

The End(s) of Marketing and the Neglect of Moral Responsibility by the American Marketing Association

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The current official definition of marketing by the American Marketing Association—adopted in 2004—ignores marketers' moral responsibility for the socioecological conditions of the world. Other statements and programs by the association hardly do better. This essay suggests that research and education on wisdom and a stronger commitment to a macromarketing orientation could begin to reverse the neglect of moral responsibility. Those actions and several others outlined will require courageous and visionary leadership from the American Marketing Association.

The claim that corporations now rule the world (Korten 2001) is less exaggerated than it seems, but in any case, it is incontrovertible that the influence of business in contemporary life is omnipresent and powerful, even surpassing the historical role of religion and government. Marketers particularly play a central part in the aggregate socioeconomic system (Wilkie and Moore 1999). Across a diverse range of common economic behaviors involving producers, intermediaries, and customers, the prevailing purpose or end of marketing is consumption that satisfies. Marketers seek to fulfill this end through an integration of market research, product design, pricing, promotion, distribution, and retailing. With consumption levels rising worldwide, the marketing field seems to be an unequivocal success. Or is it?

No one can deny that consumption is necessary for life, beginning with air, water, food, and shelter, or that consumption affords many additional benefits of a physical and sociopsychological nature. However, the risks, costs, and moral complexities of consumption are mounting (see, e.g., Borgmann 2000; Cross 2000; Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Mick 2006; Zuboff and Maxmin 2002). There is no point in reiterating the well-known statistical trends surrounding air, water, and ground pollution; business scams and fraud; credit card debt and personal bankruptcies; third-world cigarette smoking; alcohol abuse; hours spent watching television (including observed violence); junk mail (standard and electronic); or health conditions related to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The numbers numb us into a sense of denial, desperation, or both. No wonder, then, that while the influence of business has risen to an all-

encompassing level, the public's opinion of executives has plummeted to ground zero.

How has the American Marketing Association (AMA) responded? A revealing manner is the continuing definitions of marketing that reincarnate the marketing management paradigm of functions and controls that primarily serve the organization and its stakeholders. These definitions make no mention or call for scrupulous marketing, and they omit any obligation to avoid or mitigate the disturbing consequences of an ideology pledged to boundless global consumption. There is little morality in the prior definitions. Of course, it could be argued that morality has no place in the AMA's official definitions of marketing. However, some business thinkers (Harman and Porter 1997) and many ethicists would demur. The philosopher Larry May (1992, p. 183) argues that morality is framed by specific social groups:

As members of communities (whether they be professional associations, universities, or larger social groups), we derive various benefits, which change the scope of our responsibilities. The shared responsibility we should feel for the harms perpetrated within our communities is precisely the cost we incur by being members of those communities. But because we rarely think about responsibility in communal terms, it is difficult for most of us to accept these responsibilities.

Definitions and explanations of foundational concepts that are promulgated by respective leading organizations are an important way to establish the acceptable range of ideas, actions, and duties of their members. In this essay, I argue that the AMA is missing an enormous opportunity, at a critical time in the socioecological history of life on earth, to elevate the focus and scope of marketing to a higher ground for which the public, marketing professionals, and marketing students are yearning.

Some AMA defenders will acknowledge the limitations of prior definitions of marketing but will then argue that the association promotes shared responsibility by promulgating ethical standards, establishing special interest groups for societal welfare, creating a foundation focused on "good

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causes,” championing customer relationships, and advocating corporate social responsibility. In my view, as I discuss subsequently, these efforts are peripheral at best to the association’s predominant activities, if not shadow games at worst.

Deconstructing the 2004 Definition

At the time I composed this essay, the most recent and official definition of marketing from the AMA was adopted in 2004, and it proclaims the following:

Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

As is the case for all definitions, this conceptualization of marketing consists of words and ideas that are founded on, and beget, other words and ideas. Most social science definitions in the terms of human language are an endless spiraling of ambiguities (see Wittgenstein’s later works). In this latest definition of marketing, phrases such as “set of processes” and words such as “value” are exceptionally vague, though as noted, this is not a rare fault. Some would say that it is inescapable. Whether the definition of marketing could ever achieve the formal specificity and clarity in its theoretical and linguistic realms—versus its operational realm—that Teas and Palan (1997) strive to give guidance on remains to be seen. The rise and fall of logical positivism in the philosophy of science cautions against optimism on this front.

Perhaps more avoidable than ambiguity within the AMA’s definition of marketing, but arguably more discouraging, is the use of mechanical metaphors and technical terms, such as “organizational function” and “stakeholders.” There is nothing discernibly humane about these ideas. In addition, “organizational function” suggests that marketing is not a personal responsibility of anyone’s in particular. Furthermore, the term “stakeholders” presumably includes all affected beings—from indigent people to the coral reefs—but the term more readily conjures up stockholders, investment bankers, wholesalers, direct customers, and the like. Finally, the notion that customer relationships should be “managed” is a tad Machiavellian. Try telling your significant others that a major part of your life is managing their relationships with you. Consult a thesaurus, and you will find that among the dominant synonyms for “manage” are “supervise” and “control.” It is no surprise then that relationship marketing in the eyes of consumers is often a discovered mirage (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998).

Let’s be honest. With the challenging conditions we face in the world today—a lot of them created or exacerbated by marketers—the AMA should make a more valiant effort in defining marketing and use the opportunity to offer inspiration and guidance on the responsibilities that the association and its members share. However, the most recent definition neither includes nor implies anything about morality and socioecology. There is nothing in the definition that can elevate the public’s opinion of marketers, promote trustworthiness in marketer’s intentions and future influences, or moti-

vate marketing students for utmost purposes and fulfillment in blending their professional and personal lives.

In 2007, the AMA began rethinking the definition of marketing again but has not yet approved any alterations to the 2004 version. The proposed changes I have seen include dropping the phrase “managing customer relations” and adding new terms such as “conducted by organizations and *individuals*” and “value for customers, clients, marketers, and *society at large*” (emphases added). Explicitly mentioning the role of individuals and value to society is a step in the right direction. The word “value,” however, remains vague. (I doubt, for example, that it includes marketing actions that encourage excessive personal debt, impulsiveness, tobacco addiction, or obesity.) Furthermore, the proposed changes still ignore marketing and consumption consequences related to global ecologies and other species that human life depends on (and vice versa). Until the AMA officially releases its next definition of marketing, it is not possible to know how far the association has come in recognizing and energizing the moral power of the field’s self-concept.

OK, So Past and Proposed Definitions Are Flawed, But What About ...

... the AMA’s published ethical standards? Ethical standards are undeniably important and often uplifting. Kudos to the AMA for having these principles on formal record. However, finding them on the AMA Web site requires some determined hunting and clicking. Their lack of clear prominence signifies the opposite of their importance, despite the association’s statement of ethical commitment to the contrary. Furthermore, there are no specified sanctions or censures for violating the AMA code of ethics. Without the potential for revocation of professional certification (available through the AMA) and for cancellation of association membership from breaking the code of ethics, these principles end up being little more than wishful, look-the-other-way requests for good behavior. It is also revealing that among the six main values listed in the AMA code of ethics, citizenship (for societies and ecologies) is listed last.

... the AMA’s SIGs (special interest groups), particularly the one on marketing and society? The primary meaning of the word “special” is “of a particular kind, not general” (according to the *Oxford American Dictionary*). It also connotes “out of the ordinary” or “unique,” if not “minority” or “off to the side.” Something that is essential is not marked as special or entrusted to a subsegment of individuals in an organization. To be clear, I am not advocating the abolishment of all SIGs at the AMA, but because the meaning and mission of the SIG related to marketing and society is penultimate to life and well-being, it should be conspicuously integrated into the overall AMA mission and the definition of marketing. Shared responsibility to societies and ecologies should be elemental, not relegated to a SIG on the fringe.

... the AMA’s foundation, “Good Cause: Marketing for a Better World”? This effort is praiseworthy but is related strictly to nonprofit organizations. I doubt that the AMA intends this, but the highlighting of nonprofit organizations

for good causes implies that marketing by for-profit companies, such as Starbucks and Nike, is not for a better world. Marketing in the service of global well-being should be what all of AMA and its members are about.

... customer relationship marketing as a foundation of the field? It is difficult to quibble with this precept. It has a social and moral element through the notion of relationships. Some have gone so far as to hail customer relationship marketing as a new paradigm for the field (see, e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1999). Others say it is old news (being the bonding agent between buyers and sellers since antiquity). The problem with such new labels is that they are often nothing more than fads that marketers grab onto for as long as they provide apparent differentiation and competitive advantage—and then it is onward to the next flavor of the month. For evidence of this *déjà vu* trend in relationship marketing, including some of the pretenses and shysterism that have belied commitment to authentic human relationships, see Fournier, Dobsha, and Mick (1998).

... corporate social responsibility? This idea is among the latest rages, and the AMA has supported and published research on the topic. In theory, corporate social responsibility is exactly what the disparagers of business would like to see in the AMA's new definition of marketing. However, as is the case with customer relationship marketing, it remains to be seen whether corporate social responsibility will endure as a sincere and sustained movement. Let's hope so. In the meantime, it is sobering to note that among the most ardent defenders of market capitalism, the new commitment to corporate social responsibility has been called "harmful" and a "sham" (*The Economist*, p. 102). On the whole, the AMA needs to move more forcefully and publicly in establishing guidelines that ensure that customer relationship marketing and corporate social responsibility are more than empty platitudes.

Where to Now?

The AMA should inquire about and aspire to the uppermost human virtue for developing a new definition of marketing. According to philosophers, social scientists, and religious leaders, that virtue is wisdom (Baltes and Staudinger 2000; Brown 2000; Sternberg and Jordan 2005). As the pinnacle of human qualities, wisdom is more than knowledge or intelligence *per se*, and it encompasses and extends beyond ethics. Wisdom is exhibited as exceptional right judgment in matters of life and conduct, particularly in the choice of means and ends. Wisdom continually confronts fundamental and difficult questions, especially about excellence and quality of life. Recent research has shown that wisdom is correlated with psychological and physical well-being, social intelligence, maturity, self-actualization (reaching one's highest potential), and successful aging (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

In Sternberg's (1998) theory, wisdom is knowledge applied for the attainment of the common good through the balancing of multiple interests—including oneself, others, and surroundings—over short-term and long-term horizons. He further maintains that wisdom is mediated by other significant human values, including integrity, that act to balance adaptation to existing environments and to shape

existing and new environments. If marketing is to live up to its maximum potential, simultaneously with its socioecological obligations, and also become more genuinely appreciated by the public, the goal of marketing, as with wisdom itself, must be the common good.

To encourage wisdom and evoke decision processes that achieve the common good, there must be new and persistent efforts by the AMA to design educational programs and supply practical assistance for asking tough questions about excellence in life, balancing multiple interests, incorporating short- and long-term perspectives, and upholding integrity in all practices of marketing. To propel these efforts, the AMA should partner with foundations (e.g., Templeton Foundation) and institutes (e.g., Tufts University's Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise) that support research and education of wisdom. Research that specifically examines wisdom and public policy should be drawn from (see, e.g., Etheridge 2005). In addition, other fields that distinguish themselves in terms of communal obligations and holistic well-being, including medicine and nursing as well as social work, should be consulted.

The AMA should also convene summit meetings that pull together the experienced insights of people who already prioritize shared responsibility in the mission of business. This includes key politicians, biologists and ecologists, philosophers, psychologists, sociocultural analysts, historians, futurists, and business pioneers of genuine corporate responsibility. The AMA could align with and learn effectively from other organizations that seek to inspire business executives to uphold their moral obligations to their employees, customers, and the environment (e.g., World Business Academy). Similarly, the AMA needs to move more aggressively into engendering broad and stirring dialogues about wisdom and marketing by means of Web site networking, chat sites, and cyberspace cafés.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein once said, "The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them." The AMA needs courageous and visionary leadership to recraft a definition of marketing that acknowledges the daunting tasks and duties that its practitioners, educators, and students face. Time is running out for halting the dominance of micromarketing and its narrow management orientation, which Bartels (1983) criticized 25 years ago for having limited concerns with duties or responsibilities. Instead, much greater emphasis must be given to a macromarketing orientation. It characterizes the marketing system as a complex set of multilayered, near-and-far relationships in which the choices and actions of market participants have long-term consequences beyond their firms, partners, and customers (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2007). The seeds of wisdom are planted in the macromarketing perspective, and we need to nourish them for the benefit of all those affected by marketing.

The AMA's ethical standards also need to be reviewed and strengthened and then placed in more open view among the association's materials and Web site. Failure to adhere to these standards must have serious consequences. In addi-

tion, successful marketing executives of highest social responsibility need more recognition and status in the AMA as mentors and role models. Finally, corporate members of the AMA need to be encouraged and lionized for their efforts to protect and improve the quality of life in the context of their marketing activities.

No doubt, there will be some people who will contend that marketing is, at base, an amoral concept and that its definition should not explicitly evoke ethics or wisdom, including the supragoal of the common good. However, many philosophers would claim that there is nothing that is amoral. All decisions and behaviors are value guided and socially embedded, and through their interdependencies, most decisions and behaviors affect other beings in one way or another. If there are gradations across professions to this ever-cycling truism, the marketing field ranks extraordinarily high.

Ten years ago, a conference was held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, that explored marketing and eschatology (the study of endings). In a closing essay from the proceedings, George Fisk (1995, p. 295) opined,

We have not come to the end of marketing, but we are replacing the marketing management concept with larger system perspectives because of the growing frequency of international communication, the growing awareness of the place of planet earth in the cosmos and of the global consequences of ignoring local marketing externalities.

In terms of prior and proposed definitions of marketing offered by the AMA, Fisk's optimism, in retrospect, seems sadly overstated. We need soon to revise and elevate the ends of marketing. Otherwise, we will face not only the demise of marketing as a field we could be so much prouder of, but also the end of ourselves and our fragile planet.

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