Guest editorial

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On society, market logic and marketing
Marketing dominates the global consciousness. It seems only proper that academia ask some simple (and complex) questions of it, our society, our business practices, and the emerging and developed economies and communities that foment marketing and ultimately must live with its positive and negative consequences. While we acknowledge the cultural relativity of such questioning, we use this privileged space to debate moral values, the power of the market logic, and the influence of the marketing paradigm. Given the omnipresence of marketing, perhaps any discussion of “societal marketing” is passé and, in the view of some onlookers, even oxymoronic. Yet marketing’s very omnipresence and the world’s mixed interpretations of its value have profound effects on society and these effects are being met with mixed reviews.

The preceding thoughts, however, beg an important question; that is, what constitutes societal marketing? In asking this question we are trying to understand the market logic. More specifically, we wish to shed light on the functions and systems of marketing; how they reciprocally and systemically affect consumers, marketers and society and represent a form of what is called communal exchange (Biggart and Delbridge, 1998). Macromarketing scholars – along with scholars committed to consumer research; consumption, markets and culture; and public policy – are interested in such inquiry. However, marketers and non-marketers typically choose to examine simple market exchange rather than complex relationships among marketers, consumers and society, the effects of which may not be evinced until years after such exchange. Indeed, marketing educators and researchers much less frequently address what marketing does or does not effect or perpetuate in society. Though exceptions clearly do exist (e.g. Brownlie and Saren, 1995; Brown et al., 1996; Shultz and Holbrook, 1999) and much has been talked, sung, written and...
filmed about the consumer society, both virtual and other, in which many of us now live (Desmond et al., 2000; Mason, 2000; Mayhew, 1999; Ritzer, 1998). Some scholars, for example, argue that the ascendancy of the “customer” over the 4Ps – passenger, patient, proletariat, or person – is now practically globally complete (cf. Thompson, 2000). East meets West, so to speak, though recent events of terror, death and destruction suggest that the meeting is not so smooth or universally embraced as some might want to believe.

Irrespective of conflicting sentiments about globalization, marketing – and its effects – are globally visible, with organizations altering economic trends, as cycles of production and consumption classically pass through not just national but international systems (Mansfield, 1986, p. 174), making them a rich vein for many forms of academic inquiry (cf. Bolton et al., 2001). Our world has never before experienced such heights of technological and media indulgence (cf. Armitage (2000) on Virilio for a fuller discussion; Roscoe (1999) or Lash (2001) on the politics of technological forms of life). Information technologies and networks, banking, sport and recreation, agribusiness, and transportation, for example, are now global enterprises, which leave their indelible mark on global society (Golding, 2000). At the same time one need not look far to see massive and therefore unacceptable levels of injustice and poverty. Individuals who “have” travel the globe, while those who “have not” attempt to win that lottery, to scurry from threat of persecution or war, to seek asylum or to subsist in some form of contractual employment depending on their local circumstances. If they are “lucky”, their physical and maybe social-psychological needs are met, but they also enter the tourist “servicescape”, perhaps to add authenticity and to serve those who “have”. Risk is now more clearly than ever the corollary of wealth creation (Ballard, 2000) and, against all of this, corporate citizenship remains unabashedly upbeat (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001) about the benefits of organizational impacts, in terms of consumer choice, partnerships, new products, technology and medical breakthrough, to ease the burden of living or dying. Much of this legitimization process is played out in the spectacle we consume, as the media now increasingly employ a digital seductress.

Market logic underscores and invigorates consumer society generation after generation. Consequently, it seems that marketers have historically primarily focused on product/service sales, market share, growth, customer satisfaction and the like as the rudimentary measures of success. The atavistic rationale of always having done things this way is only occasionally challenged from the watch-towers of academia (e.g. Kilbourne et al., 1997; Prothero, 1998; Sturdy et al., 2001). The balance of scholarly work presents a simplistic view of the marketing world (Brownlie and Saren, 1995); more often than not myopically attending to the expressed needs of corporations and their immediate customers, which all too often suffer from their own short-sightedness, rather than long-term societal welfare (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000). In other words, most marketing scholarship analyzes or teaches how to “win” in the
marketplace (Johnson and Scholes, 1989; Singhapakadi et al., 1999) and not how to think about the strategic factors and practices that abet sustainable, positive outcomes, for the largest number of people, over the longest period of time. This agenda not only lacks vision, it ironically, ultimately will have a deleterious effect on those who champion it.

In summary, marketing’s social acceptance truly has come under scrutiny (Morgan and White, 1998). Each of us has been asked to decode the work of consumption and, implicitly, marketing (Miklitsch, 1988, p. 80). This request now seems especially compelling. Yet the field still lacks research and theory about the complex and dynamic relationships among marketers, consumers and all the global citizens who have stakes in or are affected by the marketing paradigm, i.e. everyone. Hence our interest in bringing to the academy and marketing practitioners this Special Issue on societal marketing.

There were a great many submissions to this Issue, which is itself encouraging and perhaps indicative of a number of important research themes presently in the academy. Perhaps the cultural turn has fully reached the marketing corner of academia or the transmogrification of management thinking within critical management studies has allowed the marketing academic to reclaim critique of the market from critical sociologists and the like. Whether or not any or all of this sufficiently constitutes a rethinking of societal marketing or its cultural production (Tasker, 1998) or helps us with the problem of understanding markets as distinct social structures (cf. Swedberg in Smelser and Swedberg, 1994, p. 273) is for you the reader, citizen, consumer, educator and marketer to decide.

We would be presumptuous to suggest that in this Special Issue we provide an oracle for the optimal understanding and management of those relationships. So in editing it we never expected nor even wished for a consensual answer to the question on societal marketing, as we sought to expand this project for management, marketing academicians and the world’s consuming citizens. Nonetheless, we are pleased with the depth and breadth of the subjects addressed and the opinions that we offer the reader. A brief introduction to those subjects and the authors follows.

The subjects examined in this Issue include thoughtful analyses and discussions on marketing communications, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and community-based solutions to health crises, intellectual property rights, ethics and representation, moral decision making, slavery and other forms of unfair labour practices, strategic philanthropy, and the very nature and future of marketing and marketers. Clearly, given the far-reaching parameters of the multiple themes that could be addressed – and were addressed – on a non-linear topic such as societal marketing, the linear placement of articles in this Special Issue was particularly challenging. Readers should note that the order of articles does not reflect the rigor of scholarship or the editors’ perceptions of quality and contribution. Rather we attempted to organize articles broadly around the subthemes of critique, participation and
action, and prognosis. Consequently, the first article, by O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, examines the nature and origin of the consumer society and the factors that continue to drive it; which in turn collectively affect society. Crane and Desmond then counsel on the mores of who decides what is “societal marketing” and what is in the public’s interest, asking us to develop better understandings of the structures, meanings and discourses that shape consumption acts. Borgerson and Schroeder problematize these socio-political artefacts, asking the reader to consider a representational ethics in marketing. Cova and Cova highlight the quest for community as the future of marketing, with the urgent societal issue being to re-establish communal embeddedness. In this light, four other articles make contributions. Kates explores the ways social services engage in therapeutic activities such as AIDS prevention, addiction, grief therapy, assistance with the tasks of daily living and relationships; McDonagh analyzes communicative work to foster anti-slavery and fair trade, thus linking societal marketing to the emergent theory of sustainable communication; Shultz and Nill examine the issue of intellectual property rights, its importance and fairness, and propose a game-theoretical approach various stakeholders might use to effect equitable management of these rights; McAlister and Ferrell posit that corporations can engage in strategic philanthropy to abet society, while simultaneously having a positive impact on corporate performance, as measured by traditional marketing and corporate indices. The set of refereed articles concludes with a rigorous assessment of marketing by Holbrook and Hulbert and their thoughts on the prognosis for marketing and those who practice and study it.

The special issue closes with two book reviews. The first is a postmodernist critique by Patterson of Blank Fictions written by James Annesley as a text for readers of cultural and US studies. Patterson argues that this is in actuality an important marketing text redressing the social imbalance all too often evident in contemporary marketing discourse. The second is on The Handbook of Economic Sociology edited by Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg, which is given a modernist critique by Delbridge. This reviewer highlights the text as a useful source of cross-disciplinary theorizing, if marketers are willing to grasp such a nettle.

Finally, we would be remiss if we failed to thank our colleagues who contributed to this Special Issue on societal marketing and thus society in general. Each author was thoughtful and positively responsive to the editors’ and reviewers’ sometimes-demanding requests. We also thank Emerald and the Editors of the European Journal of Marketing for sharing with us the valuable intellectual space that is the Journal. Without these people and institutions this Special Issue would not have been possible. To all of them and all the stakeholders of marketing, we wish all the best!

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References


