



# Enacting customers—Marketing discourse and organizational practice

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## KEYWORDS

Customer orientation;  
Marketing discourse;  
Power/knowledge;  
Marketing practice;  
Public housing;  
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**Summary** This paper seeks to (A) contribute to a theoretical understanding of the organizational enactment of the customer and (B) illustrate how customers are enacted in two public industries: public housing and public transport. Empirically three instances of enactment are attended to within the two industries: customer rhetoric, operational procedures, and the physical customer environment.

The study shows how the customer emerges as an open object of managerial knowledge, influenced by contingencies present in and around the organizations. The study explicates the customer's role in organizational practice by bringing forward the dual function of reduction (of complex contingencies) and projection (of established organizational conditions) exercised when the customer of discourse is translated and enacted. It also questions the hegemonic/universal assumptions about customer orientation found in critical and managerial text, respectively.

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## Introduction

Marketing has evolved from a specialist subfield into an all-encompassing management discourse with ambitions to govern most aspects of both private and public organizations (Brownlie & Hewer, 2007; Brownlie, Saren, Wensley, & Whittington, 1999; Skålén, Fougère, & Fellesson, 2008). In fact, “marketing has become the soul of the corporation” (Deleuze, 1992: 6). The customer is central to the managerial philosophy of marketing (John, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), as well as to related prescriptive disciplines such as Service Management (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Grönroos, 2007; Schneider & Bowen, 1995) and Quality Management (Deming, 1986; Lengnick-Hall, 1996; Oakland, 1989), and hence also to

our understanding of organizational life. Through the idea that organizations should be shaped according to, e.g. ‘oriented towards’, customer needs and requirements, marketing has brought the customer into the very nexus of organizational practice. It is the customer's function and role in this practice that is the theme of this article. Specifically, the aim of the paper is to contribute to research into how marketing is practiced by (A) contributing to a theoretical understanding of the organizational enactment of the customer and (B) illustrating how customers are enacted in two public industries: public housing and public transport. The background to this aim is elaborated on below.

Organizational aspects of this orientation towards the customer have been critically analyzed and debated from several theoretical positions, including various formulations inspired by discourse analysis (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Du Gay, 1991; Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Hackley, 2003; Korczyński & Ott, 2004; Morgan, 1992, 2003; Rosenthal, Peccei, & Hill, 2001; Skålén et al., 2008). This literature has demon-

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strated the discursive nature of both the customer herself and the managerial interpretations of her, thereby contributing valuable insights into the organizational consequences of marketing. It has also been argued that the definition of the customer constitutes contested terrain (Gabriel & Lang, 1995), indicating that the content of the customer concept should not be taken for granted. However, most of these analyses share a preoccupation with the customer as an abstracted, discursive subject position (cf. Dean, 1999), offering little detailed understanding of how the customer of discourse is actually enacted in day-to-day organizational practice.

When enacted, the customer is given a concrete, articulated substance in the form of vocabularies and analogies, organizational arrangements and patterns of action, and various physical manifestations (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Douglas, 1986; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Latour, 1986). It is through such carriers the customer of discourse spreads between organisations and eventually integrates into the complex material and immaterial networks that constitute local organising. It is also these objectifications (rather than the abstract idea of the customer) that are confronted with other aspects of the social life in and around organisations.

The integration of the discursive customer into local conditions can be analyzed as a process of translation (cf. Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Latour, 1986). In the translation, both form and content may be altered, thereby creating tension between the customer as an ideology, or theory, and the customer as an aspect of organizational practice. This provides a strong argument for explicitly investigating not only what a customer is, according to discourse, but also what eventually emerges when discourse is enacted in practice (cf. Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000).

Studying customer discourse through the empirical lens of situational practice adds to the understanding of how the customer is constructed as a discursive subject and how and to what extent this subject influences organizational practice (see Rosenthal & Peccei, 2007 and Skålen & Fougère, 2007 for two examples of studies applying such approaches). In particular, studies of situations where the presence of customers is not naturalized and the logic of customer orientation is not self-evident might provide valuable insights. The presence of factors such as competing traditions, complex stakeholder interests, and inflexible operational conditions marked by economies of scale and resource inertia is likely to add challenges to the translation process as they are potentially contradicting the rationality customer orientation. Attending to situations where customers are enacted despite such challenges might help clarifying both the basic character and the limits of the customer idea of marketing discourse.

The widespread adoption of marketing ideals in the public sector during the 90s and 00s (Aberbach & Christensen, 2005; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) offers plenty of examples of such situations. Studying customers in "public" industries, albeit somewhat counterintuitive, also helps distinguishing marketing-as-(organizational-) practice, i.e. the managerial logic of marketing, from the market-making-practices producing of the overall market structure (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007: 142, cf. Cochoy, 1998). The sectors of public transport and public housing, where several programs have been launched which explicitly or implicitly promote the customer idea and

the ideals of the market, face all the challenges mentioned above. The realization of these programs has therefore the potential to bring forward key aspects of customers as a pivotal cornerstone of managerial marketing, as well as of how "customers" – as an abstract discursive notion – are enacted within organizational practice.

In the next section of the paper, the discursive character of the customer in mainstream marketing is outlined, and the analytical concepts of 'translation' and 'objects of knowledge' are introduced in order to open up the enactment of discourse to situational conditions. There then follows a discussion about how the data for the study has been collected and analyzed. Next, empirical illustrations are presented of the organizational enactment of the customer in the two industries mentioned above, public housing and public transport. Following previous research, three instances of the enactment have been dealt with customer rhetoric, operational procedures, and the physical customer environment. In "Discussion" section, two aspects of how the customer is enacted in practice are elaborated on; namely, how the customer reduces complexity and projects existing organizational conditions. It is also argued that the discursive formulation of the customer as an "open" (i.e. underdetermined) object of knowledge greatly contributes to its successful inclusion in organizational practice. Finally, the theoretical and empirical conclusions of the paper are summarized, and their implications for future research commented upon.

## Customers, organizations, and discourse

According to Foucault (1981, 1997), government ('the conduct of conduct') in late modernity is increasingly being characterized by the creation of regulated fields of freedom where self-regulating actors adjust themselves to fit the norms of conduct established in the specific field through systems of expert knowledge and language (cf. Rose, 1999). The result is the formation of coherent systems of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault, 1981), whereby the world is constructed, governed, and enacted on the basis of certain claims of knowledge. It is these systems that constitute discourse and 'institute actors together with their domains of action and self-regulating rules of the game' (Hasselbladh & Bejerot, 2007: 176). Specifically, discourse provides a way of talking about a particular subject, thereby constructing it in a certain way, in addition to providing the technologies and procedures for performing not only the subject itself, but also agencies who act on the subject (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1996).

In marketing discourse, the customer emerges as one such subject, of key importance not only to how the organization should relate to its environment, but also to the functioning of the organization itself and its employees. On a foundational level, the firm should be 'doing the things that will make people want to do business with it' (Levitt, 1960). This makes the customer someone to interact with in value-creating exchange relationships (Bagozzi, 1975; Morgan & Hunt, 1994, and someone to investigate and adapt to through strategies of customer- and market-orientation (Hunt & Lambe, 2000; John, 2003; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). The customer thus constitutes a central nodal point of marketing

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