



Theoretical developments in industrial marketing management: Multidisciplinary perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Marketing as a discipline in general, and industrial marketing in particular, has drawn upon a number of different theoretical perspectives from domains as diverse as organisational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology to further our understanding. However, to build this understanding and increase the relevance of marketing research, we need to be aware of the ontological assumptions and stances that such theoretical perspectives use. The purpose of this special issue is therefore to offer a platform for the exploration, comparison, application, and consideration of ontological choice and its implications in industrial marketing research. To achieve this we review early industrial marketing scholarship in this first section. In the second section, we identify the larger ebbs and flows that mark the development and advancement of industrial marketing research. In the final section, we provide an overview of the papers in this special issue in the form of a thematic exploration of theoretical developments in industrial marketing management research.

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1. Introduction: Reviewing the past and exploring the future of industrial marketing research

Marketing as a discipline in general, and industrial marketing in particular, has drawn upon a number of different theoretical perspectives from domains as diverse as organisational theory, systems analysis, economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology (Buvik, 2001; Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, & Berthon, 2003). As marketing researchers we not only draw upon these diverse theoretical perspectives, but we also regularly combine differing theoretical perspectives, from within and outside the management and marketing disciplines, to further our understanding. However, to build these new theoretical understandings and increase the relevance of marketing research, we need to be aware of the ontological assumptions and stances that such theoretical perspectives use. Knowing how conceptually close or distant differing theoretical approaches are to the marketing phenomena of interest and how compatible they are in terms of their underlying properties and characteristics in providing explanations will have a major impact on the contribution researchers may make in using such theories (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011).

Given the importance of ontology in framing research contributions, it is surprising that greater attention is not paid to exploring different ontological and epistemological approaches in industrial marketing research (Easton, 1998). The purpose of this special issue is therefore to offer a

platform for the exploration, comparison, application, and consideration of ontological choice and its implications in industrial marketing research. To achieve this we review early industrial marketing scholarship in this first section. In the second section, we identify the larger ebbs and flows that mark the development and advancement of industrial marketing research. In the final section, we provide an overview of the papers in this special issue in the form of a thematic exploration of theoretical developments in industrial marketing management research.

1.1. Taking stock of early industrial marketing scholarship

Why would our introduction to this special issue of *IMM*, with a remit to explore the role and development of theory in industrial marketing, consider the origins and identity of the field? George Day (1996:14) reflected on the importance of histories thus: “Histories serve many functions. They reveal our origins, celebrate our successes, and remind us of our debts to our intellectual ancestors. A history also helps interpret the past by identifying the reasons for important transitions.” Therefore, prior to embarking on an exposition of theory in industrial marketing it is worth pausing momentarily to consider the foundations of the field. In so doing, we will be much better served when appraising current thinking on the topic in the subsequent papers in this issue and industrial marketing scholarship in general. With almost a century of industrial marketing research having been undertaken, it also seems fitting that we pay tribute to early contributions from neophyte industrial marketers. The purpose of this section is not to provide a periodization of industrial

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marketing, nor is it intended to consider schools of industrial marketing thought, – many good examples of this already exist (cf. Shaw & Jones, 2005; Wilkie & Moore, 2003) – or even provide a historiography of industrial marketing¹ but rather to revisit our disciplinary identity.

Identifying the genesis of industrial marketing is problematic. Although it was not until the latter half of the 20th century before industrial marketing really began to gain momentum as a field of interest within marketing in its own right, considerations of transactions between organisations are as old as the discipline of marketing itself (cf. Copeland, 1924; Elder, 1935; Mehren, 1930; Shaw, 1916; Weld, 1916). It was, however, with Melvin T. Copeland's collection of short case studies, *Marketing Problems* (1920) and *Cases in Industrial Marketing* (1930), that the subject of industrial marketing arguably receives its earliest mention and consideration, although the first dedicated text to deal with the topic was John Hutchinson Frederick's (1934) *Industrial Marketing*. Although one can argue that the discipline of marketing itself was conceived with studies of industrial markets as noted: the origins of industrial marketing lie in the Mid-West of the USA and are rooted (pun intended) in studies of the marketing of agricultural products (e.g. Weld's, 1916 *Studies in the Marketing of Farm Products*).

Although industrial marketing is regarded as one of the traditional elements of marketing (Zober, 1971), it was not, however, until the publication of *IMM* in September 1971 that the first dedicated outlet for industrial marketing scholarship was available. With its publication, industrial marketing finally emerged as a legitimate sub-field within marketing. Since then, research on industrial marketing has flourished (cf. Reid & Plank, 2000; Webster, 1978; Wilkinson, 2001, for thoughtful discussions of the evolution of industrial marketing scholarship). However, it was quite some time before the first courses in industrial marketing were being offered, and research in industrial marketing began to gain any critical momentum. The early momentum in industrial marketing research had appeared to stall for a short period between the mid-1930s and mid-1960s. Indeed, by the early 1960s E. Raymond Corey² (Professor of Marketing at Harvard Business School for over forty years, and one of the founders of the Harvard Business School Press in 1984) was lamenting the paucity of scholarship on industrial marketing. He notes; "Surveying the great volume of marketing literature, one is struck by the fact that a relatively small amount of it is devoted to the problems and techniques of marketing industrial goods. Instead, particular interest has been shown in consumer goods selling on the part of those writing in the marketing field" (Corey, 1962: v).

Corey (1962) introduced a text on cases and concepts in industrial marketing and taught what is regarded as the first university course dedicated to industrial marketing in 1957 at the Harvard Business School (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Other institutions followed Harvard's lead, and arguably the greatest advance in marketing scholarship in the latter part of the twentieth-century was in the domain of industrial marketing. Contributions from numerous researchers (cf. Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Heinritz, 1971; Robinson, Faris, & Wind, 1967; Sheth, 1973; Webster & Wind, 1972a, 1972b) laid the foundations of the field and raised its profile in areas such as organisational buying behaviour and industrial marketing. This resulted in hundreds of papers being published by scholars being drawn to the emerging area of industrial marketing (Johnston & Lewin, 1996). The mid-life crises had been averted.

1.2. Industrial marketing and its major areas of research: A view from the field

In a comprehensive review of scholarship in industrial marketing, LaPlaca and Katrichi (2009) identified six major areas of industrial marketing discourse: sales and sales management, buyer behaviour,

innovation/NPD, marketing strategy/management, channels/distribution, and buyer–seller relationships. It is to these topics that we now briefly turn. In so doing, we issue a caveat concerning the period in which our discussion is framed. Our attempt to take stock of the field largely confines itself to scholarly texts between Copeland's contribution of collected cases (1930) and the early 1980s, when conferences and academic movements devoted to the topic of industrial marketing (e.g. the inaugural Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group conference held in Manchester in 1984, the Institute for the Study of Business Markets founded in 1983 at Penn State, and the Centre for Business and Industrial Marketing founded in 1996 at Georgia State) would indicate the formalization of the field. A second caveat refers to the extent to which industrial marketing scholars can fairly lay claim to these topics, given that they are also in some cases distinct fields in their own right (e.g. innovation/NPD). Nevertheless, we have endeavoured to restrict our discussion where possible to recognised industrial marketing scholars.

1.2.1. Sales and sales management

In a survey-based paper published in the *Journal of Marketing* in 1945, training and supervising salespersons was ranked by scholars in the field as of considerable importance in terms of key concepts to teach students (Converse, 1945: 16). Although admittedly much of the content in such classes was probably devoted to the issue of retail sales to the public, we might assume that some pioneers were already thinking about the marketing practices that occur within the supply chain. It is not surprising that early studies in industrial marketing emphasised selling given that much of the early momentum in marketing scholarship take place against a backdrop of financial hardship in the early- to mid-part of the 20th century. The sales era (1930–1950) is one regarded as companies promoting hard-selling techniques, and the customer frequently taking a secondary role to profit (Friedman, 1998). This coincided with the Great Depression, which ultimately forced companies to pay more attention to the needs of customers. Particularly notable during this period is the efforts of Fredericks' 1919 text *Modern Salesmanagement*, in which he emphasises the importance of sales strategy, territory management and expounds the qualities of sales personnel in a comprehensive text for its time providing coverage of 34 sales-related topics. This work was later advanced by Thomas (1982) who published on aspects of interpersonal purchase influence in organisations in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

1.2.2. Buyer/buying behaviour

Of all the areas in which industrial marketing research has been undertaken, organisational buying behaviour arguably has the greatest lineage (cf. Fearon, 1989 for an insightful historical discussion of the evolution of the purchasing function). The Wall Street crash of October 1929 ushered in the period of the Great Depression in the U.S. (which became ultimately a global recession), and would continue during the early part of the second global World War, causing an era of fiscal concern, high unemployment, and devastation to numerous key sectors (including construction, forestry, and most heavy industries). The first New Deal (1933–1934), witnessed the inception of the National Recovery Administration, which oversaw the policy decision to set maximum prices and wages, and attempts to control cutthroat competition. These necessitated businesses to manage their buying decisions and budgets more carefully. Against this backdrop, there was considerable optimism over the broader role that marketing could play during the Second World War and in a post-war world with the promotion of democratic forms of government (cf. Bernays, 1942, calling for marketers to extol the virtues of democracy).

1.2.3. Innovation/NPD

Although the viability of certain new products has been a long-standing area of interest to marketers (Burchard, 1935), the area of innovation and new product development (NPD) is a somewhat curious

¹ Studies concerning the history and/or contribution of industrial marketing are unfortunately few in number (LaPlaca, 1997; Lilien, 1987; Reid & Plank, 2000; Wilkinson, 2001).

² For more information on E. Raymond Corey see: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/06.10/39-coreyobit.html>.

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