

Time to face up to Marketing's worldwide identity crisis

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Has marketing lost its way? A small but growing number of international experts believe that marketing is currently in steady decline as a credible business discipline. The authors agree, and argue that the fundamental problem is a severe 'identity crisis' that is eroding marketing's influence where it really counts: in the boardrooms of the world's large organisations. Symptomatic of this crisis is that many marketing practitioners, as well as academics, trainers, business commentators and even the discipline's own professional bodies seem to have lost sight of its essential strategic dimensions. We offer an agenda for addressing marketing's problems.

Field of Research: Strategic Marketing; Identity Crisis; Marketing Discipline.

1.0 Introduction

One of the most prominent marketing authors of our time, Malcolm McDonald (2009, p.433) recently asserted "... the discipline of marketing is destined to become increasingly less influential unless there is some kind of revolution, or at the very least a new beginning".

He is not alone in signalling a concern that marketing is losing its way. Over recent years, a number of other authors similarly have drawn into question the direction and relevance of the discipline, charting its decline from a variety of different perspectives (e.g., Reibstein, Day and Wind, 2009; Kotler, 2009; Davidson, 2009; Mick, 2007; Wilkie and Moore, 2007; McDonald, 2004; Sawhney, 2004). Consequently, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we develop an argument that the fundamental problem can be usefully characterised as a 'great identity crisis'. In particular, we elaborate upon the main causes and complications of this 'illness' and the serious downstream consequences of doing nothing to remedy the situation. Second, we propose a 'call-to-action' in the form of an urgent research agenda for helping to resurrect the stature of the Marketing discipline before it becomes forever relegated to the tactical and operational ranks of organisational decision-making.

2.0 Key causes

Lying behind marketing's current malaise are a host of causes. Here are some of the main ones:

Inadequate and inconsistent definitions of marketing: Malcolm McDonald (2009, p. 434), notes: "A major stumbling block to finding a way forward is the cacophony of definitions that exists." It's hard to disagree with this assertion. Most definitions of

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marketing do little to dispel the misunderstood values, activities, and knowledge domain of the discipline (Davidson, 1999). Many are somewhat abstract and obtuse. Worse still, precious few make any direct reference to the discipline's essential role in strategic decision-making.

Trendy but inappropriate job titles: Over recent years we have witnessed an explosion of newly-minted and apparently more 'fashionable' job titles across all functional areas. This trend has probably impacted marketing more than most, resulting in an increasingly large proportion of staffers who now have the word 'marketing' in their job title. However, many of these people - such as salespeople, telesales operators, public relations people, business analysts, copywriters and website technicians - are not really marketers at all. This trend has engendered real confusion about the true nature of marketing both within the organisation and more generally throughout society (McDonald, 2009).

Widespread misrepresentation: A preoccupation with promotion and sales-related topics within the mainstream business media has resulted in the misrepresentation of marketing's multi-faceted nature which is, simultaneously, a philosophical, strategic and operational discipline. Unfortunately this problem is equally evident within marketing's own publications. For example, a recent content analysis of a leading marketing practitioner publication showed that the 'promotion' category was overwhelmingly predominant (West, 2008). Notably, this trend is similarly reflected in marketing's academic journals (Brown, 2003).

Fad 'mania': For many years, various marketing short-course training providers have hyped dozens of the 'latest and greatest' marketing-related fads as the road to improved market visibility and market share gains. This has bred both a 'quick fix' and a 'lazy' mentality among practitioners (Davidson, 2009), effectively embedding the belief that marketing is more concerned with generating short-term cash-flow from 'me-too' offerings than it is about securing long-term profitability based on serving the real needs of customers. Moreover, many of the self-styled 'experts' who deliver these kinds of courses do not have an in-depth understanding of strategic marketing and therefore pay scant attention to providing their audiences with an appropriate context for their ideas.

Growing confusion among the next generation of aspiring marketers: Since the authors themselves are currently working within marketing academe, we feel duty bound to report that the tertiary education sector itself is not immune from blame in fuelling marketing's worldwide identity crisis. In our view, a small but growing number of management students throughout the education system have been graduating for some time now without a clear understanding of marketing's real priorities. The uncomfortable question persists: are we producing valuable, knowledgeable and skilful young marketers who understand the 'big picture' of marketing's strategic responsibilities and who are capable of becoming the business leaders of the future?

3.0 Key complications

As new 'complications' arise from the original 'condition', marketing's identity crisis simply gets worse:

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Loss of influence in the boardroom: One recent study shows that only 14 of the UK FTSE 100 companies have a marketing director on their boards (Ronay, 2006). Certainly, it seems that in 2010 marketers are more likely to be perceived as having a role in execution rather than strategy. Yet without marketing's influence at board level an organisation may well not have the necessary capabilities to deliver customer-focused strategies or seize new market opportunities.

Colonisation of marketing's strategic responsibilities: Whether through indifference or neglect, both marketing practitioners and marketing academics are guilty of allowing their territory to be 'colonised' by other disciplines (Reibstein, Day and Wind, 2009). For example, in many organisations those involved in sales, finance and production appear to have assumed full control of strategic decision-making, usually allowing a sales, finance, or production-led organisational philosophy to flourish at the expense of a customer-led approach. In others, marketing's strategic responsibilities are out-sourced. This means outside 'strategic marketing consultants' are occasionally, and usually for short periods only, occupying marketing's empty seat at the strategy table (but with varying degrees of success). Not coincidentally, this trend has been paralleled in the academic world. Marketing frameworks, concepts and models have been adopted, refined, developed and applied by other fields - such as strategic management, operations management, accounting and finance.

Failure to innovate: Marketing is the organisational discipline chiefly responsible for delivering truly innovative and useful offerings to the marketplace. Yet the current preoccupation with pursuing short-term/quick pay-off initiatives crowds out resources for genuinely new products that have longer-term pay-offs and real customer and societal benefits (Day, 2004). At the same time, the need for creative strategic thinking is minimised. Regrettably, far too many marketers seem to have become fixated on brand extensions that lead to ever more 'trivial' products (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2009).

Declining status of marketing's representative bodies: In the eyes of many senior executives, the status of marketing's various representative professional bodies around the world has long been deteriorating. We suggest that this is partly because these organisations have failed to take the profession towards levels of accreditation commensurate with other comparable professional bodies. More importantly, however, we suggest this is also a reflection of their failure to properly 'market marketing' as a serious strategic discipline, both within their own membership ranks as well as across the wider business community and beyond.

4.0 An understanding of the crisis

In medical circles, the malaise known as an 'identity crisis' is defined as "a period of confusion concerning a person's sense of self and role in society" (Mosby's Medical Dictionary, 2009). Some of its key symptoms (Erikson, 1970; Marcia, 1980) are listed below, all of which serve to illustrate why identity crisis provides a near-perfect metaphor for marketing's current problems. An identity crisis occurs when a person is experiencing:

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1. A disintegrating commitment to a prior dominant identity;
2. An increasingly confused and blurred perception of self;
3. An unravelling sense that historical continuity is lost;
4. An unfolding exploration of different identities;
5. A gathering uncertainty about his/her real role in life;
6. A deteriorating ability to face future life challenges.

Notably of all those listed, we believe a '*disintegrating commitment to a prior dominant identity*' signals the most significant, revealing and defining symptom of marketing's identity crisis - because it seems that almost the entire marketing community has lost sight of marketing's implicit strategic dimensions that are the origins of the discipline. Yet it is marketing's role in strategy formulation, that is, deciding what to offer to what market, together with the development of an authentic 'customer value proposition' that binds the whole of the discipline together. In particular, it is important to appreciate that its many operational tasks cannot be effectively carried out in the 'vacuum' created by the absence of a marketing strategy. Without a customer-focussed strategy 'blueprint' to guide all of marketing's operational decision-making, over time an organisation's day-to-day marketing activities will almost certainly lack coherence, direction and purpose.

5.0 A call to action

As a matter of some urgency, we believe it is now incumbent upon the entire marketing community around the world to help re-establish marketing as a serious strategic discipline. As a starting point, we propose an agenda for each of three key sub-groups, as follows.

Marketing practitioners: For this group, we propose two main actions.

(i) *Promote a better appreciation of marketing:* Senior marketing executives should work widely throughout all levels of their company or organisation to promote a better appreciation of marketing as a strategic discipline and as the domain of market-related knowledge, value-creation expertise and customer advocacy. In particular, there should be an emphasis on ensuring that there is a unified understanding of marketing around the strategy table in the boardroom.

(ii) *Collaborate with human resource specialists:* In partnership with their colleagues in human resource management, senior marketing executives should review the appropriateness of all marketing-led positions: job titles, specifications, duties and responsibilities. In addition, the content of all of the organisation's training and management development programmes should be similarly reviewed.

Marketing's representative bodies: For this group, we suggest three key actions.

(i) *Develop one globally-recognised definition:* Perhaps the single most important step towards resolving marketing's identity crisis is for all its representative professional bodies to start to work together towards the promotion of one 'globally-recognised' definition that clearly identifies marketing as an essentially strategic discipline. This would give our discipline ('the patient') an opportunity to re-centre itself around a proper sense of 'self'. For any new definition to have the necessary depth of acceptability and universal appeal among marketing practitioners, it will need to be as instructive, practical and straightforward as possible. We recommend

that such a definition would necessitate the inclusion of the following three central concepts. First, the creation of a customer–centric organisation - to ensure that the marketing philosophy is fully embraced through cultivating an organisational-wide commitment to satisfying customers and encouraging all the functional areas of the organisation to work together towards this common purpose (Agee, 2007; Gulalti and Oldroyd, 2005). Second, the identification of appropriate target markets and corresponding value propositions - to communicate that the ultimate task of Marketing is to formulate a separate Marketing strategy for each of the product/service offerings within an organisation's portfolio. Third, the development of satisfied customers in a socially and environmentally responsible manner at a planned financial return - to communicate that a further task of Marketing is concerned with translating the strategy for each product/service offering into action on a day-to-day basis, often through collaborating with customers to co-create value (Lusch, 2007).

(ii) *Raise professional accreditation standards:* In a business world that has become a pressure cooker of economic, societal and environmental stresses, now is the time for marketing to assume a leadership role in influencing the direction of organisational decision-making in a positive and responsible way. To this end, marketing's various representative bodies around the globe should strive towards the development of some sort of fully 'Licensed Strategic Marketing Practitioner' status for their members.

(iii) *Ensure a better mix of topics within membership publications:* A healthy balance of articles that reflect the full spectrum of marketing's tasks and responsibilities, and from a range of perspectives, is recommended.

Marketing academics: For this group, we propose a four-point research agenda.

(i) *Research and develop metrics as they relate to strategic level decision-making:* There has been much recent debate about how marketing's contribution to an organisation should be measured and justified (Varcoe, 2009). Interestingly, the debate almost always refers to the term R.O.M.I. (return on marketing investment). However, in reality, the debate has been largely restricted to R.O.P.I. (return on promotional investment) measures, meaning that the more important, strategy-level measures are being largely overlooked (Carey, 2009). Consequently, there is a need to identify metrics that relate to strategic marketing decision-making and especially marketing's contribution to 'value'. That way, it can better justify its presence in the boardroom.

(ii) *Learn more about the underlying 'how to' of successful marketing strategy formulation:* Most previous research in this area has been quantitative in nature and served only to answer the 'what' questions in relation to high performance strategic marketing, effectively ignoring the underlying 'how to' questions. Hence, there is a real need to understand much more about the qualitative aspects: the decision-making skills, knowledge base and processes employed by top strategists. In order to gain such insights it will be necessary for researchers to use more 'involving' qualitative methods, such as phenomenology and ethnography.

(iii) *Investigate the means by which market-led innovations are successfully conceived, developed and brought to market:* The current widespread reluctance among organisations to deliver innovations that offer real customer benefits needs to be addressed. Consequently, we suggest a renewed research focus aimed at understanding how successful organisations manage to profitably bring discontinuous, truly innovative and useful offerings to market. The aim is for this

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research to be able to educate and inspire managers to embrace discontinuous innovation.

(iv) *Appraise all undergraduate and post-experience level marketing programmes:* The suggested focus here is to appraise the content, interrelationships and sequencing of marketing papers across an institution's portfolio from a student learning perspective. The goal of this research should be to identify and profile 'best practice' with respect to these dynamics so that it can be modelled throughout the entire tertiary education system. This will help to ensure the system produces graduates with a well-rounded understanding of marketing's strategic priorities.

6.0 Conclusion

Marketing is currently suffering from a debilitating malaise that can be usefully characterised as an 'identity crisis'. Unless and until the entire marketing community re-commits to a proper understanding of marketing as being fundamentally a strategic discipline, our 'prognosis' is that this crisis will simply intensify. Unchecked, a number of destructive forces will steadily and inexorably continue to undermine marketing's credibility and influence where it really counts: at the strategy table in the boardrooms of the world's large organisations. This augurs a 'doomsday' scenario for marketing. It means our discipline is in grave danger of becoming forever relegated to the tactical and operational ranks of organisational life - to the ultimate detriment of customers and all other stakeholders.

The sooner marketing can re-discover its true identity, the sooner it can begin to fully realise its contribution to organisational prosperity and the betterment of society. The question is: are we ready to acknowledge that we have a problem?

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