians must face the problem of access, marketing historians might find it comparatively difficult to obtain travel grants from business school deans who place a higher priority on funding new laboratory equipment or providing seed money for surveys and experiments. Further, reading and interpreting qualitative evidence can be extremely time consuming. Aside from advertising content analyses using predetermined coding categories, much historical research cannot be done well by using teams of student assistants. Thus, too great an emphasis on primary sources may effectively prohibit research on some topics in marketing history.

One factor that might determine the mix of data sources is the historical era being investigated. There is an enormous amount of period material for late nineteenth and twentieth-century marketing studies. In contrast, primary evidence documenting such things as managerial thinking or buyer attitudes is far less abundant for the eighteenth century and earlier and, being scattered over a great number of documents, quite difficult to locate. It seems repetitive and wasteful for marketing historians researching the earlier eras to re-analyze the same primary sources that other historians have gone over repeatedly. A great deal of historical research from fields as diverse as women's studies to material culture (Witkowski 1990) begs to be read, analyzed, and incorporated into the body of marketing history. For many years, scholars in marketing, advertising, and consumer research have borrowed theoretical ideas and empirical findings from economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other fields. There is no reason to believe that the large body of historiography cannot contribute in a similar fashion.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The present writer once received the following criticisms from two different reviewers of the same paper. While one reviewer said "too much of the paper concentrates on a simple narrative," the other noted that "Historical writing has a pattern and rhythm. An important part of historical writing is narration. That is missing here." Contradictory comments such as these dismay hopeful authors, but in this case underscore narration as an important issue.

Narrative history describes "What was the case?" Four basic elements -- character, setting, action, and happening -- interact to produce narrative (Megill 1989). Character and setting are called existents, whereas actions (taken by characters) and happenings (how settings impinge upon characters) are events. The majority of historians write within a narrative structure (Hexter 1971; Lavin and Archdeacon 1989). Although tradition identifies narration with the recounting of events, many historians emphasize existents. For example, Fernand Braudel's Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800 (1967) focuses on food and drink, housing and clothing, and technology and towns.

Narrative history that concentrates on character or setting does not necessarily require a chronological arrangement. John Demos (1970) organizes his highly regarded history of family life in the Plymouth Plantation (1620-1691) topically rather than diachronically. He begins with a discussion of physical setting, moves to household structure, and then examines themes of individual development. Demos chose this approach not only because it seemed a better way to highlight analytical issues, but also because changes in family structure generally come very slowly and, hence, elements of stability and continuity loom unusually large. If spread over too long a period, however, a topical arrangement may "seriously distort the objective reality of the past" and "forfeit the fundamental historical essence of change through time" (Marwick 1970, p. 145).

Some historians prefer a more dramatic and literary style than others who favor heavy documentation and elaborate presentation of empirical findings. Good narrative depends upon a correct determination of historical tempo, the art of expanding and contracting the scale of time to establish the significance of events (Hexter 1971). Much narrative in historical writing can be termed "impressionistic" (Demos 1970). General statements are followed (or preceded) by a small number of illustrative examples. Dissatisfaction with this approach has increased the emphasis on cliometrics or "scientific" history (Fogel and Elton 1983), the use of quantitative models and measures and statistical analyses. Sometimes, however, a paucity of evidence leaves no alternative to the impressionistic approach.

Marketing historians can face serious difficulties when editors and/or reviewers are biased against narration. Many scholars in the social and behavioral sciences, not to mention quite a few professional historians, view description as a less serious task than explanation. Explanation is deemed to be more scientific and generalizable than description of particulars. This position is being challenged, however, as evidenced by the current debates between positivistic and interpretive consumer researchers (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Moreover, as Megill (1989) points out, even nominally descriptive writing will have a large component of explanation. That is, the ordering of events chronologically implies (but does not prove) causality.

Problems may also arise in the review process when referees are unfamiliar with the different ways in which history can be presented. As mentioned, narrative can be arranged topically as well as chronologically. There also can be a geographic organization, usually by the territories of political units (Shafer 1974). In argumentative or justificatory pieces the writer might limit the topic to an analysis of sources or, in the case of Fullerton (1988) and Morris (1990), assemble and criticize evidence in order to evaluate alternative representations of the past. In historiographic essays or surveys of prior studies, narration of events is likely to be relatively less important than thematic issues.

Finally, reviewers can sometimes introduce unexpected criteria, as indicated by the following criticism of a thirty-page manuscript: "There is absolutely no way that a piece as short and informal as this one can produce a 'history.'" This writer is unaware of any length requirements for historical writing or, for that matter, any other kinds of marketing research. If this criterion were taken seriously, few historical pieces could ever appear in marketing journals unless editors made special provision for articles far longer than the average submission.

INCORPORATING RELEVANT LITERATURE

Unlike the typical social science article in marketing and consumer research, papers written by professional historians often proceed without first integrating previous work on the subject or problem of interest into the text. This is not to say that historians ignore prior findings and interpretive essays, but just that their narrative structures do not always lend themselves to or require the kind of presentation that first "plugs into" existing literatures, theoretical perspectives, or research traditions. When included, such material is usually placed in footnotes, a hallmark of the rhetoric of history.

This lack of explicit "positioning" can be frustrating to reviewers and other readers accustomed to the social science tradition. It makes historical research seem atheoretical, which it frequently is, and consequently irrelevant to the accumulation of knowledge, which it is not. More important, a lack of grounding in the literature may detract from the drawing of implications and the building of theory, topics discussed later in this paper. Thus, whether and how to incorporate relevant material becomes another important issue for marketing historians.

Papers taking a positivistic stance, such as theoretically driven content analyses (Belk and Pollay 1985; Gross and Sheth 1989), will invariably review the literature to find loose theoretical ends and to develop hypotheses. Essays and argumentative pieces also discuss relevant literature, sometimes in great detail. Incorporation of prior research will probably be most difficult in narrative works, especially case studies that emphasize events.

THE METHODS SECTION

An anonymous reviewer once criticized a paper submitted by this author as "a piece of storytelling rather than formal research . . . There is no research method set forth that explains a systematic means of search for themes, and therefore there is not assurance that the finding of themes is conclusive in a scholar's sort of way." According to this position, historical writing in marketing should make explicit its data sources and methods. This seems to be a quite reasonable guideline, although one that is not always followed by professional historians.

Some historical writing proceeds with scant discussion of research methods. For example, the following sentence from Roland Marchand's (1987) "The Fitful Career of Advocacy Advertising" is as close as the article comes to a methods statement: "A historical survey of some early advocacy campaigns will reveal both the variety of experiments within this advertising mode and the ways in which earlier practitioners tried to deal with the problems that still beset the genre" (p. 129). Marchand, a professional historian, never explains what he means by the term "a historical survey." His text does not describe his sample of ads nor say how they were interpreted, although his references do suggest he consulted several archival collections. Other historians are more explicit about their methods than Marchand, but still relegate their methodological statements to footnotes or bibliographic essays.

Methods sections should contain a description of the data sources and, if applicable, how they were selected from a larger universe of sources. In addition, this section might discuss how the data was analyzed. A good example of one such methods section can be found in Fullerton (1988) who first discusses the philosophical support for his historical approach, including the rationale for a cross-national investigation, and then describes his sample of primary and secondary sources. Note that Fullerton was not just writing a narrative history, but was scrutinizing a marketing theory, the so-called "production era" concept inspired by Keith (1960).

THE IMPLICATIONS OF MARKETING HISTORY

Professional historians write history more as an end in itself, an independent contribution to knowledge, than as a vehicle for building theories or making policy. They are committed to the study of individual facts, the events, institutions, and personalities that have historical significance, rather than to the discovery of broad conceptual constructs. Historians believe that each period contains its own reasons why events occured and that these causes are usually not generalizable (Firat 1987). Although historians sometimes use theory as a means to their own particular ends, such as the application of psychology or psychoanalysis to explain the behavior of famous people, relatively few are willing to go very far in drawing implications. Historical research is a cumulative process and every generation builds upon and revises previous work.

This position characterizes much traditional, Anglo-American historiography. However, continental European "historicism" takes a rather different approach in stressing "historical laws, determining factors, and the meaning of the past as the source of the present" (Daniels 1981, p. 96). Further, cliometricians, who focus more on collectivities of people and recurring events than on particulars (Fogel and Elton 1983), are committed to the positivistic philosophy of building, testing, and refining historical models. Given these different schools and paradigms, marketing historians need to consider what are and how to present the implications of their research and writing.

Whatever pretensions marketing scholars may have, many people consider the field to be "applied research" that should have some utilitarian purpose such as refining marketing practice or, perhaps, contributing to public policy making. Similarly, it could be argued that historical research in marketing should also go beyond the accumulation of historical facts. Arguably, historical study is something of an intellectual luxury that should try to pay its way by somehow adding to the inventory of theoretical ideas. Although such opinions may have dubious validity, they appear to be held by some practitioners and professors.

Historical analysis can contribute to the field of marketing through the formulation and testing of hypotheses (Shapiro and Doody 1968) or, putting it more broadly, through the development, appraisal, and testing of theories. For example, the process of assembling and analyzing the historical record can generate emergent themes just as readily as can ethnographic and other qualitative methods (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Writers can usually find room for this material in the final sections of their papers. In Does it Pay to Advertise?, John Philip Jones (1989) draws several specific lessons for advertising management at the end of each case history. Hollander's (1986b) article on the marketing concept concludes with separate "explanation" and "implications" sections.

Editors sometimes ask for the implications of historical research and may suggest additional areas that should be consulted. On the other hand, too much emphasis on hypothesis formulation might elicit a reviewer comment like the following: "It is not clear that the Journal of Marketing should be an appropriate forum for attempting to generate new research projects." Not all marketing academics consider theory development and/or interpretive methodologies acceptable for journal articles.

When used for theory testing, historical research can be thought of as diachronic analogy to cross-cultural investigations. By comparing a theory with the record of earlier periods, the researcher "may be able to show which of its parts are most unyielding, and which are most variable, in relation to particular cultural settings" (Demos 1970, pp. 129-130). The problem with using history for theory testing, however, is that so much evidence is biased, incomplete, and too often nonexistent. For many issues, particularly those pertaining to the internal states of long dead consumers, there is very little data whatsoever. Longitudinal analyses of advertising content appear most applicable to this purpose.

CONCLUSION

There is no best model for writing marketing history and it would be overly dogmatic to insist upon one. As the debate over cliometrics has shown (Fogel and Elton 1983), professional historians themselves often disagree, sometimes bitterly. Nevertheless, marketing historians, journal editors, and reviewers might benefit from the following guidelines which seem to have broad, although not universal, application.

1. Marketing historians should stress primary data sources quite heavily when researching and reporting twentieth-century topics. Research on marketing during the first part of the nineteenth century and earlier need not be as dependent upon primary data. So many historical studies are already available that it seems rather inefficient for marketing scholars to replow this turf too vigorously. Much can be gained from recasting findings into a marketing context -- a kind of historical "meta-analysis." Still, researchers should familiarize themselves with the primary source material from the earlier eras so that they can critically evaluate secondary sources.

2. The narration of marketing history can stress events or existents. It can be arranged chronologically, geographically, topically, or in some combination of the three. Whatever the organization, it should be synthesized through appropriate linkages, such as the comparative method, and it should be adequately balanced in its coverage (Daniels 1981). Marketing history needs to cover a topic adequately, but should also strive for economy in its written presentation.

3. Positivistic research, as well as critical essays, should be clearly positioned within the stream of prior research. Narrative historians do not have to present a formal literature review, but they should be prepared to answer editor and reviewer queries on this point. The better the literature review, the easier it will be to build theory.

4. Given the social science grounding of our field, as well as the realities of the review process, most historical writing in marketing should present a reasonably formal methods section incorporated into the body of the paper. This section should include both a description of data sources and how they were chosen, and also some indication about how they were analyzed.

5. Finally, to pay its way in the marketing discipline, historical research should try to draw some implications for theory building and, if possible, for management. Articles written from a positivistic perspective will test hypotheses as a matter of course, whereas more interpretive and qualitative narrative studies might consider a brief listing of emergent themes.

Assuming that marketing historians can reach some consensus about how to evaluate the written presentation of their work, the problems they confront in the review process will eventually diminish as the body of research expands and journal editors assemble a pool of published authors from which they can choose reviewers. In the meantime, however, marketing historians need to continue their educational campaigns, not only to stress the usefulness of their specialty (see, for example, Hollander 1986a), but also to inform their colleagues about what kinds of historiographic methods are most appropriate.

REFERENCES

Belk, Russell W. and Richard W. Pollay. 1985. "Images of Ourselves: The Good Life in Twentieth Century Advertising." Journal of Consumer Research 11 (March) 887-897.

__________, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf. 1988. "A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet." Journal of Consumer Research 14 (March) 449-470.

Braudel, Fernand. 1967. Capitalism and Marterial Life, 1400-1800. New York: Harper and Row.

Daniels, Robert V. 1981. Studying History: How and Why. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Demos, John. 1970. A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony. New York: Oxford University Press.

Firat, A. Fuat. 1987. "Historiography, Scientific Method, and Exceptional Historical Events." In: Advances in Consumer Research, Vol. 14. Melanie Wallendorf and Paul Anderson, eds. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 435-438.

Fogel, Robert William and G. R. Elton. 1983. Which Road to the Past?: Two Views of History. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Fullerton, Ronald A. 1988. "How Modern is Modern Marketing? Marketing's Evolution and the Myth of the 'Production Era.'" Journal of Marketing 52 (January) 108-125.

Gross, Barbara L. and Jagdish N. Sheth. 1989. "Time-Oriented Advertising: A Content Analysis of United States Magazine Advertising, 1890-1988." Journal of Marketing 53 (October) 76- 83.

Hexter, Jack H. 1971. Doing History. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hollander, Stanley C. 1986a. "A Rearview Mirror Might Help Us Drive Forward--A Call for More Historical Studies in Retailing." Journal of Retailing 62 (Spring) 7-10.

__________. 1986b. "The Marketing Concept--A Deja Vu," In: Marketing: Management Technology as Social Process. George Fisk, ed. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Hudson, Laurel Anderson and Julie L. Ozanne. 1988. "Alternative Ways of Seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research." Journal of Consumer Research 14 (March) 508-521.

Jones, D.G. Brian and David D. Monieson. 1990a. "Early Development of the Philosophy of Marketing Thought," Journal of Marketing 54 (January) 102-112.

__________ and David D. Monieson. 1990b. "Historical Research in Marketing: Retrospect and Prospect." Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 18 (Fall) 269-278.

Jones, John Philip. 1989. Does It Pay to Advertise?: Cases Illustrating Successful Brand Advertising. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Keith, Robert J. 1960. "The Marketing Revolution." Journal of Marketing 24 (January) 35-38.

Lavin, Marilyn and Thomas J. Archdeacon. 1989. "The Relevance of Historical Method for Marketing Research." In: Interpretive Consumer Research. Elizabeth C. Hirschman, ed. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 60-68.

Marchand, Roland. 1987. "The Fitful Career of Advocacy Advertising: Political Protection, Client Cultivation, and Corporate Morale." California Management Review 29 (Winter) 128-156.

Marwick, Arthur. 1970. The Nature of History. London: Macmillan and Company.

Megill, Allan. 1989. "Recounting the Past: 'Description,' Explanation, and Narration in Historiography." American Historical Review 94 (June) 627-653.

Morris, David J. 1990. "The Railroad and Movie Industries: Were They Myopic?" Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 18 (Fall) 279-283.

Pollay, Richard W. 1985. "The Subsiding Sizzle: A Descriptive History of Print Advertising, 1900-1980." Journal of Marketing 50 (April) 18-36.

Savitt, Ronald. 1980. "Historical Research in Marketing," Journal of Marketing 44 (Fall) 52-58.

__________. 1983. "A Note on the Varieties and Vagaries of Historical Data." In: First North American Workshop on Historical Research in Marketing, Stanley Hollander and Ronald Savitt, eds. East Lansing, Michigan State University, 30-34.

Schlereth, Thomas J. 1982. "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976." In: Material Culture Studies in America, Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1-75.

Shafer, Robert Jones, ed. 1974. A Guide to Historical Method. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press.

Shapiro, Stanley J. and Alton F. Doody, eds. 1968. Readings in the History of American Marketing: Settlement to Civil War. Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin.

Witkowski, Terrence H. 1989a. "Colonial Consumers in Revolt: Buyer Values and Behavior During the Nonimportation Movement, 1764-1776." Journal of Consumer Research 16 (September) 216-226.

__________. 1989b. "Probate and Property: Written and Material Data Sources for Consumption History." In: Marketing History:The Emerging Discipline. Terence Nevett, Kathleen R. Whitney, and Stanley C. Hollander, eds. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 120-131.

__________. 1990. "Marketing Thought in American Decorative Arts." Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 18 (Fall) 365-368.