



Commentary: misplaced marketing – when consumers or society are not satisfied

Herbert Rotfeld

Professor of Marketing, Auburn University, Alabama, USA

Long-lasting wave of US consumer activism

Keywords Consumer marketing, Customer satisfaction, Marketing concept, Marketing theory

When the biggest and long-lasting wave of US consumer activism was taking off 30 years ago, many business educators and practitioners did not understand how it had ramifications for their work. Marketing experts were heard to say, “The marketing concept says that we should ‘satisfy consumer needs’, so this isn’t really a problem for us”.

Unfortunately, such a view presumes that all firms follow the modern marketing orientation. Even if they all did, it would not necessarily also be true that many firms satisfying consumer needs would also serve the interests of society at large. And even if they did, when some firms do a good job of following the marketing concept to satisfy consumer needs, many of business’ critics wish that the marketers were not involved.

Now that consumer protection laws and advocacy groups influence business activities around the world, marketing is criticized by almost everyone, from social critics to government lawmakers to political pundits. Even at social gatherings, marketing people find the introductions followed by all sorts of virulent complaints as if all problems were their personal fault. Audience manipulation, offensive products and cultural destruction are among the social ills often laid at the feet of the marketing business. These criticisms might be voiced by people with limited knowledge or understanding of marketing theory and practice, but they also can be examples of misplaced marketing.

Marketing concept

It is part of the business’ conventional wisdom that while marketing was just selling many years ago, today, under the modern marketing concept, it combines all facets of the product, price, distribution and communications in order to satisfy consumer needs and wants. It is the “smaller” or unsuccessful firms that might still just look at marketing in terms of selling and all “*successful*” firms practise the marketing concept, or so many think. Yet there exist many examples of products or services that do not follow the “marketing concept”, but instead, provide features in terms of what designers or engineers say they can produce. For them, marketing remains just selling. Marketing gets “misplaced” because the planners or managers do not ask how the product or service could meet consumer needs.

Such examples are not hard to find. Everyone has looked for a product with certain features and “settled” for something short of what they want. It is not uncommon to hear the store manager state he or she “knows” the customers, so certain products are never stocked. “They are not interested in that kind of thing”, the inquiring customer is told, though the manager never tried stocking it and no one ever sought other opinions.

Of course, a product is more than the sum of its physical features and a good sales job changes the product itself. And maybe the people who cannot find exactly what they want are just out of step with the rest of the marketplace. There might not be enough of them to be considered a viable target market segment – maybe virtually all potential purchasers want the unavoidable

Consideration of consumers in other nations

features of, for example, stereos with AM radios, portable digital radios with clocks, wrist-watches with several alarms and minivans that fill every inch of space with seats.

Misplaced marketing does not mean a business will fail, especially if all competitors engage in the same activities, but it can make for some unusual perspectives toward consumers.

US companies often send products to other countries with features designed for satisfying customers in the domestic market without consideration of special concerns of consumers in other nations, as if what satisfies consumers in the USA provide the same values around the globe. Many features are added to a product mix because an engineer thought it would be simple and inexpensive to do, not because anyone thought it made the product more desirable for consumers. Expensive electronic items often have simple parts like batteries or lights that are expected to die but are nigh impossible to replace; service hotlines are often not so hot. Customers test doors and walk away, while employees mill about inside the store waiting for the clock to chime on the hour for the posted opening time.

In addition, satisfying consumer needs might be contrary to those of the greater society. Over two decades ago when the first oil shortages forced car companies to offer more efficient products, the solution was to produce smaller and lighter vehicles. But one US company tried to delay, offering a downsized version of its luxury car line but strongly promoting the still available "original" full-sized gas-guzzling version. The affluent consumers who cared not about rising gas costs might have been served, but not the social goal of oil conservation.

The most vexing problem

Yet the most vexing problem for marketing people comes from those instances that marketing is accused by pundits, activists and public policy makers of being misplaced when it is properly used and applied. Politicians, educators, movie or music producers, cigarette companies, distillers, gun companies, pornographers or others often do a good job of following the dictates of thorough strategic marketing, while many people might wish that, at least for them, marketing was not used.

Instead of marketing, adapting themselves to a marketable image, politicians should be leaders, using marketing theory and practice to, at most, sell their ideas to the public. Schools need to attract students but they still should work to retain academic integrity. Cultural artifacts should grow from the populace, not be designed as per a marketing strategy, or so we are often told. In addition, to critics of the US marketplace, certain products should not be efficiently and profitably delivered to "satisfy consumer needs", no company should maximize its profits with these products, and *never* should these products even be imagined to be marketed with children as a target segment.

Of course, even if critics believe that marketing is misplaced it does not necessarily mean it should be banned, but it could be a source of "problems" (or, at least, a basis for criticisms of various aspects of marketing practice).

And therein lies the interest from the activities under the term I have coined of "misplaced marketing", be it misplaced because it is misapplied, misused, abused, or simply the source of social criticisms. These are not all marketing mistakes, though it is easy to see where products such as the failed Apple Newton misplaced marketing while the successful Palm Pilot did not. But the questions it raises can also include apparent successes, so misplaced marketing gets to the heart of seeing what marketing is, is not, and what it can be.