
Herbert Jack Rotfeld

The Textbook Effect: Conventional Wisdom, Myth, and Error in Marketing

Textbooks and Research Journals

Conventional wisdom holds that marketing textbooks are based on established marketing concepts. Readers assume that the contents of these books reliably summarize research findings to provide foundational information for students. In what is assumed to be a virtuous and reciprocal relationship, knowledge is generated in research, published in journal articles, and then collected and summarized in textbooks. The process sometimes is reversed when journal articles appeal to textbooks for authority. However, the relationship between texts and research is not always virtuous. For example, in their study of marketing texts, Armstrong and Schultz (1993) collected 566 normative statements about pricing, communications, and product or distribution decisions that were not supported by empirical evidence. Nine of the statements were judged to be "nearly correct" when their wording was reversed!

In this review, I explore the ambivalent and often perverse relationship between knowledge generating (research) and knowledge disseminating (textbooks) activities in a process I call the "textbook effect." The textbook effect refers to (1) the embedding of old, defunct, unsubstantiated theories in textbooks and (2) the effect such embedding has on practice and research. Although my point is a general one, for the sake of illustration I take up a particular case of the impact of the textbook effect on the body of research referred to as "fear appeals."

The Case of Fear Appeals

Fear appeals have become a mainstay of the marketing literature. After many decades of research, it is interesting to

Herbert Jack Rotfeld is Professor of Marketing, Auburn University.

review how the textbooks report fear appeals issues and how these reports relate to what research is published in refereed journals.

Twenty-three general marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior textbooks, published in the last three years and having some coverage of fear appeals, were selected for review. Although the books varied in how much they said, they varied little in the substance of their reports (see Table 1). Few reported actual research on what works and why. Of those that did cite research, all reported a theory that has never been supported in the literature.

Most of the texts simply gave narrative descriptions or examples of types of threats that can be used to appeal to consumer fears. Some listed fear as a type of appeal, others cited studies showing the growing use of fear appeals, and a few referenced articles that list how readily fear appeals are used in certain areas. A handful, besides giving examples, also discussed the difference between social and physical fears.

Although the topic is called "fear appeals," more appropriately it should be called "appeals to audience fears." Textbooks do not so much discuss consumer fears as present descriptions and examples of types of threats that can be used in marketing communications. Threats are literal content that illustrate undesirable consequences from certain behaviors, such as car damage, injury, or death from unsafe driving or bad breath, illness, or cancer from cigarette smoking. Fear is a consumer's possible emotional response to threats. A threat is an appeal to fear, a communication stimulus that *attempts* to evoke a fear response by showing some type of outcome that the audience might want to avoid. Despite this important distinction, the textbooks tend to use the terms fear and threat interchangeably, discussing a type of threat as the "amount of fear" in a message.

Only five of the textbooks had detailed discussions about effects or effectiveness of appeals to fear. All five said the relationship between the amount of fear and persuasion is curvilinear (a few even showed a picture of the near-classic inverted-U). Under this view, increases in audience fear have an optimal level for persuasion, after which there is a drop-off in the likelihood that the audience will respond in the desired fashion. Two of these five authors also present a history of the evolution of fear appeal thought.

The problem with this dependence on the inverted-U hypothesis is that refereed published reviews of the literature and a meta-analysis of data have all shown that, despite the idiosyncratic nature of fear arousal responses to threats and the ad hoc nature of some research definitions and execu-

tions of fear appeals, the relationship between the emotional response of fear arousal and persuasion is not curvilinear but monotonic and positive. In general, the greater the actual fear engendered by a communication, the greater is the persuasion (Boster and Mongeau 1984; Rotfeld 1988; Sutton 1982, 1992).

A meta-analysis of 35 published studies on a wide range of topics, subjects, and communications vehicles concluded that "increases in fear are *consistently* associated with increases in acceptance [of the recommended action]" (Sutton 1982, p. 323). Some old psychobiology studies suggest that large amounts of subject fear have a negative impact if and

TABLE 1
A Guttman Scale of Textbooks' Coverage of Fear Appeals

	Description	Examples	Social Versus Physical	U-Shaped Response	Evolution
Batra, Myers, and Aaker (1995), <i>Advertising Management</i> , 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Bearden, Ingram, and LaForge (1995), <i>Marketing: Principles and Perspectives</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X			
Bovee, Houston, and Thill (1995), <i>Marketing</i> , 2d ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.	X	X			
Bovee, Thill, Dovel, and Wood (1995), <i>Advertising Excellence</i> , 1st ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.	X	X			
Evans and Berman (1995), <i>Principles of Marketing</i> , 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Hoyer and MacInnis (1997), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 1st ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.	X	X			
Keegan, Moriarty, and Duncan (1995), <i>Marketing</i> , 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Kotler and Armstrong (1996), <i>Marketing: An Introduction</i> , 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (1996), <i>Marketing</i> , 3d ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X			
Mowen and Minor (1997), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Nickels and Wood (1997), <i>Marketing: Relationships, Quality, Value</i> , 1st ed. New York: Worth Publishers.	X	X			
Siegel, Carolyn F. (1996), <i>Marketing: Foundations and Applications</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X			
Solomon and Stuart (1997), <i>Marketing: Real People, Real Choices</i> , 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Vanden Bergh and Katz (1999), <i>Advertising Principles</i> . Chicago: NTC Business Books.	X	X			
Burnett and Moriarty (1998), <i>Introduction to Marketing Communications</i> , 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X	X		
Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (1998), <i>Marketing</i> , 4th ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (1998), <i>Advertising</i> , 1st ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
Semenik and Bamossy (1995), <i>Principles of Marketing: A Global Perspective</i> , 2d ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
Belch and Belch (1998), <i>Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective</i> , 4th ed. Boston: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X	X	X	
Shimp, Terence A. (1997), <i>Advertising, Promotion, and Supplemental Aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications</i> , 4th ed. Orlando, FL: The Dryden Press.	X	X	X	X	
Solomon, Michael R. (1996), <i>Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having, and Being</i> , 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X	X	X	
Berkman, Lindquist, and Sirgy (1996), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: NTC Business Books.	X	X	X	X	X
Tellis, Gerard J. (1998), <i>Advertising and Sales Promotion Strategy</i> , 1st ed. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.	X	X	X	X	X

Notes: description = gave description of fear appeals, examples = gave examples of fear appeals, social versus physical = discussed social versus physical fears, U-shaped response = discussed U-shaped response, evolution = covered evolution of fear appeal thought.

only if the person's fear is so strong as to verge on the neurotic (e.g., Janis 1968; Leventhal 1967). However, there is a dearth of evidence that mass communications appeals can engender neurotic emotional responses, and no one has asserted that neurotic consumer behavior should be a strong focus of future advertising research or marketing strategy. Surprisingly, the discussion of how people resist strong fear messages and the repetition of the various curvilinear hypotheses remain quite common in marketing textbooks.

In those rare instances in which textbook authors note that the inverted-U has not stood up under scrutiny, they tend to explain that it still might be true despite problems with previous research findings. For example, one book, which cites a strong review of the literature that clearly illustrates how and why the inverted-U has failed to be supported by research data, then asserts a seemingly intuitive explanation by saying that the optimal level of fear might depend on the degree of relevance of a topic for the audience, somehow missing the point that topic relevance is an integral part of audience fear. If a subject is not relevant for an audience, they will not fear it.

How the textbooks locked onto this old and erroneous view of fear appeals goes back almost 50 years to the work of Janis and Feshbach (1953, 1954). In their studies, the appeals the researchers designated as weaker were more effective in persuading high school students to adopt the recommended tooth care procedures. In an almost offhand comment that attempted to explain the results, the authors speculated that an optimal level of fear for persuasion might exist. Two decades later, Duke's (1967) critique of Janis and Feshbach's studies complained that their findings had become overgeneralized in the literature. Although Janis and Feshbach dropped all discussion of the elusive optimal level of fear from later theoretical presentations, their original speculation was picked up in marketing textbooks.

Textbooks in any field can lock in old thinking to the detriment of future research. As Nobel Prize-winning economist George Stigler (1985, p. 112) observed, "Once an idea is widely accepted, it is guaranteed a measure of immortality." Similarly, naturalist Stephen J. Gould (1985, p. 384) has repeatedly pointed out how "[f]acts achieve an almost immortal status once they pass from primary documentation into secondary sources, ... errors are copied from generation to generation and seem to gain support by sheer repetition. No one goes back to discover the fragility of original arguments." Almost all basic sociology texts state that Margaret Mead found that the Tchambuli of New Guinea reversed sex roles, despite her repeated assertion from the time she published her work on the Tchambuli in 1935 until her death that she never made such a claim. In 1979, Goldberg (as reported in Goldberg 1996) pointed out this persistent error in a letter published in *Contemporary Sociology*, a publication of the American Sociological Association and read by virtually everyone publishing in mainstream sociology, only to review textbooks a decade later and find that the letter had no effect whatsoever.

In the same way, once the concept of an optimal level of fear for persuasion found its way into textbooks, many marketing researchers have repeated it and sought to validate it,

explain it, or simply use it as a starting point for their work (e.g., Keller and Block 1996; Strong and Dubas 1993).

Typically, research in marketing journals starts in one of two ways. On the one hand, it is claimed that some unknown optimal level of fear exists to maximize persuasion power. On the other hand, after dutifully listing a handful of studies, the conclusion is that prior research data are "mixed." In both cases, discussion locks onto speculation that an optimal level of fear for persuasion might exist. Despite the failure of every thorough literature review to show empirical support for the theory, the optimal level of fear concept seems to have been elevated to the position of disciplinary dogma—repeated, discussed, tested, and/or debunked as if it remains the prevailing successful theoretical explanation. One would think that if the data are repeatedly mixed after 45 years of research, the theory would be discarded as unsupported. Many studies look for ways to explain or support a theory that has never been supported in the first place. This is not altogether unlike the researchers who seek evidence of Bigfoot based on a priori conclusions that he exists (see Gould 1996).

Given the staying power of "levels of fear" and the inverted-U in marketing journals, the consistent repetition of this view in textbooks is not altogether surprising. Conversely, it could well have been the textbooks that led to the common view in journals. Which came first is not clear, but the current textbook presentations do not provide reviews of contemporary research literature. Their discussions often depend on articles written when Richard Nixon was president.

One study still frequently cited in textbooks (Ray and Wilkie 1970) attempts to defend and explain the inverted-U in the face of equivocal data. The article speculates that studies that found "high fear" most persuasive might have used communications that were equivalent in scare content to the "mild fear" messages found most persuasive in other studies. Similarly, researchers who found the strongest response to what they labeled high fear did not use scary enough material to realize that subjects would be less persuaded at higher fear levels. Back when this article was written, research in the area was in its infancy. The first critiques of the curvilinear theories had just started to come out in psychology journals (e.g., Higbee 1969), and marketing researchers were attempting to reconcile confusing and conflicting data (e.g., Spence and Moinpour 1972; Sternthal and Craig 1974; Wheatley 1971). However, this does not explain why these articles are still the theoretical linchpins of textbooks published in the past few years. Perhaps the fact that they were originally published in the still-prestigious *Journal of Marketing* or *Journal of Consumer Research* explains something.

But the plot thickens further. Some articles are cited by the textbooks as concluding things they did not say. For example, they referenced an article as supporting a curvilinear relationship, even though that article had a specific subhead stating "The Myth of the Inverted-U" (Rotfeld 1988). To a certain extent perhaps, the books simply repeat one another: New studies are patched into old discussions; new findings or theories are presented in a context of how they fit with prior and accepted textbook summaries. I certainly do not

want to single out specific textbooks for this misuse, because the practice is far from uncommon. However, one conclusion could be that the textbook writers' goals are not to review research accurately but to maximize the number of marketing faculty members who have at least one article listed in the references (Rotfeld 1999).

Explaining the Textbook Effect

The dogmatic retention of unsupported and outdated theories in textbooks, as well as the implicit endorsement and propagation of these in journal articles, is a problem. Textbooks seem to institutionalize theoretical approaches from previous years. One result of this is that many researchers also lock into the unsupported views and defend theories that have failed to establish any explanatory utility.

Yet textbook authors are not wholly to blame for the textbook effect. No textbook author or team I know of claims to be expert in all the areas general books are required to cover. As a potential remedy for this situation, most publishers send manuscript chapters out to reviewers for comments and corrections. Unfortunately, reviewers tend to be selected as possible major adopters, not because they are experts on the topics. Because of this process, authors wish to repeat the conventional wisdom.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how authors use and/or avoid the research literature. Consistent with Armstrong and Schultz's (1993) findings that the actual use of research seems limited, a general point is usually made, and a research article or two is cited to demonstrate how the issue under discussion is applied. General statements spring from single examples, and then the author moves on to another subject. In most cases, the cited research articles are not even related to the broader discussion. If actual research is used, it is often based on errors, myths, or attempts to defend the conventional wisdom.

The basic problem remains. Textbooks have institutionalized a theoretical approach from the earliest years of a field, and probably as a partial result, researchers also have locked into a pattern of trying to explain or support a perspective that has repeatedly been discredited. In many fields, textbooks take on an aura and power not unlike that of sacred texts. The mere presence of a collection of textbooks can provide legitimacy to a discipline or a specialized subfield (Ferrell 1998), even when those basic texts fail to be the compilations of journal research that most of us believe they should be. Some faculty members might try to criticize textbooks or not use them at all, but their numbers are few and they often report widespread student complaints of the practice.

Perhaps, at least in the case of fear appeals, the errors are about to be corrected. In the new fourth edition of his consumer behavior text published in fall 1998 (after the books for this study were gathered), Solomon (1999) cites recent journal articles and states,

Some of the research on fear appeals may be confusing a threat (the literal content of a message, such as saying "engage in safe sex or die") with fear (an emotional response to the message)... [G]reater fear does result in greater persuasion—but not all threats are equally effective because

different people will respond differently to the same threat. Therefore, the strongest threats are not always the most persuasive because they may not have the desired impact on the perceiver.

This change is encouraging! However, it is a single textbook and a single topic.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, J. Scott and Randall Schultz (1993), "Principles Involving Marketing Policies: An Empirical Assessment," *Marketing Letters*, 4 (3), 253-65.
- Boster, Franklin J. and Paul Mongeau (1984), "Fear-Arousing Persuasive Messages," in *Communications Yearbook 8*, Robert N. Bostrom, ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 330-75.
- Duke, J.D. (1967), "Critique of the Janis and Feshbach Study," *Journal of Social Psychology*, 72 (July), 71-80.
- Ferrell, O.C. (1998), "The History of Marketing Principles Textbooks," paper distributed and presented at Academy of Marketing Science annual conference, Norfolk, VA (May 28-30).
- Goldberg, Steven (1996), "The Erosion of the Social Sciences," in *Dumbing Down: Essays in the Strip Mining of American Culture*, Katherine Washburn and John F. Thornton, eds. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 97-114.
- Gould, Stephen Jay (1985), *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- (1996), *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Higbee, K.L. (1969), "Fifteen Years of Fear Arousal: Research on Threat Appeals: 1953-1968," *Psychological Bulletin*, 72 (6), 426-44.
- Janis, Irving L. (1968), "When Fear Is Healthy," *Psychology Today*, 1 (April), 46-48, 60, 61.
- and S. Feshbach (1953), "Effects of Fear-Arousing Communications," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 48 (January), 78-92.
- and ——— (1954), "Personality Differences Associated with Responsiveness to Fear-Arousing Communications," *Journal of Personality*, 23 (December), 154-66.
- Keller, Punam Anand and Lauren Goldberg Block (1996), "Increasing the Persuasiveness of Fear Appeals: The Effect of Arousal and Elaboration," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (March), 448-59.
- Leventhal, Howard (1967), "Fear—For Your Health," *Psychology Today*, 1 (September), 54-58.
- Ray, Michael L. and William L. Wilkie (1970), "Fear: The Potential of an Appeal Neglected by Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 32 (January), 54-62.
- Rotfeld, Herbert J. (1988), "Fear Appeals and Persuasion: Assumptions and Errors in Advertising Research," *Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 11 (1), 21-40.
- (1999), "The ICOM Offense," *Marketing Educator*, 18 (Winter), 6.
- Solomon, Michael R. (1999), *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having, Being*, 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Spence, H. and R. Moinpour (1972), "Fear Appeals in Marketing: A Social Perspective," *Journal of Marketing*, 36 (July), 39-43.
- Sternthal, Brian and C. Samuel Craig (1974), "Fear Appeals Revisited and Revised," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1 (November), 22-34.
- Stigler, George J. (1985), *Memoirs of an Unregulated Economist*. New York: Basic Books.
- Strong, James T. and Khalid M. Dubas (1993), "The Optimal Level of Fear Arousal in Advertising: An Empirical Study," *Journal of Current Issues of Research in Advertising*, 15 (Fall), 93-99.
- Sutton, Stephen R. (1982), "Fear-Arousing Communications: A Critical Examination of Theory and Research," in *Social Psy-*

chology and Behavioral Medicine, J. Richard Eiser, ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 303-37.

- (1992), "Shock Tactics and the Myth of the Inverted U," *British Journal of Addiction*, 87 (April), 517-19.
- Wheatley, John J. (1971), "Marketing and the Use of Fear or Anxiety Arousing Appeals," *Journal of Marketing*, 35 (April), 62-64.
-