

Who's doing what? Exploring market practices and practitioners

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Abstract

The so-called practice turn (Schatzki et al., 2001) has made entries in many disciplines of contemporary social science. So far, however, there is a paucity of empirical practice studies addressing the activities of market practitioners. In this paper, we analyze marketing practices in two longitudinal case studies of Swedish retail trade. The research question dealt with is: who is performing marketing? We employ the threefold conceptualization of market practices as interlinked exchange, normalizing and representational practices proposed by Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006; 2007) to select a number of empirical vignettes of marketing practice from the case studies. Our analysis shows that important marketing activities were carried out by a multitude of actors, including professionals and amateurs, individuals and collectives, humans and non-humans, specialists and generalists. In our concluding discussion, we trace the implications of this observed heterogeneity of practices and practitioners both for research and for market practice.

Keywords: *marketing practices, marketing practitioners, retailing.*

Introduction: why take an interest in those who practice marketing?

The role of marketing and marketers has been debated frequently over the years. Among the aspects discussed has been the gap between marketing theory and marketing practice (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hunt, 2002; Madichie, 2009), the status and influence of marketing departments and marketing practitioners (Anderson, 1982; Webster, 1992; Homburg et al., 1999; Moorman & Rust, 1999; Enright, 2006; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009); and the proper domain of marketing for both research and business practice (McKenna, 1991; Brown et al., 2005). A central tension in all these discussions can be traced to diverging understandings of marketing and accompanying ideas about those who engage in it. In this paper, we seek additional insights into these issues through empirical inquiries employing a practice approach.

The so-called practice turn (Schatzki et al., 2001) has made entries in many disciplines of contemporary social science. Theories of practice challenge dominant models of action and social order, explained as purpose- or norm-oriented, by attending to everyday practices shaping both actions and social order (Reckwitz, 2002). These theories draw on a variety of theoretical traditions, including the works of Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, Garfinkel, Butler and Latour (ibid.). The practice turn has also made some inroads into marketing, in the fields of consumer research (Holt, 1995; Warde, 2005; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Ingram et al., 2007; Watson & Shove, 2008) and market studies (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006; 2007; Araujo et al., 2008). So far, however, there is a paucity of empirical practice studies addressing the activities of market practitioners.

Our argument for turning to practice is twofold. First, attention to practice offers a way out of the entrenched positions characteristic of discussions about the gap between marketing principles and marketing practice and may thus offer fresh takes on the issue of marketing's relevance in contemporary society. Second, attention to practice encourages an earnest appreciation of how marketing actually is performed over a discussion of how marketing should be performed in principle. A first challenge when turning attention to practices related to markets and marketing, is to assess to what extent current understandings of marketing practitioners allow us to capture the relevant practices. Thus, the central research question dealt with in this paper is: who is performing marketing, in practice?

Five sections follow this introduction. First, we establish our theoretical starting points concerning marketing practice and marketing practitioners. Second, we discuss the design of the empirical studies that we draw on as well as our analytic procedure. Third, we present twelve empirical vignettes illustrating various facets of marketing practice. Fourth, we discuss who is doing marketing in the light of these vignettes. Fifth and finally, we present some concluding remarks concerning the definition of marketing proposed in this paper and relate our findings to the ongoing discussion about marketing as a profession.

Theoretical starting points

The question of who is performing marketing requires us to establish two important theoretical starting points. First, the answer to our research question will critically depend on our definition of marketing practice. Thus we will start by presenting our theoretical view of what constitutes marketing practice. Second, our analysis of who is performing the activities that pass as marketing according to our theoretical model will depend on how we conceive

acting entities. Hence, in the subsequent section, we will present some theoretical concepts that can assist us in characterizing those who do marketing.

Marketing practice

When I first began teaching, marketing was taught and written about from the perspective of a manager in his corporate office seated in a leather chair, smoking his cigar, and moving customers around to create segments. Over time we got to a point where we had bell-bottomed managers, but only briefly, the cigar fell away, occasionally that manager might be a she, and the organization might be a non-profit agency. But we are still sitting in that corporate office or agency office shoving customers around in an effort to work our magic on them more efficiently. (Houston, 1994:ix)

The marketing management school was developed with a rather clearly distinguished marketing professional in mind, a specialist who was surrounded by similar professionals in a well defined and demarcated functional department of the firm. More extensive marketing management research also walked hand in hand with the proliferation of marketing departments and marketing specialist (Keith, 1960). Over the years though, interaction and relational approaches (IMP, relationship marketing, etc.), attention to processes of self-service and co-production (Normann and Ramirez, 1993), and concepts such as prosumers (Toffler, 1980) and part-time marketers (Gummesson, 1991) have all brought attention to the fact that marketing activities are broadly distributed across a variety of actors. Beyond this, more recent work on market practices have argued that market-ing, defined as those activities that contribute to produce markets, includes a much wider set of activities than what is traditionally recognized as marketing (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007). In line with these ideas, a broad notion of marketing practice, which is not restricted to the actions of professional marketers, seems a fitting starting point when turning attention to marketing practice.

Thus, in order to identify who is performing marketing, we employ the model of markets as constituted by practices proposed by Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006, 2007). This model suggests a threefold conceptualization of market practices as interlinked exchange, normalizing and representational practices (see Figure 1). Exchange practices are activities that contribute to consummate individual economic exchanges. Normalizing practices are activities that contribute to establish normative objectives concerning how a market should work, or how (some group of) market actors should act. Representational practices, finally, are activities that contribute to create images of markets and/or how they work.

It is important to underscore that this theoretical model forms the basis for our analysis. Accepting our results hinges on whether or not one accepts the premises. In our concluding discussion, we will return to the issue of whether this model is able to capture relevant aspects of marketing or not.

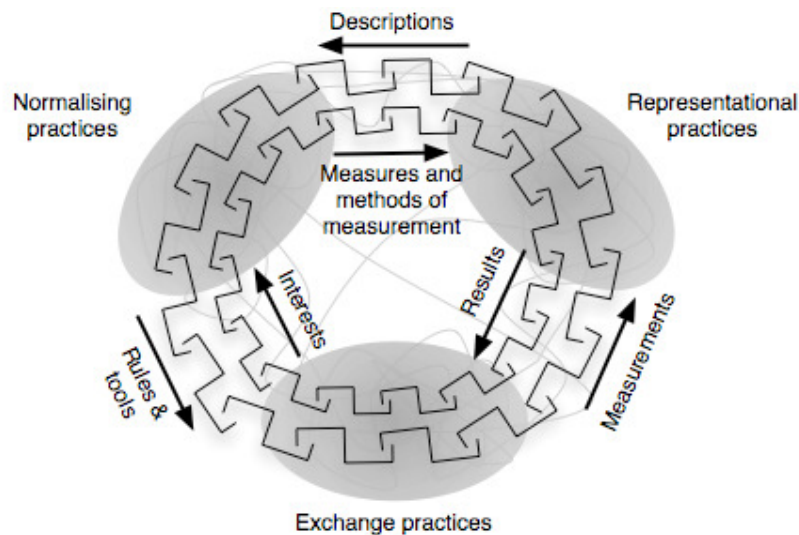


Figure 1. Model of a market as constituted by interlinked market-ing practices (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007).

Marketing practitioners

Whatever definition of marketing practice one chooses to employ, there is a second conceptual issue that needs to be addressed before one can provide an answer to the question ‘who is performing marketing’: Which entities can qualify as being among those “who perform marketing”? This question is not as straightforward as it may seem. As our discussion about marketing practices above suggested, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that some actors perform “marketing in the wild” (to paraphrase Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2003). Hence, we need to conceive marketing actors in a way that does not exclude the possibility of non-professional marketers. Furthermore, recent work on the organizing of markets has highlighted the potential import of material devices on working markets and brought attention to the hybrid combinations of devices and individuals/organizations that take part in marketing (Callon et al., 2007).

As is well understood from work on narratives (see, e.g. O'Neill, 1994), qualifying as someone performing marketing will also depend on how broadly or narrowly we delimit the individual practices that are being performed. If we employ relatively broad labels to describe practices, e.g. ‘to segment the ice-cream market’ or ‘to plan the spring advertising campaign’, this will promote the identification of agents that correspond to this level of abstraction, e.g. “the marketing department” or “the company”. If we employ more specific labels to describe practices, like ‘made a sales-sign’ or ‘priced the lettuce’, our identification of agents will change accordingly. Any practice, however defined, “is itself at least potentially, an entirely full-fledged event that could be absolutely vital given the appropriate narrative context.” (O'Neill, 1994, p.39) Irrespective of how we define a practice, no matter how big or small, the amount of information we decide to include or exclude from the narrative is always to some extent arbitrary.

Given these insights, we will refrain from imposing a very elaborate model of actors to guide our analysis and instead proceed in a more exploratory fashion. Thus, we will use the empirical vignettes to identify dimensions that are able to capture important aspects of the

variation among those observed to perform marketing. Such an approach can provide useful inputs for developing a richer conceptualisation of those who practice marketing.

Study design

In selecting a suitable setting for inquiry, we have deliberately turned our attention away from the marketing departments of manufacturers, since the marketing management school has already taught us that a substantial part of marketing practice takes place there. Instead, we have focused on another area of marketing practice, specifically retailing. We analyze marketing practices (including efforts to shape as well as operate in markets) in two longitudinal case studies of Swedish retail trade (Kjellberg, 2001; Hagberg, 2008) in order to identify and develop our understanding of actors performing marketing.

The first case study is a historical study of how a major private food distributor engaged in the rationalization of food distribution in Sweden between 1940 and 1960. The focal firm, Hakonbolaget, was a food wholesaler largely owned by 4000 private grocery retailers. The study covers Hakonbolaget's efforts to render wholesale operations more efficient, to influence public policy related to food distribution, to modernize food retailing and to better integrate wholesaling and retailing. The vignettes included in this paper concern food retailing. This study is primarily based on archive material, both from the focal firm and one of its managers, and secondary sources, such as articles in contemporary business press. The second case study is a study of consumer electronics e-retailer NetOnNet and the emergence of e-commerce in Sweden. NetOnNet was founded in 1999 with the purpose of selling consumer electronics over the Internet and was one of few companies to survive the so-called dotcom-crash. Five years later one could read in the Swedish business press that e-commerce had recovered and had become an established form of retailing. NetOnNet was described as the brightest shining star of Swedish e-commerce. This study is based on a combination of archive materials, interviews and observations. Both studies have been conducted according to the methodological principles of the sociology of translation (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Latour, 1996; Law, 1994). This means that the cases were constructed by following those who act, whatever their form, without imposing a conceptual framework foreign to them.

In broad outline, the analytic procedure used for this paper can be described as consisting of five steps: 1) identification and selection of outcomes; 2) identification of practices; 3) identification of practitioners, 4) writing up vignettes; and 5) looking for similarities and differences across vignettes. All steps of the analysis were performed jointly by the authors. We started our analysis by examining the two case narratives to identify specific outcomes. Guided by the threefold conceptualization of market practices developed by Kjellberg & Helgesson (2007), we sorted these outcomes into three different categories: normative objectives, economic exchanges and representations. We then selected two outcomes from each case in each category, resulting in a total of twelve outcomes (see Table 1). The selection was made with an eye towards ostensibly similar outcomes from both cases, e.g. an outcome concerning how to price goods from each case. As a second step, and in accordance with the idea that practices are classified according to the outcomes they produce (*ibid.* p.143-144), we then used the identified outcomes as "seeds" working ourselves backwards in the case narratives to identify the specific activities involved in producing them. The next step of the analysis was to identify the practitioners involved in the practices producing these outcomes. This was done in parallel to writing up short empirical vignettes based on the case studies. These vignettes were developed in three steps: 1) each author produced a first draft based on his case study, 2) the draft was cross read and discussed by the two authors; 3) each author

revised the texts based on questions and comments made by the other author. This procedure resulted in twelve vignettes, two from each case study and each practice. Finally, these vignettes were analyzed to identify similarities and differences among practitioners participating in performing marketing. In the following, we will alternate between the two case studies as we present the twelve vignettes illustrating various facets of marketing practice (structured according to the model of markets as constituted by practice discussed above).

Scene	Outcome	Practice
N1	Legislation banning resale price maintenance	Normalizing
N2	Changing conditions for use of lowest price guarantees	Normalizing
N3	Self-service as norm for food retail stores	Normalizing
N4	Changing the business plan and strategic objectives	Normalizing
R1	Depicting a retail format as being less costly	Representational
R2	Comparison of price levels in different retail formats	Representational
R3	An image of the sources of company revenues	Representational
R4	A categorization of retail formats	Representational
E1	Self-service stores and modified full service stores	Exchange
E2	Web shop and warehouse shop	Exchange
E3	A purchase in a self service store	Exchange
E4	A purchase in a warehouse shop	Exchange

Table 1. Market outcomes and identification of marketing practices

Empirical accounts of normalizing (marketing) practices

In this section we present four vignettes where various actors engage in efforts to alter, affect, or handle the normative objectives for a particular market.

N1 Hakonbolaget: Questioning retail efficiency and banning resale price maintenance

By mid-1945, the lenient position assumed by the Swedish public vis-à-vis the practices of the retail trade during the war was coming to an end. Politicians and trade union representatives complained about goods distribution being inefficient and out-dated. Academic experts pointed towards Resale Price Maintenance – i.e. manufacturers dictating the retail prices for their goods – as one explanation for this inefficiency. RPM was said to increase costs by fostering service competition rather than price competition. To investigate its effects, a public expert committee including manufacturer, wholesaler and retailer representatives was formed in 1946. The experts commissioned investigations into specific markets and arranged public hearings with businessmen from various industries and trades about their pricing practices. The final report, presented in 1951, suggested that RPM should be banned on account of its negative effects on price competition. This led to massive complaints from the trade, including Hakonbolaget, whose head of Organization remarked: “There would be chaos if every retailer was to calculate for himself!” The critics claimed that retailers were inadequately equipped to price goods, lacking both calculative skills and knowledge about retail costs. The complaints triggered a series of talks between the government and representatives of business life resulting in a final legislation banning RPM but accepting suggested resale prices. This change significantly affected the retail markets. It *allowed*

retailers to price goods, rather than *required* them to do so. It also allowed producers to print suggested retail prices on their products, which in effect meant that charging less than the suggested price would be associated with extra costs for the retailers (for price-marking).

N2 NetOnNet: Questioning the competitors' use of lowest price guarantees

The NetOnNet web shop opened in March 1999, but sales were modest during the first six months. Having recruited new investors and redesigned the web shop, NetOnNet made a renewed attempt to challenge their store-based competitors in October 1999. Prior to this effort, price had been identified by NetOnNet as the main competitive factor. Thus a significant price difference compared to the competitors was regarded as the most important advertising claim. NetOnNet soon identified a major obstacle in convincing customers to shop via the Internet: the price guarantees offered by store-based competitors. According to these guarantees customers who bought products in a store and then found identical products at a lower price in another store would be reimbursed (sometimes also adding a bonus). In November 1999, NetOnNet turned to the Swedish Consumer Agency (SCA) pointing out that the guarantees did not apply to e-commerce, although the terms did not explicitly mention this. It was also reported to media through press releases. According to NetOnNet, the price guarantees purported to discourage consumers from making price comparisons. NetOnNet reported two competitors to the SCA, while one of their customers reported a third competitor. This customer had bought a product that NetOnNet offered for 1000 SEK less in a newspaper advertisement a couple of days later. The customer claimed the guarantee, but was refused on the grounds that the guarantee did not cover Internet retailers. According to the customer, this was not explicitly mentioned in the terms. As a result of these controversies all three competitors announced that their guarantees would include Internet offers, provided that delivery costs were included in the price comparisons.

In September 2000, NetOnNet engaged a researcher in economics to investigate the effects of price guarantees. According to his report the guarantees acted as a substitute for lower prices and actually produced higher prices (Ganslandt, 2000). The reason for this was that customers stopped making price comparisons. Subsequently, NetOnNet once again reported the price guarantees of one of the competitors, Elgiganten, to the SCA. The researchers' report was now attached as evidence that a lowest price guarantee actually was a highest price guarantee. In their response to the SCA, Elgiganten stated that they had now changed their price guarantee to a "200% guarantee", so that customers would receive the price difference times two if they found a lower price. This was soon noted by some customers who set up a web site offering a specific TV for 1 SEK, while Elgiganten's price was 50 000 SEK. The customers then bought the TV from Elgiganten and claimed the price guarantee, so that they received 50 000 SEK and a 50 000 SEK TV! In response, Elgiganten introduced new restrictions so that the guarantee no longer was valid for Internet offers.

N3 Hakonbolaget: Establishing self-service as the retailers' norm for food retail stores

Besides identifying RPM as a major source of inefficiency, the parties engaging in the debate discussed alternative methods for lowering retail costs, including the use of self-service as practiced in the US. Nils-Erik Wirsäll, the head of Organization at Hakonbolaget actively promoted this new retail format after a visit to the US in 1946. He monitored the latest developments through the American business press and wrote Swedish articles on the subject. Hakonbolaget also sought to interest the retailers in self-service by prompting discussions about it in the retail councils organized across their territory. According to the minutes from

these meetings the retailers found both merits and drawbacks with self-service. They were curious but saw many practical difficulties in relation to their own situation. Above all, they found the new format to be at odds with their primary strength: delivering personal service to their customers. ICA-tidningen, the professional publication for retailers published by Hakonbolaget, also promoted self-service during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Editorials argued for its benefits; selected customers gave voice to their preference for inspecting the goods on their own; articles gave practical advice on how to convert manually served stores, etc. In 1950, a special issue was dedicated entirely to self-service, and a year later an editorial exclaimed: “The idea that won!” So massive was the propaganda for self-service that by the early 1950s there were few if any associated retailers who were prepared to defend the traditional retail format in public.

N4 NetOnNet: Seeking to retain credibility in the face of changing norms, .com crash

In the beginning of 2000, a public debate emerged about the future of e-commerce in general, and e-commerce companies in particular. A common claim in the debate was that e-commerce companies had underestimated the costs, and the importance of logistics. Christmas trees not being delivered until after Christmas became an important symbol of this. Despite this emerging critique against the industry, NetOnNet was able to secure a private placement giving it a much-needed injection of new capital in April 2000. This private placement was preceded by the formulation of an offensive expansion plan including increased advertising and internationalisation. A few days after the completion of the private placement, the Swedish business press reported that the stock prices in the US had fallen rapidly. Apparently, a crisis for e-commerce companies was in the making, with heavy losses and inability to attract investors. Sweden followed suit. In May 2000, the board of boo.com, one of the most famous e-commerce companies in Sweden, filed for bankruptcy. The crisis of e-commerce companies became evident to a broader public.

Prompted by the new situation the managers of NetOnNet discussed how to proceed during the summer of 2000. Their former plan now appeared impractical with its envisioned new capital injection into the NetOnNet during 2001 and plans to rapidly expand to other European countries. So the plans were revised and the international expansion was scaled down. In the financial report for the first six months of 2000, a new image of NetOnNet was put forward. The most important aspects of this image were: that the company expected to show profit from the third quarter 2001; that all activities purported to generate sales transactions; that management had earlier experience from the consumer electronic business; that the company had low costs; that logistics was a core activity; and that the company focused on measurement and profit based metrics. These aspects were expressed in the so called “NetOnNet model”, with business guidelines for how to proceed.

Empirical accounts of representational (marketing) practices

In this section we present four vignettes where actors engage in efforts to create images of how a particular market, or exchange practice works.

R1 Hakonbolaget: Determining whether costs are lower in self-service stores

Despite the apparent success of Hakonbolaget’s attempt to establish the idea of self-service among its associated retailers, the pace at which the retailers converted their stores to the new

format was modest. By 1952 only 128 out of 4000 retailers had converted to self-service. One reason for this was held to be the lack of credible knowledge of the economic consequences of converting. Thus, in 1953, Hakonbolaget initiated and funded a co-operative research project with Lars Persson a researcher at the Stockholm School of Economics. The primary purpose was to compare the (cost-) efficiency of self-service and traditional stores, and to hopefully establish the economic superiority of the former. The company took an active part in the study by supplying information about the studied retail stores, including accounting figures from their Accounting Centre and information about assortments and employees from their local offices. The researcher put considerable effort into generating a representative sample by taking into account the profiles of the stores. The final report published in 1955 showed that the profitability of large self-service stores was higher than for large traditional stores, and that self-service was not worse than manual service in smaller stores, at least not in a statistically significant sense (Persson, 1955). Since converting to self-service often led to turnover growth, it was possible to set up a chain of evidence that provided scientific support for the claim that a private retailer would be better off if he converted his store to a self-service format.

R2 NetOnNet: Are prices lower on the Internet?

An initial assumption made by the founders of NetOnNet was that lower costs of operations would allow Internet companies to offer lower prices than store based competitors. The statement that prices were lower on the Internet was repeated in advertisements and newspaper articles. In December 1999, the Swedish Retail Institute (HUI) published a price comparison between Internet companies and traditional retailers in the Swedish business press. Contrary to the claims of NetOnNet and other Internet retailers, the comparison showed that it was more expensive to buy products over the Internet when freight costs were included. This triggered a debate in the Swedish business press. Critics of e-commerce claimed that e-commerce companies had underestimated costs for purchasing, handling, marketing and distribution. Supporters of e-commerce claimed that the comparison had major shortcomings. It was based on buying a single product and failed to account for the decreasing freight cost per product when buying more than one product. In addition, it did not take into account the costs related to purchases in physical stores, e.g. time and gasoline.

In September 2000, the HUI presented a new price comparison covering products in six different categories. This time consumer electronics were included while freight costs were not. The reason for excluding freight costs was that there would also be additional costs when buying goods in a physical store. The results suggested that prices were lower on the Internet for five out of six product categories. For one category – consumer electronics – prices were systematically higher on the Internet than in physical stores. Since the result caused some astonishment, the HUI soon performed a new comparison covering a larger number of companies and products. NetOnNet was now one of the representatives of e-commerce companies. This time, freight costs were once again included in the comparison. The results showed that the prices were almost equal between e-commerce companies and physical stores. In the comparison, NetOnNet was shown to have the lowest prices of the companies compared. When the results were presented, NetOnNet claimed that the price difference was even larger since freight costs had been included, but not the hidden costs of purchasing in physical stores.

In a number of advertisements, NetOnNet sought to illustrate these hidden costs by showing people transporting large TV's on the subway or using trolleys. In 2007 the Market Court

addressed the question of whether prices were lower on the Internet than in physical stores, in a case involving NetOnNet. As a result, NetOnNet was not allowed to claim that their prices were lower than those of the competitors. However, they were allowed to claim that prices were lower on the Internet compared to physical stores, since the Market Court had found that the costs of selling goods through the Internet were lower.

R3 Hakonbolaget: Results reinforce efforts to help the retailers

During the initial propaganda for self-service, the support offered by Hakonbolaget was largely seen as a form of subsidy to the private retail trade. A few years later, however, figures were indicating that this support was actually paying off. By 1954, sales figures indicated that the new retail establishments that the company had helped to secure had a significant positive effect on the turnover development of the company. Although establishing new stores led to financial strains for Hakonbolaget, then, they also contributed to strengthening the position of the company. The efforts to monitor newly established stores also indicated that Hakonbolaget could significantly affect their performance by selecting the right retailers for the job. Thus it was observed that retailers who had “the correct ideological position towards our work” – i.e. those who were loyal to Hakonbolaget – displayed a higher purchasing fidelity and thus produced a sales increase for Hakonbolaget above the average per unit of retail turnover. In a comment to these figures, the managers observed that a successful recruitment of retailers allowed the company to “await payment in the form of increased co-operation.” Hence, continued financial support to the (right) retailers would help Hakonbolaget as much as it would the retailers.

R4 NetOnNet: Are e-commerce and mail order the same?

Initially, NetOnNet and other e-retailers presented e-commerce as a new form of retailing. Entrepreneurs, media and investors were enticed by the newness. In early 2000, following the delivery problems of e-commerce companies a debate took place in Swedish business press in which mail order companies were singled out as the future winners. According to some debaters, aspects such as assortment and logistic functions seemed to be similar when comparing mail order and e-commerce. Another group of debaters claimed that mail order and e-commerce were completely different due to criteria of speed, flexibility and mode of modernity. Representatives of the Swedish Mail Order Association participated in the debate. Even though they repeatedly claimed that the e-commerce companies were unable to properly perform customer service, payment systems and logistic handling, e-commerce companies were invited to apply for membership in the association. Few e-commerce companies did.

Instead, NetOnNet engaged in establishing another association – the Swedish E-commerce Association. Initially, the new association received a large number of applications from e-commerce companies. However, many of these companies went out of business in the following years and the Swedish E-Commerce Association languished. NetOnNet became enrolled by the Swedish Mail Order Association and eventually became a member. In parallel, mail order companies were now receiving more and more customer orders through the Internet. In retail trade statistics (eg. Supermarket, Statistics Sweden), mail order and e-commerce was initially presented as two different forms of retail. In the annual statistics of the retail magazine Supermarket, e-commerce and mail order were with the start of 2003 accumulated in a new category: “distance selling”. For Statistics Sweden, e-commerce was handled in the alteration of SIC-codes in the turn of the year 2002/2003. New categories including Internet retailing were introduced as subcategories of mail order. In 2006, the

Swedish Mail Order Association changed name to the Swedish Distance Sellers. It was openly presented as an effort to enrol more e-commerce companies as members of the association. In a newspaper insert presenting the association, e-commerce as well as mail order was now included in the history of distance selling in Sweden, with the roots reaching back to 1879.

Empirical accounts of exchange (marketing) practices

In this third empirical section we present four vignettes that in various ways relate to the consummation of economic exchanges.

E1 Hakonbolaget: Self-service or more service?

Besides trying to convince retailers about the superiority of self-service, Hakonbolaget also engaged in concrete efforts to establish self-service stores. Their in-house trade magazine translated the principles of self-service into practically useful designs and procedures. A subsidiary called Retailer Service sold self-service equipment, such as gondolas, cash registers, shelves and wicker baskets. The wholesale offices pre-packaged goods for self-service and engaged in local community planning to secure new retail locations. The latter reduced the need to adapt existing retail facilities, in which groceries, meat, and dairy products often were sold in adjacent but separate facilities due to health regulations. A conversion to self-service could thus require the removal of inner walls. Hakonbolaget employed retail advisers to assist retailers when modernizing or building new stores. Finally, Hakonbolaget offered much needed financial support to such projects. All of these efforts were important when realizing a self-service store. Taken together, they allowed the company to exert considerable influence over the choice of both store design and retailer.

Despite these efforts, the pace at which the associated retailers were converting to self-service remained sluggish. Many retailers could or would not make the necessary investments, and Hakonbolaget was increasingly burdened by offering financial support. At the same time, the slow pace might result in the associated retailers losing ground to the Consumer Co-operation. To complement their promotion of self-service, Hakonbolaget introduced another efficiency-enhancing solution to be combined with manual service at low cost: “the Hakon helper.” This solution consisted of books of pre-printed purchasing lists distributed to the retailers’ customers, so that they could compile their orders at home. Customers could then hand in their lists in the morning and pick up their goods in the afternoon. The solution had many advantages: First, it reduced waiting time, not only for customers handing in lists, but also for those who kept coming to the store, where the queues now would be shorter. Second, it allowed the retailers to organise work more effectively, using slow hours to fill the orders that had arrived in the morning. Third, being a cheap solution that could be implemented without changes to the basic design of the store, the system helped alleviate some of the financial strains that the changeover to self-service was creating for Hakonbolaget.

E2 NetOnNet: Constructing the web shop and adding a warehouse

NetOnNet constructed the first web shop with the help of a local advertising agency, using a standard software platform and with the site kept on a third-party server. The CEO of NetOnNet worked in his apartment with the website, creating texts and pictures, updating prices and sorting the products in different “departments”. The web shop was introduced in

March 1999. The server crashed on the first day. During the following months there were long waiting times for web site visitors due to a lack of capacity. The problems of capacity were later to be handled by engaging an IT company and changing to a new software platform with shorter response time. Other changes of the website took place gradually. The product texts were developed and extended. New departments were introduced. The ordering routine was developed. The customer would pick products, placing them in a “shopping cart” and then proceed by clicking on the “check out” link and registering order information. The customer could choose between two delivery alternatives (home delivery by a transport company or pick up at a Post Office). An e-mail address and a phone number were presented on the website so that customers could ask for assistance. New functions of the website such as product comparisons, a technical glossary, and a membership registration routine were subsequently being developed. Around Christmas 2000 started to grow swiftly. So many new customers found their way to the NetOnNet website that NetOnNet found it increasingly difficult to deliver the products on time. Customers were supposed to place their orders on the website and then wait for delivery, but many customers now refused to accept this procedure. Some called customer service just to make sure their order had been registered. Others wanted to come to the warehouse and pick up their products, in this way reducing both waiting time and shipping costs. After some hesitation, NetOnNet decided to allow for this alternative procedure. It soon became clear that this led to increasing problems caused by the ‘collision’ between customers picking up their products and the regular distribution of goods. Although NetOnNet was able to handle the regular shipments before Christmas, these incidents were the starting point for protracted negotiations with customers. In April 2001, NetOnNet launched direct *selling* from their warehouse in Borås. With the help of computer terminals, it was now possible to search for products and to place the order at the premises. After completing the order and paying at a cash register, the customers could pick up the product at the dock. During the following months, experiments and negotiations with the customers took place and continuous adjustments were made. Finally, NetOnNet formally launched a warehouse shop in Borås followed by a second one in Ullared in 2002.

E3 Hakonbolaget: Making purchases in a self service store

Taking the division of labour to an unprecedented level, the Hakon helper was a more radical solution to the issue of distribution efficiency than self-service. Still, it does not appear to have had any significant effect on the further spread of self-service. The retailers regarded it as a makeshift for those who for some reason had to continue with manual service. Once opportunities arose to convert to self-service, this was the preferred solution. In this scene, then, we look at what a self-service encounter actually entailed from two points of view.

A customer entering the store should pick up a basket and then proceed by walking down the aisles. She should inspect the goods on display, select the ones she preferred, and put them in the basket. In the aisles, eye-catchers, signs and especially prominent displays would accompany certain goods to bring attention to special prices or season offerings. If she needed assistance, she had to find a clerk or maybe another customer to ask. There were still some items that were not pre-packaged, such as fresh meat, so she would need to stop at a manually served counter in the store and let a clerk weigh and price mark certain products. Having passed through the aisles, she would end up at the checkout counter, where a clerk would enter the prices of the goods into the cash register and charge for them.

From the viewpoint of the retailer, many of the activities that went into the realization of this exchange had taken place much earlier. Through the layout of the store, a significant part of

the activities had been delegated to others, such as shelves and gondolas, product packages and signs. Throughout the day, slow periods would be utilised to replenish goods in the shelves, to pre-package items that were not delivered in consumer packages by the producers, and to price goods that did not have suggested retail prices printed on them.

E4 NetOnNet: Realizing a specific exchange – buying at the warehouse shop

The first two warehouse shops were followed by a major national rollout of warehouse shops starting in Malmö 2006. The opening in Malmö was advertised locally, with special offers on 23 selected products. Approximately 60 people had queued up and the CEO of NetOnNet was there to greet the visitors on the opening day. Outside the entrance, shopping trolleys were lined up beneath a display explaining that using them would render lower prices possible. Further out in the parking lot, three people were handing out pieces of paper to the visitors. One was a voucher offering a 100 SEK discount on purchases of at least 500 SEK in two Elgiganten stores located in Malmö. The other was a price comparison of the products advertised by NetOnNet in connection to the opening. It included the prices of NetOnNet and Elgiganten, and suggested that prices were lower at Elgiganten. At approximately 9 am the doors to the new warehouse shop opened. The queue disappeared, replaced by a stream of new visitors throughout the morning.

The CEO greeted the visitors and handed out shopping bags. Once inside, shelves, pallets, aisles, packaged products and displays met the visitors. Throughout the premises there were small stations consisting of a computer, a screen, a mouse, a keyboard, and pencils and notebooks. Displays and screens presented how to shop in four steps: 1) Search; 2) Note; 3) Collect; and 4) Pay. If you had any questions you could ask the staff moving around in the store or you could go to one of the information desks. You would also see other people in the shop: security guards scouting for shoplifters; suppliers demonstrating product at two smaller and apparently temporarily placed desks; other visitors using the computers to search for products or searching by walking down the aisles. A bit further into the shop, you would see an area furnished with tables, chairs, soda vending machines and displays inviting you to have a break. You could pick most of the products directly from the shelves before going to the checkout, although some products had to be picked up after payment at a special collection point. There was a long line of manned checkout points where you could pay cash or by card. If you wished to pay by instalment you were required to go to the information desk first. At the checkout point you were supposed to return the shopping bag and switch to a paper bag to carry the products in. If you were using a trolley, this should be returned at the parking lot.

Analysis: Who is performing marketing?

How can we characterize those involved in performing marketing in the empirical vignettes above? Below we discuss actor variation in five dimensions that emerge from our combination of the empirical material with our theoretical ideas about actors.

Both humans and non-humans

In our conceptual discussion of actors and agency above, we argued that non-human agents may routinely perform certain aspects of marketing practice, and that we need to be sensitive to this possibility in our analysis. So, what do our empirical vignettes tell us about this? It seems clear that at least some of the practices accounted for were not directly performed by humans. Rather, they were mediated by various devices with which others interacted. The

vignettes from the retail stores offer many examples of this. In the self-service stores, product packaging, signs, shelves, and baskets replaced the clerk behind the counter of a fully served store (E3). On the NetOnNet website, a product catalogue with photos, product descriptions and comparisons, replaced the in-store salesman (E2). Non-humans such as price guarantees, vouchers, and price comparisons participated as enrolment devices or obstacles depending on the point of view. Some vignettes illustrated how humans were equipped with non-human devices in order to become capable of acting in a particular way: e.g. equipping customers with a purchase list (E1). As the Hakonbolaget case clearly shows, the participation of technical devices is not a new marketing phenomenon. However, during recent years we have seen an increasing proliferation of non-humans in the marketing field; e.g. mobile phones, computers and point-of-sale scanners. It seems clear to us that these objects are too many and too important to be excluded from the analysis. On what terms we should include them, however, is to some extent a matter of choice. Since they make others behave differently, we suggest that they too have agency (albeit to a varying and sometimes very limited extent) and that they should be recognized as such rather than regarded as essentially docile and passive means (Latour, 2005).

Both professionals and amateurs

In their analysis of the fashion industry, Rinallo and Golfetto (2006) concluded that marketing practitioners also were involved in theorizing about markets, thus highlighting a less than complete division of labour between various groups. How does this map onto our empirical vignettes? Clearly, professional marketers dominate, i.e. actors for whom the consummation of economic exchanges, the production of market images and the establishment of rules and codes of conduct for markets are “part of the job”. These professionals include individual small-scale Hakon retailers, departments and subsidiaries like ICA Tidningen, entire corporations like Hakonbolaget and NetOnNet, various types of federations like the Swedish Distance Sellers, as well as store interiors and websites. All of these are dedicated to marketing practices. But there are also amateurs engaging in some of the practices accounted for; actors who contribute in important ways to various marketing practices as part of some other project or simply by happenstance. A particularly conspicuous example is the customers who put up their own website in order to exploit the price guarantees offered by Elgiganten (N2). Still, most of these amateurs perform marketing activities in a routine way, like the housewives who either completed their purchases in-store or handed in their written orders (E1). There were also numerous efforts of equipping amateurs to act in a more professional way: e.g. a glossary to explain technical terms or enabling product comparisons on the web site (E2). In the public debates regarding the efficiency of goods distribution (N1) and the future of e-commerce (N4) different professionals were involved, many of them not being professional marketers (politicians, academics, trade union representatives), but also amateurs were involved. Another situation in which both professionals and amateurs were involved was the customer pick-up of goods in the NetOnNet warehouse (E2), where distribution performed by professionals was mixed with distribution performed by amateurs.

Both individuals and collectives

As is evident from the examples given above, there is considerable variation in terms of the geometry of the actors figuring in our vignettes. Some are individuals known either by their personal name, their official title, or both, e.g. Nils-Erik Wirsäll, the CEO of NetOnNet, and Lars Persson. Others, we sense, are groups or collectives made up of a number of such individuals, e.g. a retail council, or the Organization department. Others yet, represent groups

of such groups, like NetOnNet and Hakonbolaget. Finally, some are groups of groups of groups, e.g. the Swedish Distance Sellers. We could also observe how different collectives form and resolve related to marketing, e.g. through constituting different business associations (Swedish Mail Order Association, Swedish E-Commerce Association and Swedish Distance Sellers). Another example is how the changing image of a group (e-commerce companies) had effects on the formation of the business plan for a specific company (NetOnNet). This type of progression in social complexity is also present among non-humans performing marketing practices. Thus, we find singular entities like packages, baskets, and trolleys but also more complex systems, like the NetOnNet website or an entire self-service store interior.¹ Finally, we need to recognize the presence of hybrid arrangements. If we examine closely someone (or something) that performs a particular marketing practice, we discover that we are dealing with a materially heterogeneous collective made up of both human and non-human components. To take a simple example, it is the housewife plus the basket that interacts with the self-service store (which is made up of the retailer, the staff, the packaged goods and the store interior).

Both specialists and generalists

Some of those performing marketing show up in several of the vignettes above, e.g. Hakonbolaget, NetOnNet, and Elgiganten, whereas others figure only in one scene and perform a very particular marketing practice, e.g. the pre-printed order lists and the researcher in economics. In the former group we find actors who appear to possess a broad range of capabilities, and who seem to be relatively more complex in their make-up. That is, they seem to be made up of a number of different versions, or contain a number of possible actor configurations. In the latter group, we find two types of actors. First, there are actors who are primarily engaged in other projects, and hence only perform marketing “on the side”, like the researchers engaged by Hakonbolaget and NetOnNet. Second, there are actors who appear to be highly specialized and more or less made to measure to engage in a particular marketing practice, such as the computer stations found in the warehouse shop and the pre-printed order lists distributed by the Hakon retailers. There are also examples of how actors became more specialized or more generalized. This was central in the transformation to self-service, where those who performed customer service were becoming more specialised while the customers acquired new capacities that made them more generalized. Another example is the NetOnNet web shop. It was initially specialized in displaying products and collecting customer orders from a small number of customers, but subsequently it was afforded a broader range of capabilities, such as comparing products, taking membership registrations or assisting warehouse shop visitors in finding products in the warehouse.

Different purposes

A final observation that we make is that those engaging in marketing practice display considerable variation in terms of what they seek to achieve. Some engage in overt attempts to re-shape or modify the market through the practices they engage in. One of the more obvious examples of this is Hakonbolaget’s effort to influence their associated retailers to convert to self-service. Others seem to have no such ambitions, but may nonetheless contribute to enact important changes. One example of this is the customers who refused to

¹ As observed by Latour and others, a corresponding case can be made for regression. Any entity that appears as one can decompose into several parts, and usually does so, if it fails to perform as expected (Latour, 1994; Callon and Law, 1995; Andersson et al., 2008).

wait for their goods to be delivered by NetOnNet, in this way providing the initial impetus for the warehouse stores. We also saw examples of different actors participating in the same kind of activities and different activities potentially leading to the same outcomes. In the Hakonbolaget case, politicians, trade unions, academic experts, manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers were involved in the same debate but for different purposes. Another example is how NetOnNet and consumer electronics customers had different purposes for challenging the price guarantees (get rid of them or make money on them), while both had the effect of changing the conditions of the guarantee.

Concluding remarks

As we stated in our discussion of the theoretical starting points for this inquiry, any attempt to provide an answer to the question “who is performing marketing”, critically depends on how you define marketing. We want to start by addressing whether or not the admittedly broad conception of marketing implied by the model of markets as constituted by practice is able to capture relevant marketing activities. We will do this by relating the empirical vignettes presented above to a few well-known marketing concepts. First, several of the vignettes concerned *pricing*, which is a classic issue in marketing. But while the topic was familiar, it was dealt with in ways that are far from typical in the marketing literature. Second, at least two vignettes were directly linked to the idea of *targeting*, i.e. the introduction of pre-printed order-lists (E1) and the establishment of warehouse shops (E2). Third, not surprisingly, different *promotion* activities figured in the vignettes (e.g. advertising and PR). However, there were considerable variation in the purposes of promotion, from consummating individual exchanges to shaping norms (e.g. how prices should be compared) and representing the market (mail order and e-commerce are both distance selling). Fourth, there were many examples of practices involved in *market analysis*; e.g. defining the market, measuring market size and evaluating the competition. It involved companies, trade associations, magazines, statistical agencies. Fifth, there were also examples of what some would call *internal marketing*, e.g. Hakonbolaget promoting self-service to associated retailers. Sixth, different practices and practitioners were involved in the *distribution* and physical handling of goods: e.g. distribution companies or the customers picking-up the goods at the dock. Seventh, there were a broad variety of practitioners involved in *sales* activities, whether as personal selling or self-service: baskets, retail clerk, customer and the Hakon helper. Finally, we could also discern gleams of other well known marketing concepts, such as *testimonials* (e.g. customers giving voice to the benefits of self service) and *comparative advertising* (NetOnNet and Elgiganten comparing prices also involving the HUI and the Market Court). In all, we find that the definition of marketing implied in conceptualizing markets as constituted by interlinked normalizing, representational and exchange practices indeed captures central and familiar marketing themes.

Our analysis of the empirical vignettes shows that important marketing activities were carried out by a multitude of actors, including professionals and amateurs, individuals and collectives, humans and non-humans, specialists and generalists. In academic debates about the present and future status of marketing and the need for reform, it has been suggested that marketing needs to become a “true” profession (e.g. Sheth & Sisodia, 2005). Taking our observed heterogeneity of marketing practices and practitioners into account we question both the prospects and merits of such a development. Rather, we would argue that retaining a broad understanding of marketing practice and practitioners, not restricted to the actions of professional marketers, is an important means of avoiding “marketer myopia” (Sheth & Sisodia, 2005:10). Indeed we argue that the ever-present quest for the one definition of

marketing's essence, however broadly defined, is misdirected. Our concern is similar to that expressed by Brown (2007) in his brilliant commentary on the discussions about the service-dominant logic for marketing. Any suggestion that there has been, is, or will be one dominant logic or correct definition of marketing, misses out on a central characteristic of social processes from which marketing is unlikely to escape: their multiplicity (confer Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006). Preserving a sensitivity to diversity and to efforts seeking to limit or restrict that diversity – of which there are many – seems a more worthwhile endeavour than contributing to the modern project of constructing marketing as an immutable mobile ready to accompany imperialistic marketers as they “boldly go where no man has gone before”.

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