

Marketers - A Case Of Physician Heal Thyself?

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Abstract

Do writers in the area of marketing use and learn from the lessons they teach to others? This question is raised after noting the contradictions between the contents of books on the subject of marketing and the day-to-day concerns suggested by industrial marketers.

This article draws on the results of research carried out among 30 European marketing managers (Germany, France, UK, Sweden). This research shows firstly how these managers perceive the marketing literature. The paper then generalises some principles to improve the correspondence between the contents of books and the expectations of industrial marketers.

Résumé

Les auteurs en marketing s'appliquent-ils à eux-mêmes les leçons qu'ils donnent aux autres dans les livres qu'ils écrivent ? Telle est la question que l'on peut se poser en constatant le décalage qui existe entre le contenu des livres de marketing industriel et les préoccupations quotidiennes des managers.

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude empirique sur les problèmes quotidiens de 30 marketing managers européens (Allemagne, France, Royaume uni, Suède) et sur leur perception des livres de marketing. Sur cette base, il tente ensuite de dégager quelques préconisations pour rendre les ouvrages de marketing industriel plus consistant avec les préoccupations des lecteurs.

Structure of the paper

This paper is divided into three parts: -

- Background to the research and methodology
- Research findings concerning managers' perceptions of the contents of marketing books and the relationship to their day-to-day tasks

- Finally we discuss ideas and recommendations to improve the utility of marketing texts in order to improve the correspondence with the expectations of marketers

Understanding the industrial marketers information needs

In 1998 the Cranfield School of Management published the results of a study concerning the future of marketing in industrial and business-to-business organisations (1). This study showed that marketing was poorly perceived in such companies, and in terms of importance as a function was ranked only above human resources.

The combined experience of academics and consultants reveals that marketing managers actually read very little with respect to professional support from the literature. This led to the first hypothesis:-

H1 - that books on industrial marketing are written by academics for academics.

If we accept this hypothesis and consider the consequences for marketing, this would mean that authors write first and foremost to address their competition, in other words other authors, or their students (as programme content) rather than for marketing practitioners.

Combining these two thoughts leads us to a second hypothesis. If marketing has a poor reputation, this is partly because it does not create enough perceived added value for the rest of the firm. In turn, this poor performance could be due to the fact that as marketing managers do not read very much specialist literature on this subject, they do not always have access to appropriate tools and best practices. So why do they not read much? Because they do not have much time and because the books that have been written, in theory for them, are not sufficiently accessible and consistent with their daily problems.

H2 – Marketing texts for practitioners are not sufficiently accessible.

insert Diagram 1

Working from these hypothesis, we devised the notion of addressing the problem at source by apply marketing principles and listening to marketing practitioners, in order to understand their expectations of books. We seek to understand the consequences if authors of marketing books were to apply marketing principles.

Methodology

As background to the research over a period of nearly a year questionnaires were issued to marketing practitioners attending a variety of training programmes in both France and England. They were asked to describe the problems that face them as practitioners, either on entry to a new post or in their current positions. We sought to understand their initial and recurrent problems.

The findings of this first phase helped in the design of open ended, 30 minute, face-to-face telephone interviews conducted with thirty managers from around Europe (Germany, France, UK, Sweden). The first part of the interview aimed at determining the concerns of marketing practitioners, and the second part to understand their perceptions of marketing texts with which they were familiar. The main topics probed in the interview were firstly concerning the appropriateness of the contents of books against market expectations, and secondly the style of such books required to attract the reader. A detailed report was written following each interview, these were then analysed to identify relevant themes.

Finally, the results of the findings were confirmed in two focus groups conducted with marketing practitioners, in which we were particularly interested to understand issues concerning books and the presentation of material. This involved topics such as size, the use of colour, layout and overall style.

Research findings

General attitude to marketing texts

In general the findings were consistent with the two initial hypotheses. Marketing managers read little, sometimes even very little. They do read books on the subject of marketing but these are often of the "airport bookstall" variety. Particular examples mentioned include "Thriving On Chaos" by Tom Peters, "Inside The Tornado" by Geoffrey Moore and "Competitive Advantage" By Michael Porter. In other words they are familiar with American authors, the sometimes flamboyant style of writing and the many short examples and vignettes used to illustrate particular points.

A notable exception was that many managers mentioned the work of Philip Kotler, mostly encountered as an introduction to marketing. The choice appears to be guided by the immense popularity of the author, whose name is on the covers of six out ten books on marketing throughout the world (a remarkable example of the marketing process applied to the promotion of his work). Popularity does not necessarily go hand in hand with a positive perception, the majority of those interviewed also said his work left them eager for more as the problems and challenges related to their particular business or industry were not addressed in sufficient and specific detail.

Presentation of books

- Size - Following the interviews and focus group work, the message concerning size was clear. Marketing managers hate "big, dull books". Those which are just pages and pages of small print give a dull and grey appearance to the book. Managers are more used to clicking on their computer screen to visualise diagrams, images, links, and non textual elements. All in colour if possible. To summarise, they want books in which the text is punctuated by visuals as often as possible.

- Chapters - Chapters were considered to be too long. Managers are sporadic readers, consuming a book whenever time is available such as on a train journey, in the airport lounge or even in bed. Subsequently, it is difficult to imagine reading a long and boring chapter. Not being able to finish a chapter is seen as a failure and frustration. Finishing a chapter is seen as success and a motivation to read further. Managers prefer short, stand-alone chapters that can be read as the opportunity arises.
- Case studies - Many texts include case studies and vignettes. Practically all the interviewees admitted that they hardly ever found the cases to be of use. They appreciate that examples illustrate and demonstrate particular circumstances, but do not value cases that need further work and analysis. Once again this illustrates a "surfer" attitude - managers rapidly click from one window to another. Managers prefer to know where information is and where to find it when needed rather than to work through an exercise that might not necessarily correspond to specific requirements. By contrast, the attitude is rather different when attending seminars and courses, when case study work is particularly appreciated.
- Navigation - In view of the way in which managers read books there is a much greater requirement for clear references. Managers can read, jump from one chapter to another and from one part of the book to another. They rarely read the whole book from cover to cover. Rather, they extract the tool, example or model that most corresponds to their needs. To make this task easier, they underline the need for clear indexes, charts, tables of contents, flow diagrams etc.

Book content

There were frequent comments and judgements concerning the more academic style of books. These comments can be classified in four main groups: -

- Content and function - a large gap is perceived between content and function. Books are composed of 90 per cent of theoretical discussion and explanation with 10 per cent of actionable output. Marketing practitioners found that their day-to-day work requires 90 per cent application, and only 10 per cent thought.
- Length and complication - books are considered too complex, too compact and overly integrated. The step-by-step methods commonly seen in books were particularly disliked. These monolithic models produced negative reactions with managers. This is because such texts require a high investment of time in order to understand the information. If, as in many cases, this is unsuited to the requirements of the manager then this represents a wasted investment. If time is constrained, managers will reduce the risk and seek their solutions elsewhere. Secondly, reality is very different from that laid out in the step-by-step processes included in textbooks. The manager's reality is composed of many conflicting short and long-term requirements. Finally, managers commented that even if they do work assiduously through the various stages of the process, this still does not

necessarily result in a successful outcome. As one of the interviewees commented: -

"When I buy a book on marketing, I would feel stronger, better prepared, or simply better. But if the book turns out to be too complex or too difficult to get into, I can't read it and I get the impression that I am unable to understand. In fact, I feel even more stupid than before having bought it!"

- Ease of assimilation - managers commented that it is much easier to learn about the subject of marketing by means of a training seminar or course which allows for more reflection, often structured as part of the programme. To quote another respondent: -

"The books provide knowledge that needs assimilating, whereas what we need are good questions to make us as managers think, rather than offering ready-made solutions."

- Useful but not specific - managers noted that books present many tools, as methods and processes. However, these do not necessarily respond to their specific and actual challenges in the day-to-day task. Consider this comment: -

"It is all useful stuff, just as a computer is useful. We cannot do without it but it is not enough, and our daily concerns are not made of strategic segmentation, planning and analysis. Our real concerns lie elsewhere."

The open-ended nature of the interview process enabled the concerns of managers to be investigated in further detail.

Managers concerns

The day-to-day concerns of managers could be classified into three main areas - personal positioning, status and recognition and clarification of the marketing function.

- Personal positioning - managers are concerned as to their status and personal positioning within the firm. Due to the nature of the role they often felt isolated within an industrial business. The feelings of isolation, lack of clarity and the generally indefinable nature of the role often led to managers feeling marginalised. Practitioners felt that they occupied a co-ordinating role, working with many other departments and teams but lacking hierarchical superiority, which required diplomatic and influencing skills in order to input to company strategy. Managers often questioned how they could successfully work with, for example, sales who often saw marketing as data hungry or with the technical and research and development teams who did not acknowledge the role of marketing in the product development process.
- Status and recognition - in industrial and business-to-business firms technically or professionally qualified staff are seen as kings and sales people as barons.

Marketing is seen in terms of cost rather than profit. As a consequence the marketing function is constantly supervised, scrutinised and suspected. A tactic employed by managers was to maintain a record of successes and achievements in order to justify their role. Practitioners were frustrated at the ease with which investments were made in, for example, new product development but a fraction of that expenditure invested in a marketing study beforehand was often viewed with suspicion. The role of marketing in the organisation is such the managers work hard not to be rejected rather than accepted.

- Clarifying the role of marketing – Due to the intangible nature of marketing the role is not always clear. This can lead to misinterpretations as to the function of marketing, and frustration on behalf of marketing staff together with inefficiencies in the marketing function. To quote one respondent: -

"The part played by the research department is clear, the design of products. The role of the sales people was also clear to everybody, to sell the products. Nobody would dream of asking the engineers to sell product, or the sales people to design them! But no one really knows in my firm what the marketing department does, so we are asked to do a bit of everything."

In such conditions the role of marketing emerges incrementally by trial and error. This is particularly the case if the person appointed to a marketing role has a background in another department without explicit skills in the subject. In this way tactical issues, such as responding to requests for information, consume marketing resource and detract from more important areas of strategy and co-ordination. By following a LIFO approach (last in first out) the marketing department focuses more on what is urgent rather than on what is important and abdicates control of the department to those outside. As a consequence the added value is low and marketing is seen not to have contributed.

Managers and their operational concerns

Whilst the preceding discussion represents a summary of managers' concerns within the context of a marketing role, managers can often define specific issues in very clear terms. For example: -

"I'm a fireman who puts out the fires that start up everywhere and who does a thousand different things at the same time"

"How can I write brochures, sales documents or reports?"

"How can I cut the product range if I think it is too large?"

"Should I begin with a product before analysing the market, or the market before deciding the product?"

"How can I find out what the competition is doing?"

"How can I forecast sales?"

These are predominantly tactical and operational issues. Here despite its importance and widespread discussion in marketing texts, market segmentation was mentioned no more

than five times during the course of the interviews. Other themes frequently dealt with in books on marketing were not mentioned by managers. These include; service, value, analysis (SWOT or other methods), planning, purchasing behaviour, the role of networks and marketing strategy.

Alternatively, and to take a more positive stance, we could suggest that these topics are not mentioned by managers as part of their operational concerns because they do not constitute a problem. We don't believe this to be the case.

Coping in a practitioner environment

We were interested to explore how managers, often with a predominantly technical background relevant to the industry and operating in firms with a low perception of marketing, the attitude to marketing somewhere between neutral and openly hostile, managed in such circumstances.

In the majority of the cases discussed, business operated relatively smoothly. Successful marketing practitioners were able to achieve this by investing substantial amounts of time in meetings and discussions with their colleagues from other functions. They were very capable in creating contacts, managing relationships and committing sufficient time to internal marketing to develop a positive and confident atmosphere. Such managers were also adept at drawing in appropriate resources from consultants and outside agencies. In particular for communications, market research and consultancy. Good marketing practitioners were also able to prioritise and identify what is both urgent and important.

It would appear that successful and capable marketing managers were able to achieve success by efficient management of time, good interpersonal relationships and communication and problem identification and resolution. However, these are general management as opposed to marketing skills and this demonstrates a contrast between understanding marketing and knowing how to achieve effective marketing outcomes in practice (Diagram 2).

Insert Diagram 2 here

Good marketing managers would therefore appear to be efficient managers as well.

Discussion

Drawing on our findings we propose some recommendations for authors writing books on the subject of marketing for the practitioner market. Authors are on the horns of a dilemma in deciding which of the elementary principles of marketing to include, and risking the disenfranchisement of the more professional reader. Alternatively should a full menu of subjects be offered in order to allow the readers to select for themselves.

A solution is not an easy one, and probably somewhere between these two extremes. Pedagogically the first solution is not a good one, but on the other hand if the gap

between the reader's expectations and the offering of the text is too great again this would lead to disappointment. Taking into account the findings from our interviews and focus groups we suggest four main outcomes.

- Focus to the reader rather than the discipline - a primary concern of marketing practitioners in industrial and business-to-business organisations is their own well-being and position and status within the firm. By adopting the reader's perspective the content should assist in helping the reader to sell their skills and capabilities together with the discipline of marketing within the firm.
- Work from first principles - many marketing managers have transferred from technical or sales positions and have no in-depth experience or knowledge of marketing. By working from first principles the relatively inexperienced manager can be taken to progressively more advanced levels. The content of the book should be explicit and assist the reader in diagnosing their own circumstances. The focus should actively and explicitly assist in enabling the reader to identify those areas of the text that are relevant to their particular requirements.
- Marketing and management - marketing managers have both a marketing and managerial dimension to their work. To improve the operational effectiveness of marketing managers they need not just more professional marketing skills but management capabilities as well to enable them to be truly effective.
- Navigation and readability - managers are increasingly information butterflies, surfing through information and unable or unwilling to concentrate for long periods. They will quickly review content and move on due to limitations and pressures on the time. Navigational tools such as indexes, tables of contents etc enable the reader to browse through a book easily and quickly. Short chapters and visual information will capture the attention of the reader with respect to items of interest to them. However the book should not go as far as presenting itself in a comic strip format, this was regarded as unprofessional.

Conclusions

Some authors (4,2,5) have already raised the issue of the role and legitimacy of marketing within the firm and the gap between theory and practice. Our research, continues this theme, and offers arguments that challenge the effectiveness with which marketing academics and other experts can connect with the true concerns of marketing practitioners. This is to argue that authors need to have a greater understanding of requirements of the target reader. Do authors write for their colleagues and competitors, their students or marketing practitioners? No market is necessarily more important than another, but each has different needs. One circumstance that could pose real problems are authors who write for themselves, but they of course publish on their own behalf! Finally, we pose the question as to whether these findings are limited in scope to industrial marketing, or whether they have wider application in other disciplines?

Notes

- 1) MELDRUM M.J., PALMER R (1998)- *The future of marketing in industrial and technological organisations*. - Cranfield University. Working paper
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- 3) P. MILLIER P., PALMER R. (2000) - *Nuts, Bolts & Magnetrons. A practical guide for industrial marketers*.- Chichester : J. Wiley & Sons,
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- 5) PRAS B. (1999) « Les paradoxes du marketing ». in : *Revue Francaise de Gestion* n° 125 Sept-Oct.

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Diagram 1

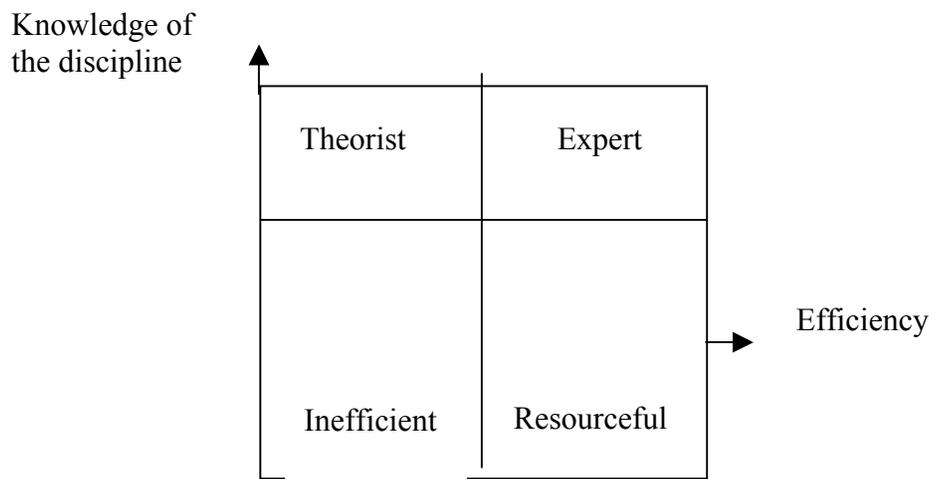


Diagram 2