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# Misplaced marketing

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## Mistaking a marketing perspective for ethical analysis: when consumers can't know that they should want

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to point out the distinction between needs which marketing aims to satisfy, and the consumers' true needs for their own health and safety. While marketing professionals might cite consumer satisfaction as serving consumers, they are mistaking marketing for morality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Gives reference to some articles of recent research literature on consumers in the marketplace, with emphasis on the consumers' not-uncommon inability to know what they should need or want.

**Findings** – What satisfies or interests segments of consumers is not the same as understanding the consumers' interests.

**Originality/value** – Points out an important distinction that marketing professionals wish to ignore. What is in consumers' best interests, the proper or ethical decision, might not be what most consumers perceive as their needs. Sometimes, even if something is in the consumers' best interests, there does not exist a segment that knows it should be needed.

**Keywords** Ethics, Customer satisfaction, Consumers

**Paper type** Viewpoint

In Gene Roddenberry's vision of a future society shown in the *Star Trek* television series and movies, the peaceful exploring humans sometimes confronted the villainous Ferengi, a society of marketing-term-spouting avarice-driven businessmen traveling through space searching for profit by any means necessary. This mirrors many other forms of the modern USA popular culture in which business profits provide the motive for all sorts of murder and mayhem. Even contemporary comic book versions of *Superman* altered his arch-foe Lex Luthor from an insane scientist seeking world domination to a brilliant businessman, a *de facto* graduate of the Ferengi School of Business Ethics who does not feel properly appreciated for his success.

As business people become the cultural villain, the marketing professional's defense to these critics – aside from knee-jerk assertions of "I'm not like that" – hides behind the shield of marketing language that says profits depend on the satisfaction of consumer needs or wants. Unfortunately, this language can be misleading. Marketing trade associations and college textbooks often imply that by satisfying consumer needs and wants, "real" non-deceptive marketing is above reproach and positive; marketing

practitioners and educators often say, "Because we are satisfying consumers, ethical questions are not a problem for us."

Where the fictional Ferengi made no apologies for being dishonest, real marketing efforts are also criticized when honest firms maximize profits from products that groups of non-customers would like to make illegal (if they could). Cigarettes, pornography or guns are legal, but the marketing explanation of "providing a service that people want" unfortunately sounds the same as a drug dealer or the Prohibition-era gangster, Al Capone. In the *Godfather* movie and book, aside from the murders and offers that cannot be refused, the fictional Vito Corleone considered himself the honorable head of a family business that served consumer needs for gambling or paid sex.

Yet even honest marketing for everyday products is targeted by social critics as the alleged cause for all sorts of social ills. Of course, marketing cannot create needs or manipulate consumers, but it is too simplistic to ignore these critics asserting their concerns as resulting from ignorance or paranoia.

Audiences laugh when a popular television comedy father tries to eat all sorts of unhealthy foods while chastised by his wife of children. And yet in reality, many people are now grossly overweight, they eat unhealthy foods and they want to believe that simply popping a pill can alter their anatomy. Years ago, a doctor told my friend's father to follow a special diet or die; when he frequently cheated on the directions, the doctor's warning held true within a year. Marketing alone does not create these problems, since the unhealthy choices taste good. Marketing did not create the junk-food-eating

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couch slug. But even when better decisions are desired, consumers might not realize what they are.

The greater and unasked ethical issue is that many people cannot tell what they should want, such that marketing segmentation decisions aimed at maximum profit often sell undesirable options to the consumers' detriment.

In some cases, the regulatory presumptions of how consumers use information results in consumers not having the right information (e.g. France and Bone, 2005). But to depend on regulations or laws rests on the error of depending on the government nanny state for ethical guidance. Legal directives do not always provide the most ethical decisions. Nor would it be enough to assert that the more socially desirable options did not sell in the past, since that marketplace failure could be caused by consumer misunderstandings, confusions or limits to education.

From the earliest efforts at consumer protection over a century ago, many efforts focused on consumer education, not business regulation. Today, as the choices are more confusing, business' ethical options go beyond selling. Providing an aid to marketplace education can satisfy consumers by helping them know what they should need. Some consumers might not care to make a better choice, yet the additional information could better serve other customers who do.

Young people might say they do not want to overreact, yet they are unable to judge what is a proper or healthy serving portion (e.g. Bryant and Dundes, 2005). Consumers tend to misunderstand the health value or risks in restaurant meals, yet they can adjust decisions when information is provided on menus (e.g. Burton and Creyer, 2004). Nutrient content, fat, trans fat and other health terms provide a plethora of perpetual sources of consumer confusion, though market research can easily go beyond looking for what would be a best seller to ascertain how to work with existing customer knowledge, helping consumers that do care about their health to make better decisions (e.g. Kemp *et al.*, 2007; Kozup *et al.*, 2006).

Another area of consumer confusion involves financial planning and handling money as consumer options have grown, retirement decisions are personal instead of managed by employers, and many consumers simply misunderstand the available information (e.g. Lee and Cho, 2005). Greater financial literacy would help people handle money matters, (e.g. Fox *et al.*, 2005), and instead of just depending on regulatory guides, knowledge of consumers' own information or understanding could make for ethical business decisions that assist consumers instead of serving their ignorance (e.g. Perry and Morris, 2005).

One of my graduate school teachers liked to point out the inherent limitation to consumer information as a solution for consumers faced with making the right decisions on investments, medicine, insurance, retirement plans or meals. I often quote former US Federal Trade Commissioner Mary

Gardiner Jones who told us that "I don't want to be required to be my own expert pharmacist, mechanic, accountant or doctor." She was a lawyer by education and that, she said, was difficult enough. Yet decades later, the world is more confusing, with choices more numerous, and the dangers of errors much greater.

Many research articles in marketing journals that purport to address ethical concerns do little beyond conducting a survey asking consumers their opinions of certain practices. Too often, in marketing textbooks or even research on marketing ethics, the consumers' happiness stands as evidence for claims that honest marketing efforts are inherently ethical. Yet the greater societal need requires going beyond giving consumers what they like, helping more people understand what they really should want.

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