Revisiting the marketing domain

Sidney J. Levy
University of Arizona, Tuscon, Arizona, USA

Keywords Marketing, Marketing theory

Abstract The two debates about the domain of marketing and the division between theory and practice are old, recurring and endless. Nevertheless, it is indubitable that marketing pervades society whether or not the critics like the idea of it or the troubling forms it sometimes takes. Similarly, the differences between theoreticians and practitioners are – like parts of a tree – also inevitable as they think differently, have different roles to play, have different languages and feel superior to each other. Those who are blind to these facts create the debates instead of realizing that is the way it is and making the best of it. Reasonable people bridge the gaps by understanding the situation and working cooperatively with their diverse colleagues.

Michael Baker’s invitation to comment on “Bridging the divide” or the gap between the worlds of academia and practice enlarges the scope of the discussion to include viewpoints on marketing's domain. Therefore I will review both of these issues. I say “review” advisedly as I am self-conscious about having written on these topics in the past and will take the liberty of repeating myself along the way. Debate about theory versus application arises continually among disciplines, often leading to schisms, organizational disruptions and splinter groups. As a recent example, the annual conference of the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) in the USA is now preceded by sessions of HCR, a group of hermeneutic researchers who pride themselves on their heretical outlook.

Broadening the concept of marketing
Looking back, when Philip Kotler and I published the article titled “Broadening the concept of marketing”, wherein we asserted that all organizations (and by extension, all individuals) necessarily engage in marketing, it provoked widespread reaction (Kotler and Levy, 1969). The 1970 American Marketing Association Summer Educators’ Conference was titled “Broadening the concept of marketing”, and Philip and I received an award for Best Article of 1969 in the Journal of Marketing. The concept was embraced in time by numerous non-business fields. The article was a stimulus to much work on activities called social marketing and non-profit marketing; also, I published (with John Czepiel) “Marketing and aesthetics” (1974), which spurred activities within the field of marketing the arts. In addition, the broadening idea was variously criticized as obvious or self-evident and thus unworthy of the fuss, as a form of marketing imperialism, and as contributing to social disorder by distorting language and promoting evil products and practices (Laczniak and Michie, 1979).

In his discussion of “the identity crisis in marketing”, Bartels (1974) raises this basic question:
The crux of the issue is this: is the identity of marketing determined by the *subject matter* dealt with or by the technology with which the subject is handled? . . . Marketing has initially and generally been associated exclusively with the distributive part of the economic institution and function. In this capacity, marketing is identified by the *substance* and the *subject* of its area of concern.

Bartels seems open-minded about the issue, perhaps preferring the substantive definition rather than the one of methodological application. He thinks the fresh interest in physical distribution, or logistics, may allow the word marketing to go on to refer to both economic and non-economic fields of application. Still, he sees marketing as but a species of generic behavioral activity, and one that is trying to trespass on someone else’s territory, saying the idea that the fields of political campaigns, religious evangelism, or Red Cross solicitation are the province of marketers, rather than of social scientists, may also be questionable.

Luck (1974) also expresses his concern over the confusion of terminology and conceptualization created by the idea that “every sort of organization is engaged in marketing”, and hopes that an authoritative definition of marketing might come from a commission created for the purpose. These territorial considerations are basically irrelevant. As Popper (1963) says, “All this classification and distinction is a comparatively unimportant and superficial affair. We are not students of some subject matter but students of problems. And problems may cut right across the borders of any subject matter or discipline”. That is, no one has exclusive right to a problem. Intellectual territoriality is not like the ownership of a piece of physical geography. Voting behavior may seem the province of political scientists, but that does not prevent sociologists from studying the behavior and need not inhibit marketers. That people like a particular food can be studied by biologists as a process of osmosis or hormonal secretions, by psychologists as a conditioned response or fixation due to trauma, by anthropologists as a cultural imperative, and by speech scholars as a reaction to the oral discourse, “Come and get it!”

What makes sex political and politics sexual is the determined attention, analysis and actions of feminists. To dismiss this as a “Feminist supremacy syndrome” (à la Luck’s reference to those “with a sort of marketing supremacy syndrome”) seems pointless and ostrich-like. To perceive or study the marketing content of a problem is not to say it is the marketer’s province rather than the social scientist’s, but that it is also the marketing scholar’s province. To compound the matter, the marketing scholar may be a social scientist as well.

Observation, not value judgments, shows that marketing is the core dynamic mechanism of the social system. Marketing comes into being with the offering of something and the wanting of something. It is grounded in two principles that create exchanges, that govern providing and acquiring. The first principle is relative scarcity. One cannot have everything (even when there is plenty) due to limitations of money, time, energy, availability, knowledge and capacity to consume. This principle creates the necessity to make choices. The
second principle, reciprocity, requires a return, whether of money, objects, attention, interest, applause, or other forms of response. Even the nursing baby learns it cannot suckle whenever it pleases and that the mother wants a responsive reward. All the rest flows from these basic facts: whether chicken or egg; in the beginning are the product and the price, with the subsequent necessity to make the product available somewhere and the need to communicate about it. These views are amplified in a monograph written with Gerald Zaltman, *Marketing, Society, and Conflict* (Levy and Zaltman, 1975).

**Theory versus application**

In addition to the broadened perspective on marketing, in “Marcology 101, or the domain of marketing” (Levy, 1976), I explored the recurring conflict between the theoretical and applied aspects of marketing. The polar views described there were extreme, agreeing with Michael Baker’s perception of the irreconcilability of the purists at each end. Siding for that moment with the academicians, I proposed the discipline of marcology that would focus on theory, on research and its publication for the sake of themselves and their audiences, and all that went with that ingroup – the faculty positions, grants, conferences and specialized journals. To the practitioners we were saying aggressively, like drivers cursing pedestrians, “A pox on you, get out of our way”. Of course, at the same time I worked also as a marketing researcher and consultant to industry, siding with the pragmatic pedestrians, applying ourselves to the marketing road with bicycles and on foot, resenting the pretentious drivers racing their engines in the incomprehensible and useless journals of marketing and consumer research.

None of the above prevented me from regarding such ambivalence as a natural human state, as I meditated on in “Stalking the amphibiaena” (Levy, 1996), or from participating in programs designed to bridge the gap between theorists and practitioners. Here are a couple of notable examples:

In September of 1978, the Association of College, University and Community Arts Administrators (ACUCAA) and the Center for Arts Administration, University of Wisconsin at Madison, convened an invitational seminar at the Spring Hill Center in Wayzata, Minnesota. Supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Spring Hill Center, the meeting was attended by marketing scholars, practitioners, and arts administrators.

This event is reported as a proceedings in the volume *Marketing the Arts* (Mokwa et al., 1980). One of the papers, by Stephen A. Greyser, is specifically aimed “Toward bridging the utility gap in marketing research for the arts”.

Another such program was created by Hirschman and Holbrook (1980), titled *Symbolic Consumer Behavior*, and sponsored by the Association for Consumer Research and the Institute of Retail Management, New York University. The meeting was attended by representatives from industry and the behavioral sciences as one of an ongoing series hosted by the Institute of Retail Management to foster communication between the business and academic communities. To run such a program, Morris Holbrook must suffer
from the same ambivalence that I do; he criticizes researchers who consult to industry, considering them obsequious dogs, while he teaches in a graduate business school.

Recurring controversy
A long-term perspective shows the recurrent character of such controversies in the marketing field. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was the excitement stirred by the widespread application in industry of qualitative research methods such as depth interviewing, non-directive interviewing, group interviewing, participant observation, projective techniques, etc. Calling all that “motivational research”, the marketing field drew upon the behavioral sciences to enlarge its arsenal of ideas and methods, and drew fire from traditional survey researchers and skeptical academicians (Henry, 1958). In the 1960s and 1970s broadening showed up to indicate marketing’s relevance to fields other than business-health, government, education, the arts, etc. – and drew resistance from traditional marketing academicians. The identity crisis referred to by Bartels (1974) showed up again in the fall of 1992, in a special issue of the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science edited by Robert A. Peterson (see Peterson, 1992). There, among others, Hunt (1992) wrote on “Marketing is . . .”, and Sheth (1992) wrote on “Acrimony in the ivory tower”. Now, here we are debating these issues again.

But nothing fundamental has changed. The extreme positions remain: traditional definitions of marketing versus newer ones; quantitative methods versus qualitative ones; behaviorists versus depth researchers; positivists versus post-modernists; and theorists versus practitioners. The extremists tend at times to be vicious and to dilute their science with moral judgments and self-righteousness. Those who want to limit the definition of marketing usually have a derogatory perception of marketing as a pernicious influence in society. Between the extremes is a continuum along which most people fall without being particularly argumentative about their views, accepting in a reasonable manner that there are diverse way of thinking and of making a living.

Having the advantage of an interdisciplinary education and an outlook that embraces rather than excludes, I think there is room for everyone and that everyone necessarily participates in the marketing process. I agree with Louis Pasteur:

No, a thousand times no, there does not exist a category of science to which one can give the name applied science. There are science and the application of science, bound together as the fruit of the tree which bears it (Louis Pasteur, Revue Scientifique (1871), quoted in Bagozzi, 1992).

In fact, as an elaboration of this view, I believe in the inclusiveness that is symbolized and illustrated by the academic tree (Figure 1).

The academic tree
In this organic metaphor the roots are the research program and what it implies for faculty participation in the academic community of scholars, journals,
conferences, preparing researchers and teachers, being part of the international scene, etc., even if, like roots, they are not so visible to the casual observer or understood by the practitioners. The roots are not apparent and not visibly beautiful and attractive, like the enjoyable proliferation of leaves, flowers and fruit, but are essential to the nourishment and growth of the tree. So, too, the necessity for the doctoral program and all that it implies in basic inputs, growth of knowledge, training for the future, and a natural and critical investment for a significant educational program. Without a strong and well-fertilized root system (funded by “rainmakers” and respected by supporters among the public, alumni, legislators, etc.), the academic tree will be stunted in its personnel, richness of insight, and quality of product. To deny the need for this support is a foolish “know-nothing”, anti-intellectual attitude that does not understand the role and necessity of basic research whose practical value may not be immediately apparent. Some researchers are defended as being good teachers as well, but why is that necessary? There is division of labor, and some researchers might best leave the teaching to others.

The trunk is the masters programs, MBAs, executive education seminars and consultancies, whereby the esoteric studies and abstractions that root the tree are translated into theories of strategy and practice. The trunk is sturdy, branching into different areas of specialization, determining policy and the shape of the enterprise. Fed by the root system, the managerial trunk is important for carrying leadership and direction to the world of action and application.

The foliage, flowers and fruit are the undergraduate programs and service to the public. These products of the academic tree benefit the general community, providing knowledge and experience for the everyday work world. Through
direct instruction in the classroom and via the training of higher level managers, the research faculty disseminate their learning.

In sum, each of these groups has its role and its province. What are the critics so worked up about? Let the others go their way and do their thing. The gap between theory and practice is a natural one as all groups have their peculiar obsessions and jargon. Some brave souls will bridge the gap, bring back word, and for a time perhaps reduce the acrimony until the next skirmish.

References