Exploring a Practice Perspective for Customer Centricity and Value Creation

Christine Boyle, Emma Posy Bullman, Laura Hogan, Karen O'Rourke and Jennifer Pratt , Mairead Brady and Martin Fellenz

School of Business, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland
Mairead.Brady@tcd.ie

Abstract

In light of the current economic downturn, this paper aims to address the issues surrounding the direction that marketing practice should take in order to both survive the recession and sustain long term growth. Substandard marketing practices that in boom times were overlooked are now exposed, while previous mindless consumption is replaced by a conscious attempt by the consumer to align value with spending. This paper argues that customer centricity and value creation stand as the pillars of marketing theory. It contends that it is not the case that the marketing philosophy needs to change; it merely needs to be better translated into practice. Firms must take a customer centric approach that understands the customer to the degree that they can offer value propositions of real worth to their customers. This paper explores the philosophies of customer centricity and value creation, positing them as the most effective foundation for a marketing plan. Three broad strategies are then introduced as a means to disseminate these philosophies throughout the organisation, with a long term focus in mind. These are: (1) bridging disciplinary silos; (2) increasing accountability; and (3) improving customer information management. This research will ascertain the developments of these areas in practice in organisations.

A marketing plan is only as strong as the logic it stands upon (Calkins, 2009). This paper explores the philosophies of customer centricity and value creation, positing them as the most effective foundation for a marketing plan, particularly during recessionary times. Three broad strategies are then introduced as a means to disseminate these philosophies throughout the organisation, with a long term focus in mind. These are: (1) bridging disciplinary silos; (2) increasing accountability; and (3) improving customer information management.

Wind (2008) contends that the world in which marketing operates has fundamentally changed. These new environments require flexibility in marketing implementation while retaining a strong commitment to the pillars of marketing theory: value creation and customer centricity. While value creation has traditionally been promulgated under the umbrella of customer centricity, this paper posits that separating these two basic elements of marketing may facilitate a deeper theoretical understanding of each. This may allow for an easier conversion of theory into practice. While much of their strength indeed lies in their combination, the separation presents value creation as a more tangible, accessible concept for marketing mangers to grasp.

Weak marketing practices, which in better times may have gone unnoticed, are now exposed. In times of uncertainty firms are often tempted by quick fix solutions. These 'quick and dirty fixes' (Sheth & Uslay,2007:303) often neglect customer centricity and value creation. Rather

than focusing on such short term solutions, which may actually cause damage to the firm in the long run, this paper posits three enduring strategies that, when implemented through the mindset of value creation and customer centricity, position firms for long term recovery.

Understanding core marketing theory and practice ifssues

To begin, this paper will compare Levitt's seminal proposal with the new definition of marketing proposed by Gronroos (2006), with the aim of illustrating that the underpinning logic of marketing theory has not strayed far. Levitt (1960) proposes that: "*…the entire corporation must be viewed as a customer-creating and customer-satisfying organism. Management must think of itself not as producing products but as providing customer-creating value satisfactions. It must push this idea (and everything it means and requires) into every nook and cranny of the organization.*" (Levitt, 1960:56). As Gronroos (2006) proposes, "*Marketing is a customer focus that permeates organizational functions and processes and is geared towards making promises through value proposition, enabling the fulfilment of individual expectations created by such promises and fulfilling such expectations through support to customer's value-generating processes, thereby supporting value-creation in the firm's as well as its customers' and other stakeholders' processes.*"(Gronroos, 2006: 407)

These two definitions, despite being created half a century apart, share a great deal in common, highlighting that the essence of marketing (value creation and customer centricity), has remained fundamentally unchanged. The extensive literature proposing implementation strategies indicates that perhaps the central problem for marketing today is in translating this theory into practice (Kotler et al., 2009: 46). "*The marketing community worldwide clearly acknowledges a disconnect between* marketing education and marketing practice" (Kotler et al., 2009:46). This has been referred to as the 'high deeds of marketing theory and low deeds of marketing practice' (Saren, M. & Brownlie, in Kotler et al., 2009: 46)

Understanding Customer Centricity

Despite extensive recognition of the importance of customer centricity in marketing literature, in practice it remains an elusive goal (Shah, 2006; Gummesson, 2007). Many firms have conducted their marketing operations paying only lip service to customer centricity. In reality, such firms have been supplier ego-centric rather than truly customer centric (Gummesson, 2008b). A survey conducted by Forrester in 2005 that found that only 4% of companies indicated complete satisfaction with their firm's customer centricity (Anderson, 2005). Further emphasising this point, Galbraith (2005) contends that many companies 'simply put a cosmetic gloss of customer focus sprinkled around the edges'.

Brady and Fellenz (2010) define customer centricity as: '*a business model that places customer value at the heart of all organisational value creation activities...therefore customer centricity goes beyond simple customer orientation...it is the latter's recognition and acceptance of the primacy of customer value over any other organisational activity. What this means is that a customer centric company does not simply build its activities around the customer. Rather it places the customer – in the form of customer value creation – at the heart of all its activities'* (Brady & Fellenz, 2010).

In times of economic security, it was predominantly finance which translated the voice of the consumer in the organisation and not marketing (Gronroos, 2006). The company-centric foci

of firms in recent year's works well only in boom periods, and firms may well have set themselves up for failure in recessionary times by engaging in such finance-oriented practices, at the risk of losing sight of their customer's values. It is therefore argued that the recession may be viewed as a catalyst for change with more companies realising the necessity of a customer centric focus.

Shah's (2006) concept of "dual value creation" highlights the symbiotic benefits customer centricity can bring to both the company and the customer. Recognising that firms are profit-driven by nature, attention should be drawn to the profitability that is frequently associated with placing the customer at the heart of an organisation and its operations. According to McGovern and Moon "customer satisfaction begets loyalty, and loyalty begets profits" (McGovern & Moon, 2007:2). This is particularly relevant in the current climate as Quelch and Jocz observe, "in a recession, loyal customers are the primary, enduring source of cash flow and organic growth" (Quelch & Jocz, 2009a:55). This point is strengthened further by Shah (2006), who argues that customer loyalty is the key to long run profitability. Tesco can be as an example of a company who have successfully translated this theory into practice. By investigating their customers' typical shopping experience, they found that their average customers' shopping scenario was divisible into six steps. Processing this information in terms of customer centricity, they identified time and effort to be of high value to their customer. As such, they developed 'Tesco Direct', an online service, in line with what their customers' value, to complement the traditional in-store shopping experience. Despite initial anticipated costs, 'Tesco Direct' has become the "world's largest and most profitable internet grocer", highlighting how customer centricity, when implemented appropriately can be aligned with a company's desire for profits (Seybold, 2001).

Understanding Value Creation

There is a heightened emphasis placed upon value creation, illustrating how it is more than simply a component of customer centricity. Levitt (1960) mentions value only once, claiming the role of marketer as '*providing customer-creating value satisfactions*' (Levitt, 1960:56). Gronroos (2006), on the other hand, mentions value three times stating that the role of marketing now encompasses '*making promises through value propositions.... through support to customer's value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation*' (Gronroos, 2006:407). These definitions mark the development of value creation into a pillar of marketing theory. Lusch (2007) comments on the evolution of marketing's identity, as going from 'to market' to 'marketing *to'*. He proposes that this has since developed into 'marketing *with'*, whereby 'marketing with' means that the primary mission of marketing is collaborating with customers to co-create value.

The hypothesis that customer value is *co-created* by both suppliers and customers, rather than *delivered* solely by suppliers as was previously suggested is further explored by Vargo and Lusch, (2008). Under the premise of this service-dominant (S-D) logic, the supplier contribution to the creation of value is a value proposition that can be of service to customers; and the customer contribution is value actualization (Gummesson, 2008a). In other words, the supplier's role in the value creating process is limited to value propositions (suggested values), (Gronroos, 2006) and 'real value' stems from value creating processes performed by the customers themselves. The true essence of the customer centricity paradigm lies not in how to sell products or services but rather on how to create value for the customer (or more precisely, *supporting* customers value creation (Gronroos, 2006)) and, in the process, creating

value for the firm (Shah et al, 2006). Put another way, customer centricity is concerned with the process of dual value creation (Boulding et al, 2005).

The terminology surrounding value creation has also evolved. Contrasting the 1985 and 2007 American Marketing Association (AMA) definitions of marketing below, it can be seen that value creation was initially not acknowledged as an important part of the marketer's role: '*Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services, to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational objectives'*. As can be seen, 'value' is not once mentioned. The AMA now understand marketing as *'...the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large'* highlighting the co-creational nature of the value creation process.

Those firms that succeed in creating value arguably stand to gain in times of economic dowturn. Recessionary times often encourage the consumer to reassess their values, driving them from mindless to mindful consumption as they attempt to align value with spending (Gerzema, 2009). This pushes the firm to offer propositions that are of real value to the consumer who now cares not about 'more but about better' (Gerzema, 2009). It is worth noting that 'better' is not necessary equated with a higher service quality. Successful companies like Ryanair recognise the value of a "no frills, low cost", service for their price sensitive consumer (Kotler et al, 2009). It is about placing the customer at the centre of your organisation and understanding them to the degree that you can offer them propositions that they value.

In an effort to keep costs low, firms often lose sight of their value creating role. For example, outsourcing to slash costs has become a popular procedure that firms use, particularly during recessions. Despite Roberts' (2003) contention that outsourcing may be beneficial in recession, organisations must be aware of the potential hazards. Companies who outsource overlook a crucial part of the value-creating process. They may offer a value proposition on the outset, but if they fail to support the value-generating processes all the way through, the customer may never fully realise the suggested value. While value is co-created, the supplier remains responsible for *supporting* the customer in their value actualization. Therefore, any dissatisfaction with the outsourced function that a customer experiences, is translated into a loss of value because the customer has not received the support required to fulfil the value co-creation process. Despite outsourcing, the consumer will typically associate their dissatisfaction with the original firm.

Implementation Challenges: Bridging Silos, Increasing Accountability and Improving Information Management

The following section discusses the important implementation strategies which need to be aligned with customer centricity and value creation. These implementation strategies act as a step towards successfully integrating value creation and customer centricity throughout the organisation. Supported by a plethora of leading theorists, these strategies were selected largely by merit of their reiteration in the literature. These strategies are; (1) bridging the disciplinary silos; (2) increasing accountability; and (3) improving customer information management (Brady, 2009; Brady and Fellenz, 2010; Davenport, 2006; Day, 2003; French & Dembowski, 2002; Gulati, 2007; Keiningham et al., 2008*;* Mc Govern & Moon, 2004; Mitchell, 2002; Shah, 2006; Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Wind, 2008).

Bridging Disciplinary Silos: Within the prevailing Anglo-Saxon organisational structure, disciplines are traditionally separated into functions. While this is valued for the degree of specialisation it offers (Kahn, 2009), it has acted to limit both the rigour and relevance of marketing (Wind, 2008:22). The integration of these silos is needed to integrate customer centricity and value creation throughout the organisation. As Shah (2006) notes, 'An ideal customer centric organisation implies having all functional activities integrated and aligned to deliver superior customer value.' (Shah 2006:116). Day (2003) proposes that this be done through a horizontal process view rather than a vertical function view. The horizontal mindset is essential in order to include all the processes and activities that contribute toward value creation for the customer (Day, 2003). The value of a well integrated organisation is observed by Gulati (2007), who notes that: *To stand out in a commoditized market, companies must understand what customers truly value. The only way to do that is to break down the traditional, often entrenched, silos and unite resources to focus directly on customer needs"* (Gulati, 2007: 108) The integration of these silos may be seen as a means to thread customer centricity and value creation throughout the organisation.

As marketing has traditionally assumed the role of customer representative within the firm, Verhoef and Leelflang's (2009) empirical research highlighting the weakened position of the marketing department becomes cause for concern. Wind recognises that "the relevance of marketing is limited the more it is isolated from other disciplines" (Wind, 2008:22). This heightens the importance of bridging disciplinary silos to reassert the voice of the customer throughout the organisation. As marketing has traditionally been perceived as representing the customer, responsibility for the customer is often relegated to marketing and sales departments (Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009). However, these departments often lack a customer focus (Brady, 2009 meeting). Unless the marketing department is truly customer centric and understands the meaning and importance of value creation, acting to make them an organisation wide focus is futile. As Davenport (2006) notes, any major transition requires leadership from executives at the very top. Day (2003) further acknowledges the importance of a collective mindset, beliefs and values which must be embedded in an orientation toward relationships. This collective mindset can be initiated and sustained by effective leadership (Day, 2003)**.** *"Ttheir knowledge and expertise are housed within organizational silos, and they have trouble harnessing their resources across those internal boundaries in a way that customers truly value and are willing to pay for"* (Gulati,2007:100).

The perception that a large marketing department is essential to organisational success is challenged by the research of Verhoef and Leeflang (2009), who argue that it is the *influence* of the marketing department rather than the size, that is relevant. Rather it is the integration and influence of marketing throughout the organisation that is paramount. The importance of organisation wide permeation of the marketing philosophy was examined by Verhoef and Leeflang who, through their research, show how the marketing departments influence is positively related to market orientation, which is positively correlated to financial performance (Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009:29). Recognising that firms are by nature profit oriented, activities that bridge silos are made more attractive by highlighting the positive financial return associated with them (Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009). This may be facilitated by an increased emphasis on accountability within marketing.

Increasing Accountability: Verhoef and Leeflang (2009) note how enhanced accountability can facilitate the permeation of a marketing philosophy firm-wide. They contend that marketing's inability to account effectively for its contribution has resulted in an undermining of its standing within the firm. Davenport (2006) acknowledges the difficulty associated with

quantifying marketing. To truly embed customer centric metrics, firms should include at least three of the most appropriate customer metrics among the key performance indicators that are reported regularly to the top management and the board. An equally important task is synchronising the incentive and reward systems with the customer centric paradigm (Shah, 2006:121).
Day (2003) contends that the process of becoming accountable is often more easily achieved by companies organised around customer groups and processes than those organised according to products, functions or geographies. French & Dembkowski (2002) point to the lack of influence and power marketing holds within organisations, whereby the common assumption is that marketing is where "big dollars are spent, and the benefits have always seemed a little soft" (French & Dembkowski, 2002: 28). Accurately measuring return on investment is seen by French and Dembkowski (2002) as a means of both justifying marketing spending and improving its credibility within an organisation. This point is echoed in Verhoef and Leelflang's (2009) contention that marketing's inability to account effectively for its contribution has resulted in an undermining of its standing within the firm..

McGovern et al. (2004) allude to how the marketing field is '*…chock- a- block with creative thinkers, yet it's short on people who lean towards an analytic, left brain approach to the discipline'* (McGovern et al. 2004:74). Verhoef and Leeflang (2009) suggest that this may be attributed to marketers' use of inappropriate methods and metrics, or to their inability or unwillingness to do so (Verhoef and Leeflang: 2009). Farris et al, 2006 further contend, that *"Marketing productivity could increase if managers were able to measure it. Recent calls for more attention to accountability, marketing metrics and dashboard marketing may be helpful in this respect."* (Farris et al., 2006) Financial metrics have an important role not only in motivating individual employees but also, in helping marketing managers measure the financial implications of their decision making and to think of marketing expenditures as investments (Shah:118). Placing emphasis on the frequent lack of accountability within marketing, French & Dembkowski (2002) stress the importance of becoming more accountable in order for marketing initiatives to be supported organisation wide. In times of recession many firms attempt to cut costs and streamline activities; French and Dembkowski (2002) note how in these times, the ability to link action to performance results, through use of analytics may galvanise marketing efforts.

Improving Customer Information Management: Companies today have unprecedented access to data and sophisticated technology that allows experts to weigh factors and consider evidence (Davenport and Harris, 2009). Despite the advantages that this information potentially offers to companies, if marketers are incapable of translating it into meaningful, value creating solutions for their consumers, it compromises their efforts. (Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009).The "*slow and somewhat tentative*" adoption of ICT by marketers suggests that marketing skills need to develop alongside advancements in information and communication technologies if the benefits are to be realised (Brady & Fellenz, 2008). The abundance of information that these developments have made available have had resounding effects on marketing. Holland and Naude have even gone so far as to suggest renaming the marketing department as an "Information Handling Department" (Kotler et al, 2009: 51). The degree to which this phenomenon has impacted upon marketing as a discipline is further noted by Day (2003), who highlights the new found importance of information and its management to competitive performance. "*In the information age, customer information is the pivotal resource because it shapes and directs everything firms do*" (Mitchell, 2002:77). Davenport and Harris (2009) describe how companies today have unprecedented access to data and sophisticated technology that allows experts to weigh factors and consider evidence

that was unobtainable just a few years ago. Despite the advantages that this information potentially offers to companies, if marketers are incapable of translating it into meaningful, value creating solutions for their consumers, it compromises their efforts. (Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Davenport, 2006) In a similar vein, it is noted that despite the many metrics available, marketing managers often have difficulty acting on the information they obtain (Keiningham et al., 2008:53). Mistakenly assuming that "more information is the same as better" stressing the importance of appropriate training for marketing managers to avoid a 'paralysis by analysis' (Mitchell, 2002). Marketing skills need to develop alongside advancements in information and communication technologies if the benefits are to be realised (Brady & Fellenz, 2008).

As Day (2003) observes, the benefits of these technologies are dependent upon an inherent customer focus. "CRM technologies can help companies gain a coherent and comprehensive picture of customers, better organise internal data to cut service costs, help sales people close deals faster and improve the targeting of marketing programmes. But they can assist in these ways only if the organisation has begun to reconfigure and reorient itself toward customers."(Day, 2003:79). All members of the organisation must thus process information in terms of value creation and customer centricity if the information is to be beneficial to the firm and customer. Neglecting customer centricity results in the marketer understanding "the consumer's rational and emotional drivers…so that they can be driven like a rat through a maze to the right destination" - a practice that is inherently company centric. As is further noted by Mitchell (2002), consumers have minds of their own and are becoming more and more aware that marketers are trying to manipulate them. As such they may be more inclined to withhold information unless they can correlate a positive link between the information they give and the value it will in turn create for them (Mitchell, 2002: 74). Companies must not forget that ultimately the consumer is the source, owner and controller of this information resource. They will only 'invest' in those companies that offer them the greatest returns (Day 2003). As such, to truly understand the consumer we should aim "to embed information from the customer into the very way the organisation works rather than using information about the customer as an input into a decision about which way to steer" (Mitchell, 2002:76).

Davenport (2006) notes how not all decisions should be grounded wholly in analytics, recognising the importance of instinct and gut feeling in decision making. Mitchell (2002) elaborates on this potential danger with what he labels "The God Quest" - emphasising the tendencies of firms to search for ever more perfect information in the hope that perfect information will lead to perfect decision making. The intuitive dimension of decision making emphasises the importance of an organisation wide commitment to customer centricity and value creation throughout the information-gathering process. Keiningham et al. (2008) support Davenport's proposition, identifying the limited role of metrics. "*Metrics are tools that can assist them in making decisions, but metrics don't make the decision – they are only guidelines. A metric can't reduce complex, multifaceted constructs to one of two dimensions – and if it does, there's a good chance it will ignore one of more important aspects of the equation"* (Keiningham et al., 2008:57)

Research Methodology: The first stage of this research will be to conduct qualitative interviews with marketing managers to ascertain the changes which have occurred in their marketing practice and the developments and challenges in the areas cited above. We aim to compare companies who have obtained expertise with firms who lack the ability or drive in these areas. This research will guide the development of survey research to test the hypotheses which will be developed.

Conclusion: While for decades both value-creation and customer-centricity have existed throughout marketing theory, the crucial translation of these concepts to marketing practice has largely been absent. In an effort to keep costs low, firms often lose sight of their value creating role. Companies may aspire to offering a value proposition but if they fail to support the value-generating processes throughout the organisation, the customer may not fully realise the suggested value. While value is co-created, the company remains responsible for supporting the customer in their value actualization. This paper posits three strategies (bridging disciplinary silos, increasing accountability and improving customer information management) in an effort towards reducing this gap. It is suggest that a deeper understanding of these two pillars of marketing theory is required in order to reinstate a clearer, more customer oriented approach to marketing practice, which is essential in the current recessionary climate.

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