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Consumer Research For (The Benefit Of) Consumers

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ABSTRACT

The historical nature of business research is briefly discussed in this paper to identify the elements that have caused such research, including most of consumer research, to have limited use by a singular audience: business organizations. Then, the possibilities of expanding the orientation of consumer research in order to produce knowledge that is usable for the benefit of consumers are explored, with special attention to research that can be guided by the interests of consumer communities.

ARTICLE

Historical Orientations of Business Research

Business disciplines and academics have long damaged their respectability by limiting the audience for which they have produced knowledge and provided their services. This audience is, in general, the organizations, but specifically, the business corporations. Consumer research, which began as the consumer behavior area within the marketing discipline, has not been able to completely escape this limitation despite the efforts of many consumer researchers (See, for example, Belk 1991; Holbrook 1987; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

Scientific research has been separated in relatively recent history into basic and applied research where basic research is expected to produce knowledge that could be of use to anyone who wishes to understand the universe and the world, and to apply it for any purpose. Applied research, on the other hand, starts not from a general interest or curiosity for discovery, but from an interest in solving a specific problem that an interested party encounters. For business disciplines this specific interest has largely been one of

improving the efficiency of business operations, and efficiency has been defined in terms of profitability. Consequently, business disciplines as applied research areas, have been and are largely considered to be involved in advocacy research; advocating greater profitability of and for organizations. As such, members of other disciplines, notably the social science disciplines, have mostly perceived knowledge coming out of the business disciplines, including consumer research, as biased and as usable by only organizations in realizing organizational goals.

Unfortunately, this perception on the part of academics outside of the business disciplines may mostly be true. While in business disciplines, especially in marketing--the mother discipline of consumer research--there is the assumption that helping organizations have success will, in the end, work to the benefit of all society, the many inconsistencies recognized between the goals and interests of organizations (including business corporations, government agencies, and other types of organizations) and the good of the public or the society in general make it difficult to keep arguing for the validity of this assumption. History is replete with examples of how for many owners and managers of organizations the organizational ends, specifically profits, become the primary and only concern, and how interests of the general public become compromised. Unless reined by processes outside of the market, such as the political, corporations following profit goals seem apt to produce many harmful consequences, including pollution of the environment, hazards to public and employee health, and exploitation of consumers.

While the academics and textbooks of business disciplines will insist on ethical behavior by organizations and on social responsibility, the role of business research is generally to advance the benefits/interests of business. Consequently, unless and until there is an overt effort on the part of the members of these disciplines to advance the benefits/interests of other constituencies, such as the consumers and the public in general, the perception and the practice of their particular advocacy will not change.

Difficulties to Overcome

Two major hurdles have to be overcome in this quest. One is the transformation in the mindset of business academics. For some time now, the whole system of the business academy has been geared to produce a certain type of knowledge--how to make organizations efficient, as mentioned above--and this is ingrained in the teaching, doctoral programs, journals and other publication procedures, academic promotion processes, and the like; that is, in every aspect and phase of knowledge production in business disciplines. It is not

an easy task to transform this ingrained workings of the disciplines, and thus the mindset of their members.

The second major hurdle to overcome is one of allocation of resources. The current system in the business disciplines is largely funded by the corporations that benefit from its knowledge outputs. Resources and recognition are conferred upon producers of this type of knowledge that both enable and motivate them to produce more of it. Are the other potential constituencies and benefactors of knowledge generation from business disciplines equipped--resource-wise and otherwise--to provide such support, or are there intrinsic joys of producing knowledge for a wider range of audiences that can be fostered by other means? Again, not easy hurdles to cross.

Yet, to move in the direction of overcoming the hurdles, it is important to have media that connect, inform, encourage, and represent the researchers who have a desire to produce basic knowledge that is usable by the unconventional audiences, as well as the audiences that have been left out of the knowledge loop. For consumer researchers one audience is especially the consumers who have been researched so that the marketers can be informed about them, but have rarely if ever been informed by consumer research. That is why journals such as this are extremely important for future respectability of business disciplines.

Towards Change for Consumer Research

Having hopefully laid the foundation for the need for a new orientation in business disciplines, in general, and consumer research, in particular, I want to move on to a discussion of how such a new orientation may be begun.

History of the "Consumer"

First, it is important to understand the (hi)story of how the human individual became the "consumer." Existence of the human individual in the consumer identity is a historical cultural construction. That is, the consumer is a construction, not a phenomenon independent of the points of view human culture has developed and institutionalized. That in certain activities we would designate the human being as a consumer is completely that: our designation. It is our definitions and viewpoints that make one a consumer, or a producer. Why would a culture wish to develop definitions of phenomena that result in classifying certain moments of human life as consumption, and thus, those engaged in these moments as consumers?

It seems to me that the initial rationale for categorizing purposeful

human activity into production and consumption was not to articulate consumption, but to articulate and promote activities that represented "production." Founders of modern economic thought as we recognize them, such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, were intent on analyzing the basis of economic wealth; in order to understand what produced the "wealth of nations" (Smith 1776; Ricardo 1819). Those activities and processes that contributed to the expansion or growth of such wealth, in their minds, needed to be identified and enhanced, articulated and privileged. Consequently, activities that furthered accumulation of economic value were designated (defined) to be productive, constituting production. Activities that did not, in effect distracting from production, were classified as "consumptive," constituting consumption. While distracting from production, many of these consumptive activities were, nevertheless, necessary for re-energizing the "producers." Just if society could keep these to the necessary minimum, and make the use of productive energies and resources not allocated to consumption economically efficient, the maximization of wealth (economic value) could be achieved.

Consumption and consumers did not get the attention of economists for a long time, until in early 20th Century when the necessity of their presence for maximization of production and economic wealth was realized. If consumers did not consume, it was understood, production did not materialize and translate into economic value and, thus, wealth. The system was not a single but a double sided, two faceted whole within the economics framework that had been institutionalized into the way that modern society "worked." It dawned on the consciousness of those who formulated policies and strategies to develop modern society that as much as it was important to turn members of society into productive people, producers, it was just as important and necessary to "consumerize" them in order to realize the modern project of improving human lives by controlling nature through scientific technologies (Angus 1989). Through such consumerization, the products of production would find "useful" ends, have "homes" to be absorbed into, commanding a willingness to be "bought," and thus realize economic value.

Since, especially, the Keynesian revolution in economics, and the advent of consumer marketing--that both gained momentum during the same period of the 20th Century is not a coincidence--the consumerization of the human individual has been accomplished in full force. There are elements of this consumerization that complement the perspective of the business disciplines discussed at the beginning, that, in effect, institutionalize and render the consumers as targets of research rather than as those informed by

research.

One important element of consumerization is the "individualization" of the human being. While, for example, in economic production the human individual is integrated into a producing community (factories, plantations, offices, etc.) in her/his constitution as a producer, the end consumer is largely separated from community in her/his construction. Indeed, the individual producer may be alone in her/his creativity, but her/his eventual success will always depend on how well s/he cooperates, organizes, and collaborates with others. In the construction of the modern consumer, on the other hand, the greatest success as a consumer is imagined to be predicated on one's independence from others. While production has been constructed as a collective enterprise, construction of consumption in modern culture isolates the consumer. The more independent the consumer, it is conceived, the more able is s/he to maximize her/his level of prosperity and satisfaction, because then s/he can develop and balance her/his preferences to attain the maximum without interference. Furthermore, the consumer has already the best insight into her/his own needs and desires. So, why would s/he need research to be told what s/he already knows the best! The consumer, for satisfying her/his needs to replenish energies for the next day's work of production, was assumed to innately have the knowledge s/he required. The way things were conceptualized in modernity, it was the producing organizations that needed to develop knowledge about the consumers in order to satisfy them. And they had the funds to support research for this purpose. Thus, the business disciplines followed this path of reasoning, and the funds, to become servants to corporations.

Furthermore, a "consumer" is seen as the end user, and end use (consumption) is conceptualized as a process where the products consumed are utilized and depleted of their value, not producing something of economic value. Consider, for example, the television set or the automobile consumed by the consumer. Such consumption is not (ac)counted as a contribution to the national economic wealth. Rather, the consumer is devouring the value that was inscribed into these goods as they were "produced." As s/he gets entertainment or mobility from owning and using these goods, s/he depletes their value and modern accounting depreciates this loss of value in the books.

So, consumerized, the human being is not contributing value to the economy, and in the modern way of thinking, therefore, to society. The consumer is a parasite. What would be the purpose of arming a parasite with information or more knowledge? The human being in her/his productive role, that is, within the organized entities of

production, merits being informed. In addition, the idea that no one has the right to tell the consumer how s/he should consume in his/her private time, as long as s/he does not harm anyone else, has been an integral part of modern ideology. In separating the public and private domains, modern discourse has squarely placed personal freedom in the private domain, the sphere of consumption, where the individual can and should practice her/his freedoms. Given the elements of this modern ideology, the role of business disciplines as we know it today is rational and reasonable.

Changing Perspectives

These modern constructions of the consumer and consumption are now highly suspect. More and more, the distinctions made between production and consumption, producer and consumer are becoming blurred. This set of constructions to formulate and legitimate a certain economic perspective of wealth and affluence is under scrutiny and attack as competing perspectives of human purpose and well-being gain credibility.

One perspective that is gaining ground is related to the post-structuralist, postmodernist orientations (Foster 1983; Lyotard 1984). An aspect of this perspective is the move away from modernist binary oppositions or categorizations, such as consumption-production, consumer-producer. As constructions of human social experience based on such oppositional categories yield to more multi-layered and multi-faceted constructions, new possibilities of organizing human activity arise. It is increasingly evident, for example, that the human being engaged in activities deemed as consumption in modern perspectives is, in effect, producing a multiplicity of meanings, experiences, identities, and values--economic and otherwise (Baudrillard 1981). It seems reasonable, therefore, that rather than rend the human being into a dualistic existence of consumer-producer, we can gain great(er) insight into the human experience by articulating human action (and agency) in its multiplicity and complexity. The consumer is not, thus, at an end of any process, but a moment in a continual process of production, a process that is not linear but multi-layered and multi-faceted, a truly complex, process. The human being is a multi-"talented" performer in this process (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

It is clear that the consumer-entity of the human being has been disprivileged and disempowered, disenchanting in the modern construction of the social experience in being excluded from and opposed to the organizations that were, in effect, served by her/his producer-entity. The way that modern discourse constructed the social world ended-up privileging the organizations, especially those

that were economically powerful--the corporations. As the "productive" entities in human society they have been afforded the benefits and the advantages; after all, they, in employing the producer-entity of the human being and rendering her/him productive, realized the modern human dream: increase economic wealth and, thus, better the human lot.

As the performer, a producer in every moment, each "consumer" may be now considered "in business," and, for this reason also, business disciplines ought to recognize the performer-consumer as a legitimate audience for their knowledge generation efforts. However, the business of the performer is qualitatively different from that of the modern organization. Her/his business is not to produce offerings for others to use as much as it is to produce oneself and one's life experiences and meanings. Granted that such production is not, cannot be, an individual act, but involves communities. For this reason, as well as because of the transformation in the construction of the consumer, the new consumer research will be required to develop and/or advance some new methods or applications, and transform its orientation.

New Consumer Research for Consumers

What does it mean to research consumers in a way that benefits them--remembering that the term consumer from here on signifies a performer, involved in multi-faceted production? Assuming that consumer research is research to find out what, why and how consumers think, feel and behave, what can we learn in such research to benefit consumers themselves? What do people benefit from learning about themselves? It is clear how such knowledge may help those who wish to control and/or interact with people, or to modify and/or reinforce behaviors, feelings, and thoughts of people. So, one outcome of consumer research for consumers may be to enable people to modify and/or reinforce their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors in directions they deem helpful to their own success--however defined--and happiness.

The closest example we have for such a model may come from psychology, or more specifically, psychoanalysis. Yet, this example is highly individualistic, where the benefits of a deeper understanding of oneself may help one individual to reinforce some and modify other behaviors, for example, to find greater happiness, success, comfort, etc. A different example comes from medicine where greater understanding of the human organism provides the basis for improving social as well as individual health. Finally, a third example is the social science disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, which provide knowledge to control institutions and social interactions to improve the quality of human life. It could be

argued that research in all these fields is already consumer research to benefit the consumer, and therefore, there is not much else to be done, that the way things are is the result of the historical division of labor among disciplines: they all study the same material from different points of view. Business disciplines to help organizations, social science disciplines, medical disciplines, etc., to help the consumers by informing governments, social agencies, doctors, and the like. What else is there to be done?

The answer is in the transforming meaning, thus the new construction of the consumer. As a producer of life experiences, identities, and meanings, the performer-consumer becomes a constructor, a signifier of what is to become, of the potential(s), and is no longer simply a reproducer of the past or present experiences and conditions of consumption. The postmodern consumer, the performer, therefore, needs research that enables and empowers the communities s/he belongs to, and thereby her/him, to produce/construct what is imaginable (the imaginary) in terms of life experiences, meanings and identities more than research that reifies or reconstructs that which is. The performer-consumer requires research that enables the *presentational* mode of action--a mode that empowers the actor to present potentials and possibilities by having a chance and facility for performing them. The contemporary mode of research, on the other hand, is of a *representational* mode--a mode that represents what is rather than enable what can be. This contemporary mode largely reinforces the status quo, even when it represents that which is more successful--however defined--or that which is likely to help attain what is sought.

Representational research, which is a logical extension of the beliefs about reality and/or truth in modern thought, tends to "calsify" reality rather than open it up to yet unexperienced potentials. If all that we research is to *represent* what, why and how consumers think, feel and behave, how are we to *present* what, why and how they could think, feel and behave? The scientific power of knowing what is often drowns out the possibility of what could be.

Facilitating Research

The postmodern consumer, in the presentational mode of research, is not a subject in the sense of being the one who is observed, experimented upon, or studied, but one who determines and directs the "investigation." The scientist/researcher, in this case, plays the role of a facilitator. The purpose of such consumer research is to provide time, space, opportunity, and organizational guidance for consumers to form communities that construct potentials, try out modes of being, and experiment with alternative meanings.

The promise of such consumer research is *enablement* of the consumer, not her/his *satisfaction*. The consumer becomes the producer or constructor in this process rather than a chooser (choice-maker) among alternatives that have been constructed or produced to satisfy her/him. The researcher becomes the consumer's partner in construction. The marketing organization becomes merged with the consumer instead of an entity that has clear boundaries that separate it and place it and the consumer as parties in relationship but distinct.

This concept of partnership may sound difficult at first, but there are examples of such research, and of organization of marketing. One example from the political arena is the Highlander School (Horton and Freire 1990). Founded around the Appalachian region of the United States, the Highlander School, under Myles Horton's leadership, facilitated communities of miners, educators, and civil rights advocates, among others, to form and formulate modes of living and relating to environmental and social forces that surrounded them. There are several success stories that come out of this example (Glen 1996). Miner communities were able to organize to improve their living conditions, and the civil rights movement was strengthened by participants who formulated and strategized communal actions at the Highlander School.

Another example from the technology field is the Electronic Cafe, later to become Electronic Cafe International with a presence in several cities around the Earth. Two artists started this establishment that soon became a community (Galloway and Rabinowitz 1989). They convinced several producers of technology products to donate prototypes of products that they considered developing. These were made available at the Cafe, where people could get drinks and sandwiches and pastries, but also have access to the high-tech products. Here, people engaged in developing uses and improvements for the products, many times integrating their uses and, thus, indicating to the companies the kinds of uses and developments they, the consumers, would like to see for technology products. These consumers were constructing products and usage experiences, rather than confronting products that were finished and on the shelves, with only the options to buy or not buy. Virtual reality applications were some of the favorites.

Conclusion

The two examples above are examples of research where the consumers are enabled to become researchers themselves, researching possibilities and trying alternative constructions of living with and in communities, performing modes of being in order to present potentially enchanting and meaningful life experiences.

This form of research, therefore, is for the benefit of the performer-consumers, human beings in general. Clearly such research requires an expansion of the concept of research. For too long, business disciplines, and social science disciplines in general, have understood research to be a process of discovering what is rather than what can be. Furthermore, research has been constructed to be "implemented" by research experts, "administered" on/to research subjects. As I have briefly tried to express, such conventional research has the inherent tendency to produce knowledge that informs those who can afford (to pay for) it, or those who have the resources to make use of it.

Asking that the research concept be expanded to include forms of research that are conducive to be for the benefit of consumers is not a call to abolish conventional research. All research approaches are needed and will continue to be employed. Instead, this is a call to expand our research repertoires to even the playing field among all potential constituencies of knowledge.

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