

German approaches to business-to-business marketing theory Origins and structure

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Abstract

The development of marketing as a discipline shows some differences between the US-dominated mainstream and theory emerging from Germany — particularly in the field of business-to-business marketing. Contemporary marketing thinking in this area in Germany is founded largely on institutional economics, with property rights theory, transaction cost economics (TCE), agency theory (AT) and information economics playing supporting roles. Based on these theories a ‘leistungs’ or ‘value’ approach has developed that permits the integration of concepts such as process thinking and services orientation in marketing with these other theories. An extended view of the system of marketing management is described that reveals new areas for marketing research and analysis in business-to-business marketing. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

The English word ‘marketing’ has been adopted without translation in most countries. This is because the establishment as well as much of the development of marketing as a modern scholarly and scientific endeavour in the 20th century took place in the US (Sheth et al., 1988). Yet it is inappropriate to ignore the existence of other marketing communities. Many of these have developed a life of their own, independent to a certain extent from mainstream (North American) marketing thinking, and have alternative and interesting perspectives to contribute to the development of marketing thought.

Such local, regional or national communities have been characterized as ‘black holes’ in marketing thinking. Black holes are astronomical objects absorbing all material coming too close but never giving back anything. This is a suitable metaphor for non-English-based marketing communities, in that, nowadays, many of these researchers are able to read English but hesitate to publish in English. An indication of this is that most marketing publications in languages other than English contain many references to English sources while English publications seldom refer to any non-English sources.

This article sheds some light on the nature and contribution of a German “black hole.” First, we provide a short

description of its historical development. We then focus on one area of thought that has not been developed to a great extent, we believe, elsewhere, i.e. business-to-business marketing theory based on institutional economics. We discuss the contributions made by the German approach and its areas of application.

1. Similarities and differences to “mainstream” thinking in marketing

Marketing has its origins in the economic theories of both the US and Germany with German-speaking economists playing an important role. For example, the so-called “Austrian School” at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was among the first to question pure equilibrium thinking and to widen the focus beyond demand curves and production functions. Later, the work of von Mises (1940) had an important impact on the thinking of Alderson (1957) and also, laid the foundation for the concept of generic strategies for achieving competitive advantage, later introduced into mainstream marketing thought by Porter (1985).

Bartels’ (1988) history marketing theory tells us that the first steps towards marketing becoming an independent discipline can be traced to the emergence of advertising research in the US in the first half of the 20th century. From this start emerged three major approaches to theory: a commodity approach, a functional approach

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and an institutional approach (Cherington, 1920; Clark, 1922; Copeland, 1924). At about the same time, similar developments occurred in Germany. Built around the work of Schäfer (1928) (see also Oberparleiter, 1930), these developments were driven not so much by an interest in advertising, but rather by the idea of demand being the dominant factor in business. German researchers were not concerned with establishing the marketing discipline but with developing a general theory of the firm. Between World War I and World War II, their work was influenced by American thinking and writing but was further developed and elaborated in Germany. During World War II, American influence stopped.

In the 1950s and 1960s, German thinking focussed more on integrating marketing thinking with the social sciences, which resulted in a behavioral orientation as well as the development of the marketing concept (Bubik, 1996). The work of Gutenberg (1955), especially his volume *‘Der Absatz’* took a more general perspective, focusing on marketing decisions and the tools available to support these decisions. His work is similar to the managerially oriented “4Ps” approach that emerged at about the same time in the US, but Gutenberg’s differs in terms of its theoretical foundation. While the 4Ps were derived from management experience and directed towards management support, Gutenberg developed a more general theory of the firm based on tools and methods originally used for economic analysis.

Another issue that was the focus of attention in the 1950s and 1960s was whether the term “marketing” meant something different than the German term “Absatz” — a question that has not yet been answered satisfactorily. The English word, “marketing,” was generally adopted in Germany around 1971 with the publication of the text book by Nieschlag et al. (1971) where ‘marketing’ replaced ‘Absatz’ in the title.

Backhaus (1998) argues that German researchers stopped following the US lead, when industrial marketing emerged as a discipline of its own. However, the early and still very influential industrial marketing book by Engelhardt and Günter (1981) adopted the US approach of the time, including a typology based on commodities. In addition, German researchers (e.g. Backhaus and Günter, 1976; Büschken, 1994) were influenced by US thinking on industrial decision-making (Robinson et al., 1967; Choffray and Lilien, 1978; Johnston and Bonoma, 1981).

The real beginning of independent German marketing thought occurred with the introduction of the so-called “interaction approach” (Kirsch and Kutschker, 1978, Gemünden, 1981), that was linked to the work of the IMP group (e.g. Hakansson, 1982). German authors began to make contributions to marketing thinking without reference to US thinking. Industrial marketing in the US was, and to some extent still is, characterized by a stimulus–response approach developed for consumer marketing, i.e. suppliers engage in marketing activities (stimuli), customers (the organism) perceive these activities and react (response). In

contrast, the interaction approach sees marketing as multi-directional rather than seller-directed and sees both buyers and sellers as acting strategically rather than purely in response to stimuli. Market transactions are not isolated, markets are not anonymous and buying has a process character. It would be wrong to see the interaction approach as a German development — it developed throughout Europe, in particular in Scandinavia. American authors also contributed to its development. For example, Alderson’s (1957) theoretical framework and his concept of ‘organized behavior system’ were influential.

The original interaction approach has been developed by German researchers using three main streams of thought: network thinking, exchange theory and new institutional economics (NIE).

In Germany, as elsewhere, most researchers associated with the interaction approach supported the development of the network approach as a comprehensive application of interaction thinking. This effort is institutionalized in the IMP Group, an informal association of researchers from around the world who meet frequently to exchange and share ideas. Although researchers from Germany are not prominent within the IMP group, they have both been influenced by it and contributed to it.

A second stream of thought emerged from the combination of traditional exchange theory and the new interaction approach. These two approaches are in many ways compatible, in particular, in their assumption that both parties to an exchange act strategically. A prominent example of this stream of thought is Backhaus’ (1997) textbook on industrial marketing, a very popular text in Germany. This text uses a combination of exchange theory and interaction thinking as the basis of its structure. In addition, Wulff Plinke and his disciples also have incorporated transaction cost economics (TCE) into their thinking (e.g. Kleinaltenkamp and Plinke, 1999) and have made significant contributions to the analysis of the dynamics of transactions (Plinke, 1989; Söllner, 1993).

The first two branches of interaction thinking in Germany have equivalents in other marketing communities, but the third stream, developed from ‘New Institutional Economics,’ is more specific to Germany. The starting point for this stream of thought is the publication of a working paper by Kaas (1992) (see also Kleinaltenkamp, 1992) that focused attention on uncertainty and on the various types of institutions that arise to overcome uncertainty. In terms of this focus, marketing is defined as the management of information and uncertainty in markets. This approach is described in the following sections.

2. NIE and business-to-business marketing theory

In mass markets, transactions are viewed as homogeneous and can be aggregated, whereas interaction thinking views each transaction as a separate unit of analysis. To highlight

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