

## Book Review

David Soberman & Dilip Soman, Eds.

*Flux: What Marketing Managers Need to Navigate the New Environment*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In the “Foreword” to Soberman and Soman’s collection of fifteen lively essays, Roger Martin, the Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, takes what he deems to be a risk. “While it is dangerous for a management school to show favouritism to one scholarly business discipline over another, I can claim that sentimentality drives me towards marketing.”

In that sentence dwell dangers beyond simple sentimentality. They are contained in the phrase “scholarly business discipline.” It is not necessary to don the habit of a medieval monk to be wary of the notion that business “disciplines” are in any serious sense “scholarly.” If nothing else, the term connotes disinterested inquiry into profound questions and the quest for at least provisional truths in traditional human-studies and, by relatively recent promotion, the natural and social sciences as well.

Business, on the other hand, may make instrumental use of the work of economists, psychologists and even ethicists when the going gets tough; but, it is hard to think of the study of interest rates, commodity markets, real estate transactions, product focus groups and advertising copy as authentically “scholarly.” And, among all the skills needed to succeed in business (with or without “really trying”), the field of marketing—whether in the effort to sell pre-owned vehicles, snack foods, fragrances, vacations or second-hand military hardware—seems especially far removed from poetics and aesthetics, the contemplation of justice and the good society, or reflections on the order of the celestial bodies and the creation of the heavens.

That, at least, is a caricature of the bias of what are sometimes predismised as traditional thinkers whose time, as we all know, has long since passed. The absent-minded professor of philosophy or literature is now only occasionally tolerated as an antique curiosity and minimally indulged in practical academic affairs within great research and teaching universities today.

This, after all, is the twenty-first century. The ethos of the business world has permeated higher education no less than any other aspect of the public sector. Commercialization of research is the premise upon which both government and private-sector funds are delivered to chemistry, engineering and computer science departments. Meantime, the measure of a “quality undergraduate education” in any field is an objective assessment of “customer” (formerly student) satisfaction with the “experience” of learning and the “value added” in terms of “marketable skills” among graduates.

Within colleges and universities, which comprise the vast marketplace of mass and, now, universal education, we are witnessing the increased commitment to digitalized “delivery systems” for commodified curricula. Both skills training and even most liberal of the liberal arts are now being refashioned for online and blended courses in which actual attendance on a campus, much less in a classroom is no longer taken for granted.

Innovation, defined mainly as the use of technological means to deliver pre-packaged learning modules to passive, isolated and uncritical students is the widely acclaimed way of the future. So broadly applicable is this vision of the future that few medium-sized or large-scale human organizations seem exempt. The same business principles are said to apply to commerce, industry, resource development, government and even NGOs. There is a presumption of scarcity and the implied inevitability of competition. The primacy of entrepreneurship is ubiquitous. Even among activist human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (not to mention any number of issue-specific or geographically focused groups) there is a merciless battle for the dollar donations of people inclined toward human mercy.

In the public sector, organized public services from education to the protection of endangered species, from law enforcement to urban planning, and from transportation and communications to international trade have long since been persuaded to abandon antique and often elitist notions of “professionalism.” They have been encouraged to embrace the methods and morals of entrepreneurship. To speak or act otherwise is to court charges of heresy against the emerging (post)modernist litany.

Accordingly, books such as *Flux* must be taken seriously not merely by their target audience, the marketing managers in the grand corporations that supply us with kitchen gadgets and wrist watches, entertainment devices and laundry detergents, but also by medical service providers, museums and transit system designers. They not only provide marketing managers with an inventory of what they “need to navigate the new environment,” but they also go some distance toward defining, legitimizing and perpetuating that environment. All the while they provide between their cloth, paper or virtual covers extraordinary insight into how the dominant ideology of our society insinuates itself into education, and thereby replicates itself in government, commerce, industry and all manner of social formations.

*Flux* is a very good example of its kind. Its contributors are erudite if not always eloquent, highly knowledgeable and unafraid to convey their messages in sophisticated terminology. They deploy complex concepts, methods and information. These people do not rely on clichés, slogans and quotations taken from random forays into *Roget's Thesaurus*. They are comfortable with an elevated breed of quasi-scientific discourse. Their vocabularies are relentlessly professional. They are sufficiently serious that it is easy to forget initial worries about their scholarship, or even whether it matters that they have displaced traditional academic discourse with elaborate explanations of how best to attract consumers to a particular brand of life insurance, automobile or peanut butter. No leather elbow patches will be seen on their jackets. No pipe tobacco will be seen.

*Flux* is divided into three convenient thematic parts. First, it deals with the “changing landscape.” Then it focuses on the implications of recent psychological and economic research regarding consumer behaviour. Finally, it moves from description and analysis to prescription: How are marketing managers going to be able to maximize “brand-building,” engage in the “productization” of research, develop tools and techniques to take full advantage of any blip or blip in consumer patterns to grab a bigger market share or to create products for markets that did not hitherto exist?

In all of this, the key word is in the title: *Flux*. The ever-evident assumption is that the world is in a state resembling barely manageable chaos. Realities are changing, perceptions are changing, and any significant differences between the two are disappearing. We are what we purchase. In this almost ontological circumstance of uncertainty, unpredictability necessarily prevails. How, then, will it be possible to make a buck, or a bundle?

Incidentally, as a great admirer of Lindsay Anderson’s film, “*O Lucky Man!*,” every time I sat down to read another chapter of *Flux*, I needed a musical introduction. Instead, however, of Frank Loesser’s “The Company Way” from the Broadway musical, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, I played Alan Price’s song, “Sell Sell” from the soundtrack quite loudly. With its sardonic Pantagruelian cynicism, it seemed perfect to set the mood.

The mood, it should be plain, is not one that is overburdened by what many people would call morality or even ethics. It’s not that the authors are consciously complicit in amorality, never mind immorality; rather, there is an implicit and generally understood presumption that this is a book about *methods* and not about morals. Even if, however, the subject were to be raised, there is an entire library of free market dogma, utilitarianism and “rational choice” economics parked in the ample references to each contribution that is ready to pop in at any moment and dispense with, if not quite resolve, any questions and doubts.

The “foundations of marketing,” writes contributor David Dunne, are to “understand your customers and develop actively engaged relationships with them.” Those who understand the new environment, replete with social media and the opportunity to create “viral video,” will find that the opportunities for sales are astonishing. In this context of commercial interaction, it becomes plain that honesty is not the best policy. In fact, it is not a policy at all, it’s a tactic. Advertising must be entertaining and focused. Engagement must be found “through transparent, honest, quick, and action-oriented communication. Relate,” the marketer is told, “to them [the consumers] as people, and not as targets of persuasive campaigns.” The smile must be genuine and the handshake must be firm. There must be unassailable sincerity in ever admonition to “have a great day.”

The relevance of these musings to the public sector should be clear. In activities from energy conservation to health promotion and from worker retraining to armed forces recruitment, governments are in the business of selling their wares—public services and public regulations—to a body of consumers formerly known as citizens. Making people aware and involved participants in any number of programs is the preoccupation of a large number of public sector workers. Sometimes, though this is seldom openly acknowledged, the political interests of the

ruling party may also be served by public service advertisements which attempt to promote prevailing policies—highlighting successful government initiatives or publicizing already popular programs. So, in both licit and illicit marketing, the public sector may have a keen interest in what marketing scholars have to say.

And what do Soberman and Soman’s contributors say? Though the changing landscape can be seen through a variety of *lenses*, as it is now fashionable to say in the relativistic scholarship of our day, the unavoidable *frame* within which reality is *constructed* is that of electronic communication including most obviously the Internet as the supplier of images and information and digital media as the means to *access* it. Some of the flavour of the book can be sensed by sampling only a few of its authors and chapters.

In Part 1, Avi Goldfarb focuses on the new communications technology. Anyone expecting a critical interpretation of some of the more troubling or, perhaps, liberating aspects of our society’s massive investment of personal time in broadband internet use will be disappointed. No deep existential (are those people on Facebook *really* my friends?) or even vaguely biological questions are addressed (do computer screens fry our brains?). Instead, Goldfarb has immediate and practical questions in mind. He explains how searching the net reduces “search costs” for consumers (we can find anything at our fingertips), allows us to shop online which means anywhere in the world (local merchants beware!), and lets us easily “use quantitative data to optimize operations and product offerings” (i.e., we can find out more about products and therefore compare both quality and prices). This, he claims, puts pressure on providers and makes for a buyers’ market, especially when millions of consumers are constantly sharing their opinions about the quality of goods. Assuming that purchasers are active, informed, canny and, above all, rational, this means that marketers must learn to “leverage” the power of the Internet and beat the consumer to the pixel punch. It is, as Hobbes so neatly put it, “a war of all against all” in the lean, mean and highly competitive global market.

In Part 2, Andrew A. Mitchell outlines some current research on memory, persuasion and decision-making. It is a primer in persuasive communication that somewhat discounts the uniqueness of the new media and relies on time-tested formulae for propaganda. Its value is not so much in its discussion of the novelty of new technologies, as in its explanation of how traditional practices of persuasion can best be adapted to the technical demands of the marketing mechanisms and to the fluid characteristics of consumers in a digital domain. Today’s advertisers must keep in mind the diversity of the audience—especially differences in age—and must be able to attack the potential consumer using an entire arsenal of psychological weaponry combining tactics of repetition, memory-based and stimulus-based messages. Fortunately, so much data is available about individual consumers and cohorts and about their perceptions and sensitivities that even a modest inventory of sales techniques shows clearly how messages can achieve the greatest impact.

In Part 3, Pankaj Aggarwal introduces us to one of the mildly disquieting implications of finding ourselves in the new landscape, a place where it may not only be difficult to distinguish the forest from the trees, but also ourselves from the vegetation. The chapter title is “Brands as Humans: Relationship Norms and Anthropomorphism.” Aggarwal is nothing if not “engaging.”

He starts out anecdotally, telling of an employee in an advertising firm where he was once a senior executive. He relates that the fellow felt such affection for the Macintosh Apple computer brand that he had its logo (the familiar outline of an apple with a bite out of it) tattooed on his chest. Such intimacy reminds me of early talk of “cyborgs” though somewhat in reverse. It also holds intimations of what contemporary futurists call the “posthuman era.” As it turns out, Aggarwal has nothing quite as mind-stretching in store for us. Instead, we are treated to some revealing case studies in which products are designed to “look like” people, particularly when they have specific “relationships” with individuals and groups. Aggarwal mentions brand mascots, but makes the point most forcefully when describing the front ends of automobiles. Cars with grilles that pointed up at the edges were deemed to be “smiling” and therefore more attractive, whereas those with grilles that pointed down at the edges were seen to be “frowning” and were therefore less attractive.

Of course, in a volume with more than three hundred densely filled pages, there is a tremendous amount of material—theoretical and applied—that cannot be adequately referenced, never mind described, explained or elucidated here. The final chapters, however, beg mention. In the penultimate chapter, Aparna A. Labroo treats “The Psychology of Giving” and shows us how to “promote” altruism—useful knowledge for anyone seeking to encourage charitable donations or justify foreign aid budgets. Then, to close, Delaine Hampton returns to the issues to which I alluded at the outset. The last chapter is entitled “Managing Brands by Leveraging Academic Research.” In it, we are told once more of the need to speed up the acquisition and utilization of new knowledge. In Hampton’s view, academic marketing scientists come up with new information and ideas which are then transformed into a commercial product, adopted by companies in the private sector, validated and calibrated, formally adopted within the corporate culture, modified with experience and used to shape everyday decisions. The trick is to make all this happen faster. “Accelerated adoption” is the key to success. And, in marketing, that means managing the “four Ps ... price, product, place and promotion.”

In the end, then, we can see that a new relationship is speedily evolving. The old dinosaurs’ smug assumption of their own elite status in the ivory tower led them to a contemptuous dismissal of business schools and sneering derision of the very notion of marketing scholarship. No longer adapted to the new landscape, they are being marginalized and will soon be as extinct as library card catalogues or personal tutorials.

In the Heraclitean flux of private-public partnerships, contracted academic research, the commercialization of education and the business model of government, distinguishing lines among these domains are being blurred and a new corporate pyramid is being constructed. The metamessage in Soberman and Soman’s *Flux* is that, by force or by consent, we will all soon know our place.

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