

The pragmatic importance of theory for marketing practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explain that theories provide an important tool for practitioners in guiding decisions by explaining and predicting consumer decision making when new specific research data might be unavailable. This is true despite the problems caused by some academic journal articles' use and abuse of theory development. The argument for this crucial role of theory in marketing practice explains reasons why many practitioners dislike academic research and related theory development, as well as points out where practitioners' criticisms are valid.

Design/methodology/approach – Delineation of problems in journal articles and some research notes the overall value of work for marketing practice and (indirectly) points out the important value of practitioner-focused research publications.

Findings – While marketing practitioners are wrong to condemn all theory development as useless, too often in too many ways, researchers and journals deserve it. Yet, despite the problems, marketing practice needs marketing theory.

Originality/value – This paper points out an ongoing common myopia of marketing practice, whereby practitioners miss out on the value of theory development.

Keywords Theory, Marketing education, Practitioner decision making, Pragmatic prediction

Paper type Viewpoint

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Marketing journals have two basic requirements for published research articles in that they are expected to:

- begin by stating the theoretical context for the study reported; and
- conclude by indicating how the research results from testing the theory provide implications for marketing practice.

Yet, often because of the former, many practitioners denigrate the latter, and they are not alone. Even some marketing educators with extensive professional experience also dislike journal requirements that their data should contribute to theory development because they would rather only gather data on some topic and state what they found. As they misunderstand the meaning of the theories, marketing professionals often express disdain for the research published in academic journals that they consider pedantic, impossible to read and irrelevant to business reality.

Admittedly, the "impossible-to-read" complaint is valid and part of the problem. Too often, alien creatures on any science fiction television program speak clearer than presentations at academic conferences. In the tortured jargon-laden language of the academic world, many words are misused, some words merely confuse and other terms the writers might make up. To

be incomprehensible often seems to be the route to academic success (as assessed in management and marketing journals, starting with [Armstrong, 1980](#)). So, despite a research article's pragmatic implications or the value of marketing science for business decisions, journal language composed with kinship to sorcery incantations discourages communications with practitioners.

However, the real problem is more basic, with practitioners' antagonism to published articles verging on primal. Their complaints about marketing theory are readily summarized by a series of statements that are repeated so often in one form or another that virtually every author of journal articles has heard: "I don't know of one product that was ever moved out of the store by an academic theory", "I only care about what works, not useless theories" or, in advertising, "No theory helps me write advertising copy or negotiate the purchase of television time".

Of course, for every business professional who defines the work in reference to short-run, narrow decisions with related fast outcomes, theory can seem to be irrelevant. However, these critics are wrong. If they have had continued success with their myopic perspective, it would be by either luck or, in rare cases, the genetic intuition of the late Steve Jobs, who possessed an unerring sense of what innovative changes would appeal to consumers. The core problem derives from not understanding what a theory is, what it provides and its importance for decision making.

To be pragmatic, those who ignore established theory are doomed to make bad decisions.

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What is a theory

The definition of a theory holds the key to its importance for decision making.

Admittedly, even some academic authors could not directly state what is a theory. Going through the contributions found in recent books of readings on marketing theory reveals many established experts on a variety of topic areas of theory development seemed straining to state a definition. They quoted from dictionaries, cited what other marketing scholars say about theories or merely asserted that a theory is whatever work they describe in their chapter, thereby conflating a survey of research results as a theory. Their difficulty is not unexpected, as it is a task that those working in the social sciences are rarely forced to encounter. In the world of academic researchers, it is presumed that everyone just knows. After years of their own research, it envelopes their thinking. As the noted adman of the mid-twentieth century Howard Luck Gossage is frequently noted as having said, “We don’t know who discovered water, but we know it wasn’t a fish” (Gossage 1987).

The non-practitioner readers will forgive me a moment of explaining the basics. In chemistry, biology or any social science such as marketing, a theory has three basic requirements in that it must:

- 1 explain existing data;
- 2 based on that explanation make predictions of future events; and
- 3 by virtue of those predictions, the theory must be falsifiable, meaning that the predictions can be tested, thereby making the theory itself open to being proven false even if it is not false.

Theories predict. What they predict, how well they predict or under what conditions the predictions might be wrong provides the basis for the research published in journals. In practice, no decision maker can subject every decision to a research assessment. Not every option can be studied. Maybe, sometimes, in some cases, intuition, experience and gut feelings can make a successful prediction. However, for all the money spent on marketing, it should become intuitively obvious for any insightful practitioners to perceive the value from an established theoretical perspective that indicates whether a plan would work as expected. Therefore, an understanding of relevant theories provides a basis for new decisions, especially when new data are unavailable.

The landmark book that retains its status as an international guide for advertising practice, the late David Ogilvy’s (1963) *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, is seldom recognized as a collection of theoretical conclusions that the business icon drew from his experience in marketing research. It is clean, direct and easy to read, so no one would mistake it for an academic report. No reader would see it stated as a theory. However, the collected rules for writing advertising – as he called them, his tools for advertising success – are based on conclusions from decades of research on how people read, hear or view advertising. They are his testable predictions of what works.

Unfortunately, the marketing educators who are the authors of most of the research articles have only themselves to blame for their critics, many of whom have attempted to read

academic literature or the textbooks where that research is supposedly compiled and reported. The critics even might have taken marketing classes as college students. There is a reason why they neither understand the value of a theory-based research journal article nor know the meaning of a theory with its pragmatic applications in practice. The original problem comes from the misuse or abuse of theories in academic work.

Not a theory

It might help to break the valuable from the meaningless by admitting that some theories are useless, some are not even theories and whole bodies of work exist as interesting academic exercises that are grossly removed from any pragmatic reality of business decisions. More vexing are the often-repeated discussions of what passes for theory in marketing textbooks that are best described by the Yiddish word *narishkeit*, a foolish silliness, or to use a euphemism born of what I reference as a “vulgarectomy”, verbal bovine manure.

For example, every textbook on marketing theories, as well as almost all basic textbooks for university programs in marketing, advertising or mass communications, describes a model of human needs that first appeared in a 1943 psychology journal article titled, “A Theory of Human Motivation”, often reproducing a pyramid-shaped chart illustrating intrinsic human needs as occupying distinct levels (Maslow 1943, 1954). Many instructors’ unquestioning acceptance of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs impels them to be sure it is included on exams, forcing students to memorize its terminology. Today, as it is also referenced in popular culture, it has become one of the most recalled marketing theories for any college graduate, yet perspicacious practitioners cite this as the prime example of the irrelevant silliness of academic theories.

In one textbook for a course devoted to the marketing theories of the field commonly found using the title of “consumer behavior” (Schiffman and Kanuk 2009, pp. 103-104), similar to the textbooks by many other authors, it directly makes the following four statements:

- 1 “The [model] appears to be closely bound to contemporary American culture”. When a citation is provided for this statement, it is from articles in management journals from the 1970s, or, at the latest, more than a quarter century ago (e.g. Hofstede 1984, who also called the model “ethnocentric”).
- 2 “It cannot be tested empirically”.
- 3 “There is no way to measure precisely how satisfied one level of need must be before the next higher need becomes operative”, meaning research would be unable to discern who possesses which of the various needs described.
- 4 “Despite these concerns, the theory is still useful as a framework for developing advertising appeals. It enables marketers to focus their advertising appeals on a need level that is likely to be shared by a large segment of the target audience”.

How thick must someone be to not realize that the first statement negates the basic claim of the model, while the fourth statement contradicts the second and third? Even for

those people whose minds face drowning in the shallow end of the intellectual gene pool, the contradictions are very simple to explain.

If culture bound, the hierarchy does not describe, as the theory claims, innate human needs or drives, plus no one should consider the “contemporary” American culture of 1943, or even 1984, a perspective providing a useful description of consumers in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. At a more basic level, if it cannot be tested, it is not a theory. Despite efforts to claim status as a social science theory, any statement that cannot be tested by observation or experiment cannot be considered either scientific or a theory. The primary pragmatic utility of a theory for audience segmentation decisions would be the ability to make predictions, which the second and third statements above say it cannot provide. If research is unable to tell which people are at a specific level of the model, then the model can neither identify audience segments nor tell if a segment is large enough to be a target.

Inexplicably, despite the obvious self-contradictions and predictive failures, this intuitive descriptive metaphor, one researcher’s ethnocentric perceptions of North American culture in the middle of the last century, has been an important collection of statements students must memorize to pass tests in marketing classes. Similarly, Freudian personality theory retains attention in some marketing classes despite its near-total absence from basic psychology for the reason that Freud’s followers failed to develop a scientific method to judge their work.

So, the question remains why theories such as Maslow’s still appear in marketing textbooks. This is not to criticize any one textbook, as the above example and other non-theories are found in almost all of them. The more important question is whether students, at any level of classes that cover marketing theories, approach the subject with a critical review of the background, history, applications and assessments of how businesses can or cannot actually use those perspectives for making decisions.

The pragmatic use of a theory, any theory, would be its ability to predict what would happen in a given situation where a decision is to be made and new data might not be immediately available. However, this does not appear to be something that most students are ever told.

Zombie theories

Economist Paul Krugman is generally credited in the economic literature with creating the term “zombie ideas” to describe theoretical perspectives that keep shambling on despite having been thoroughly refuted by research. In marketing, compounding the problem of misunderstanding the basic definitions of theories, there is the extended near-immortal life of theories that actually have been repeatedly falsified. In the world of marketing research, theories are never really discarded as false, but at some point become described as having “mixed support”. New papers cite old theories such that, over time, the background collection of theories grows, while the understanding of the phenomenon never seems to move forward.

Part of the problem might be the textbooks themselves. Conventional wisdom holds that business textbooks are based

on established concepts, with an assumption that their contents reliably summarize research findings. In what is assumed to be a positive relationship, knowledge is generated in research, published in journal articles and then collected and summarized in our textbooks. At least, it is supposed to work that way.

Many academic journal articles do cite textbooks for authority. However, in a process referenced as the “textbook effect” (Rotfeld, 2000), it is easy to document the embedding of old, defunct, unsubstantiated theories in marketing textbooks, with a less-than-desirable impact on pragmatic understanding of advertising theory that gets repeated in the academic journal articles.

Persuasion and appeals to audience’s fears provide an often-repeated example of a zombie theory in marketing research. In studies of persuasive communications, an off-hand comment in two studies over six decades ago resulted in most textbooks and many research articles today still listing an “optimal level of fear for persuasion” as a theory explaining consumer responses to public health and safety messages. The original research was an effort to assess the role of fear in human motivation, although marketing publications quickly adopted the results as a test of what type of literal mass media message content would be most persuasive, with the research literature repeatedly failing to report results supporting the prediction. An effort in a 1970 marketing journal to explain the “mixed” support for the original comment – by now elevated to the status of a theory in marketing research – actually made the statement incapable of falsification (Rotfeld, 1988), so it is not a theory. Despite this history, it still appears as an established theory in many academic journals and textbooks (Rotfeld, 2000).

The dogmatic retention of unsupported and outdated theories in textbooks is inexorably linked to the implicit endorsement and propagation of these same zombie theories in journal articles. As a result, many researchers also lock in and defend theories that have failed to establish any explanatory utility. Finally, as a partial result of that, researchers also lock into efforts to tortuously explain or support perspectives that have been repeatedly discredited.

The confusion of misplaced and misapplied theories is compounded by textbooks’ misuse of advertising materials as illustrations. Almost every theory – right, wrong, never supported or weird – is accompanied with an illustration of an advertising example presented as an application of the theory. Yet, the textbooks never reveal what few instructors ever explain, that each illustration is chosen because it looks like it *might* be an application of the theory. Instead, the assessment for selecting each example is merely whether the illustration looks good, whether the copyright holder would give permission to reprint it and if the theory might fit in a weak, sometimes inappropriate face “validity” sort of way. Was that advertisement written because the copywriters had that theory in mind? Did the predicted consumer response ever materialize? The textbook authors probably do not know, and the questions are never asked. As such, these illustrations drive up the costs of textbooks while failing to add any substantive explanatory value for readers on the pragmatic use of theories in practice (Rotfeld, 1998).

The problem for research, or rather, the problem for researchers who learned from the textbooks, is an inability to critically assess existing literature, or to propose new concepts or perspectives. They become focused on the experiment or the test, a focus on statistical significance while missing the pragmatic significance. In the end, they have a problem understanding just what is meant by a theory, which also makes them unable to explain the value of a theory to their students.

Data without theories

A further problem is the unfortunate number of academic writers who consider theory irrelevant for their work, or something to be added to data they already might have gathered following some vague idea that it might reveal something that can be sold as a journal article. When using research to make a business decision, the simple research question could turn on which test commercial is more persuasive. A government agency might want to test nutritional information formats to see which one is most likely to be used with certain types of consumers or which warning label has the strongest impact on young people (e.g. [Sabbane et al., 2009](#)). However, academic research tries to provide broader guidance than the narrow choice of a message tactic with a specific target audience (e.g. [Tangari et al., 2010](#)).

A manuscript that had been revised and resubmitted for a second round of reviews at a respected journal provides an extreme example. The revision involved an extensive rewriting, but while the authors were directed to provide a stronger theoretical context for study, the authors noted that they considered it unnecessary. To explain the omission, they said they were not concerned with theory because “We are behaviorists”, as if that simple statement would excuse data collection for its own sake.

At the most basic level, they misunderstood the appeal of behaviorism for the perspective-originating psychologists. The original term referenced a direction for social science research that, by ignoring all human thought, would allow control and measurement of all experimental variables. Instead of speculating as to what might transpire in people’s minds, research subjects, whether they would be humans or rats, would all be “response organisms”. Only behaviors would be measured in relation to test stimuli, with resulting experiments providing stronger scientific tests of theoretical predictions. In other words, behaviorism was a route to claims of social science being more like the physical sciences such as chemistry. This more directly measurable focus, in turn, allowed for greater use of analysis of experimental results and, therefore, scientific methods for testing theories.

In reality, the self-designated behaviorist authors were atheoretical data pile generators, as they failed to provide context, understanding or reason why anyone should care about their analysis. They might be the rare example where authors actually said this, but in practice, they are not unique.

Over the years, as a journal editor, member of journal editorial boards and reviewer of papers for conferences, I have endured too many research manuscripts in which the citations were more an eclectic list than a review, an ill-conceived effort to reference all articles that might be written on the topic. The papers would list other data findings, maybe even mention a

theory, but never give attention of how the data are explained by the theories. Relevant literature would be listed but not integrated, then ignored in planning the research or interpreting the results. Many times the data in the manuscript appear to have been collected first and the theory-lacking literature review written around it later. Sometimes, after reviewers note additional relevant theory or research that could influence the context or interpretation of the data, these authors would add the citations to their list with a gratuitous, vapid in-body citation, sometimes not even appearing to have read the recommended article they now cite.

In that bygone era when you had to obtain a physical copy of an article to read it, I was unable to find an article from a French-titled journal that appeared in many reference lists on my research topic. After finally tracking down the journal in the closed stacks of the University of Illinois’ main library in Urbana, I found that the paper was in French. All citations to the paper found earlier were actually taking a couple of sentences from an English language abstract printed in the front of the journal; a French-fluent friend pointed out that the abstract was not a translation of any sentences from the paper itself. The authors citing this article apparently never read it beyond the abstract. Or worse, maybe many of the authors just copied the citation from someone else (for additional tales of author illiteracy, see [Rotfeld, 2010](#)).

This is an extreme example of when articles were listed instead of basing the study on theory development. Yet, too many research articles submitted to the journals too often exhibit too little ability to understand the pragmatic need to connect theory and research.

However, maybe the problem is more basic than that. If even the authors of the journal articles have difficulty understanding the value of theory development, then the problem for presenting this value to practitioners is even greater.

If the problem with this approach to research is not intuitively obvious, take one enduring controversy built on ignorance of theory-based research, the public paranoia of subliminal advertising’s alleged ability to influence consumer sales responses. While consumers might possess a popular belief that they are manipulated by advertising mind control, the basic established theories of perception and mass communications explain how such fears are not based in reality (e.g. see: [Broyles, 2006](#)). However, if one ignores theory, then a researcher could merely design a copytest of possible advertising messages with supposedly hidden messages. By the variation of human samples, as well as the uncertain variables that are unavoidable in the data collection of social science research, accident, coincidence or research artifact could generate results, indicating research subjects influenced by the subliminal messages. To argue *ad absurdum*, take it to the next level, as studies could be discovering the effectiveness of the humorous plot device of blipverts from “Max Headroom”, a short-run 1980s science fantasy television program in which compressed commercial messages were inserted into consumers’ minds (e.g. see discussion in [Rotfeld, 2008](#)). When a researcher in the 1950s claimed to have manipulated movie theater audiences with his subliminal messages, the report’s gross violation of existing communications theory prompted efforts to replicate his

results and, eventually, following the failure of any replications to generate the same results, force the researcher to admit the fakery behind his original claims (Moore 1982, 1988).

Research articles need more than the presentation of a new data pile, as does any substantive contribution to the literature. This is also true for any marketing practitioner seeking long-run business success. Practitioners need the research for decisions, but it also helps if the research generates a greater understanding of context, a theoretical explanation that could make predictions for the future. Without a theoretical context, data become idiosyncratic meaningless artifacts, or provide information of limited utility beyond the day results are generated.

Too often, for too much research, the existence of numbers to analyze becomes more important than a theoretical context. Commentary in other journals has expressed editor's own concerns about an overwhelming focus on data analysis to the exclusion of thinking (e.g. see: Fitzsimons 2008; Rotfeld, 2007) or times where the research method seems selected to serve the presence of available possibly inappropriate convenience samples, such as students attending a class (e.g. see Rotfeld, 2003). A colleague at another university sarcastically describes these too-common research projects as adherents of the bad research model of "find data, analyze it using big hairy models".

The late naturalist Stephen Jay Gould said that "Numbers suggest, constrain, and refute; they do not, by themselves, specify the content of scientific theories" (1981, p. 106). As the numbers or methods gain greater attention, some might forget – or maybe they just ignore – the need for a conceptual foundation that must precede the analysis. In other writing, Gould repeatedly explained that:

We often think, naively, that missing data are the primary impediments to intellectual progress – just find the right facts and all problems will dissipate. But barriers are often deeper and more abstract in thought. We must have access to the right metaphor, not only the requisite information. Revolutionary thinkers are not, primarily, gatherers of facts, but weavers of new intellectual structures (1985, p. 151).

Pragmatic theories

From my personal research interests of marketing and public policy concerns, it is not that difficult to find important theory-based research questions for the consumers' interest (such as those summarized in Rotfeld and Stafford, 2007). Public policy and consumer protection activities of government are driven by some assumptions about expectations of consumers in the marketplace (e.g. France and Bone 2005). Efforts to change consumers' unsafe habits need an understanding of how the targeted audiences respond to public health messages, knowing that it might be in ways not generally expected or understood (e.g. Smith and Stuttm 2006; Mandal, 2010; Tangari et al., 2010; Wolburg, 2006).

Theories are not useless for marketing practice. Instead, they are critically important.

The marketing practitioners who denigrate, belittle and ignore the theory development found in marketing journals are looking for a research report that exactly matches a decision they are about to make. There are zombie theories, or theories with confusing models of consumer decisions diagramed like the wiring design for modern electronic toys,

but many theories could provide pragmatic implications for decisions. For any journal article, the guidance for marketing practice is the predictions derived from theory development. How well they predict or how much they help decisions is something that can be found only if used and applied. The error to be avoided is to ignore all theories instead of learning from them.

The important realization is that while data collection can be expensive and time consuming, it really is the easy part of research. If the existing theory is properly assessed, as the late social psychologist Muzafer Sherif was frequently credited by his former students as having said, "By the time you get around to gathering data, the game has largely been played". Good marketing decisions are based on theory development.

By explaining and integrating known information, theories provide an understanding for predictions of what can result from future decisions. When falsified, it provides learning from mistakes. Without theory in marketing practice, each decision is a blank slate. Thus, the immediate pragmatic value for marketing theories is to guide decision making when new research is not available or not possible to generate.

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