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Actionable marketing knowledge: A close reading of representation, knowledge and action in market research

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ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualizes the notion of *actionable marketing knowledge* by investigating how market researchers produce and justify actionable recommendations for their clients. We build upon the market practices approach, as well as a close reading of market research reports, to conceptualize the rhetorical strategies used to guide firms into action. The findings show three rhetorical strategies: First, *framing managerial anomalies* draws managerial attention to perplexing situations. Second, *loading instruments with meaning* develops a narrative in which charts and tables “speak for themselves.” Third, *signposting prescriptions* reduces interpretive flexibility by encoding guidelines within the text intended to lead readers to an intended interpretation. The relevance for business marketing is that by studying the ways representations are encoded in business reports, business scholars can better understand knowledge calibration in the theory-praxis gap.

1. Introduction

Marketing knowledge is an important concept in marketing theory (Eisend, 2015), but scholars tend to focus on its declarative aspect (know what) rather than its procedural aspect (know how) (Lilien, Rangaswamy, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2002; Rossiter, 2001). This can be a limitation by overemphasizing the codified knowledge at the expense of its application (Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014). To address this limitation, scholars call for more research on how marketers solve managerial problems at work, just like engineers do (Uncles, 2002). In other words, scholars call for more research about “how marketing is actually done in organizations” (Skälén & Hackley, 2011, p. 189).

“Actionable marketing knowledge” was the key construct used in this investigation. From a broad perspective, the construct refers to the somewhat coherent meanings situated within the marketing worldview that are intended to enact managerial action. More formally, actionable marketing knowledge is how “declarative knowledge” (Eisend, 2015) and “procedural knowledge” (Wierenga, 2002) interact in a situated managerial context, and as part of a codified marketing ontology (Rossiter, 2001).

This study investigates actionable marketing knowledge in the context of market research. Market researchers are knowledge-intensive business service firms (KIBS) (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Santos & Spring, 2015) that produce market representations to enable managers to act within their business environment (Diaz Ruiz, 2013).

The theoretical anchor of this investigation is in the market practices stream (Kjellberg, Azimont, & Reid, 2015; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Mason, Friesl, & Ford, in press), as well as the stream on constructive market research (Bjerrisgaard & Kjeldgaard, 2013; Diaz Ruiz, 2013; Nilsson & Helgesson, 2015). This stream argues that representations have the capacity to expand business strategies available to firms (Hagel, Brown, & Davison, 2008), for example, firms re-imagine future versions of markets, and then work towards bringing into effect novel market configurations (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010). Similarly, researchers found that marketing managers place less importance on the “truth value” of market research reports and more importance on the production of compelling accounts that impose a sense of order (Jacobi, Freund, & Araujo, 2015).

Our research question is as follows: “How do market researchers frame social practices into marketing knowledge that is made actionable for their clients?” To answer this question, we choose to study the complicated interactions between representation, knowledge and action (Rabinow, 1986; Von Krogh, 1998) to investigate how market researchers construct marketing knowledge for their clients. To detail, we audited market research reports to understand the sequential validations used to stabilise accounts as facts (Latour, 1999; Smith, 1978) and build devices intended for guidance (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1992). Thus, this study provides a response to the call for more research to support market researchers in their objective to regain relevance (Phillips, 2011) and for marketing scholars to support the construction

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of meaningful managerial insights (Klaus & Edvardsson, 2014; Nenonen, Brodie, Storbacka, & Peters, 2017).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the key constructs—representation, knowledge and action—both in the social sciences and in marketing research. Section 3 presents the method, empirical materials and analysis. Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 discusses the implications for theory and managerial practice.

2. Theoretical frame

2.1. Representation, knowledge and action

2.1.1. Representation

Representation is the act of portraying objects, people and events in the world through products of the mind, such as concepts and signs (Stern, 2004). In its simplest terms, a representation stands for something else; however, a representation may have either a strong or weak correlation with the original object. The strong version is like a reproduction in which the representation and the object are mistaken to be the same. The weak version is a simulation in which the representation and object differs (Baudrillard, 1994/2004). This distinction is anchored in Western thought, for example for Aristotle, *mimesis* means that the creations of the mind seemingly reflect objects of the world. In contrast to the Aristotelian tradition, scholars like Baudrillard (1994/2004) and Bateson (1972/2000) argued that representations precede the social reality that they supposedly mimic. More than simply standing for an underlying original and pre-existing object, representations call into being, and quite literally produce, that to which they supposedly refer (Hall, 1997).

2.1.2. Representation and knowledge

Representation and knowledge have different meanings (Rabinow, 1986). Knowledge is a system of “justified true beliefs” that can be either formal and explicit or informal and tacit (Von Krogh, 1998, p. 135). “To know,” for Rabinow (1986, p. 235), “is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so, to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations,” but for Rabinow representation and knowledge differ: “Philosophy’s eternal concern is to be a general theory of representations, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretence of doing so).”

Constructivists argue that people use symbols to indicate meaning and thus construct knowledge. Marcus and Fischer (1999, p. 12) developed the notion of a “crisis of representation” to explain the complicated relationship between representation and knowledge as “problems of interpretation of a reality that eludes the ability of dominant paradigms to describe it, let alone explain it.” Moreover, Smith’s (1978) “factual accounts” describe the ways people use language games to authorise an account as factual and convince each other to recognise the validity of assertions they make. One consequence is that even facts must be agreed upon. Latour (1999) developed a “circulating reference” to explain how scientists agree on facts using devices progressively loaded with meaning that “speak for themselves” (Latour, 1999, p. 102).

2.1.3. Representation and action

Because representations involve systematic distortion and non-resemblance (Baudrillard, 1994/2004), using representations to act requires active interpretations to assign a context to knowledge (Bateson, 1972/2000). One example is the *map maker’s dilemma* (Korzybski, 1994[1933]), which describes the complicated relationships between representation, knowledge and action. For Korzybski (1994[1933]), mapmakers rely on creative distortions to design useful maps. For example, because of their intended use, a nautical map differs

significantly from a geopolitical map.

In a much-circulated quote, Baudrillard (1994/2004, p. 365) wrote that “abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance,” and later continues “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory.” Managerial scholars have advanced the notion that representation can precede action. In *Reframing business: When the map changes the landscape*, Normann (2001) argued that firms can use representations to shape business markets. For example, firms envision a more effective market configuration and then shape markets by organising others to enact that vision (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2011).

2.2. Market representations, marketing knowledge and actionable marketing knowledge

2.2.1. Market representations

Marketing scholars recognise that representations rarely describe markets directly and unequivocally (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006; Stern, 2004). Managers represent social reality through a series of simplifications and abstractions that differ not only in modes of production (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010), but also in means of interpretation (Day & Nedungadi, 1994). In market representations, marketers select objects from social reality and translate them into the ontology of markets (Diaz Ruiz, 2013).

While representations may either strongly or weakly correspond to reality, market representations are so widely used that managers often assume strong correspondences. For example, managers rely on marketing conventions to translate social practices into marketing concepts (Day & Nedungadi, 1994). If the conventions are followed, the correspondence between representation and knowledge is taken for granted. However, conventions are not always successful thus representation and knowledge differ. One example is the debate whether asking purchasing intentions to establish market share fits with actual sales; while it is possible that the figures overlap, it is also possible that this form of representation is distorted from observed behaviour. To account for these differences Diaz Ruiz and Kowalkowski (2014) distinguished between *representational accuracy* and *representational actionability*. *Representational accuracy* refers to the correspondence or closeness between the findings that market researchers re-present as well as actual market practices (cf. Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Nenonen et al., 2014). *Representational actionability* refers to constructing meaningful programs of action that firms can implement.

2.2.2. Marketing knowledge

Rossiter (2002) distinguished between five forms of marketing knowledge: 1. Marketing concepts are the building blocks or semantic choices that define a marketing ontology. 2. Structural frameworks refer to a classification scheme “that helps to organise, and therefore begins to solve, a marketing problem” (Rossiter, 2001, p. 14). 3. Empirical generalisations are relationships between marketing concepts (if-then). Generalisations are at the core of academic marketing (Eisend, 2015). 4. Strategic principles are prescriptions or guidelines used to identify a situation and choose a response (if-do). 5. Research principles are also guidelines used to understand the business environment. Rossiter (2001, p. 19) stated that “the prescription, though, is to use or commission a particular market research technique, rather than to take a particular strategic action.”

Not all marketing knowledge is declarative. “Marketing decision-makers in practice have a much richer treasure of marketing knowledge at their disposal than the codified body of knowledge that has emerged from systematic academic research” (Wierenga, 2002, p. 355). In other words, research in marketing has focused on declarative knowledge at the expense of procedural marketing knowledge (Jones & Tadjajewski, 2011; Uncles, 2002; Wierenga, 2002). Procedural marketing knowledge can be defined as “all the insights and convictions about marketing

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