

## TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE MARKETING CONCEPT

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### ABSTRACT

The marketing concept, critics claim, lies at the root of manifold business ills. Its defenders, however, find no fault with the managerial philosophy it encapsulates; they blame alleged shortcomings on misinterpretations, which may be spawned unwittingly in classrooms. Accordingly, educators should choose their words carefully when discussing the marketing concept.

Exuberant lectures and fervent textbook expositions of the marketing concept, which are intended to engender interest in marketing and appreciation for marketing wisdom, commonly lead students to draw the following dubious conclusions: Sound business is never based on selling what firms want to make, but always on making what customers want to buy. It requires that marketing research professionals find needs, which the firm must fill by extending innovative offerings customers deem superior. Profit is the "natural" reward for satisfying customers. Therefore, customers must come first, always! Further, all corporate effort, not just the marketing department's, must center on satisfying customers. Since marketers are in the best position to understand customers, marketers should take charge.

Educators seem well-advised to dispel most of these misconceptions and to convey the following notions instead:

- In essence, the marketing concept is a reminder of an obvious, yet easily forgotten, axiom: No firm is likely to endure and prosper without satisfied customers! Students should learn not only that customer, product, and production orientations can be congruent, they should understand that these perspectives can be synergetic. Further, marketing miscues tend to occur when one of these orientations is given blind preference
- Although the marketing concept may be adaptable to many nonprofit endeavors and has socially desirable implications, it was formulated originally to help for-profit businesses in competitive settings achieve their pecuniary goals. It does not apply to uncompromising artists and ideologists.
- Pleasing or, better yet, delighting customers is the mean; profit is the end. Though pleasing customers is vital, it does not guarantee profitability. In addition to gratifying customers, firms should attend to exploiting competitors' weaknesses and minimizing their own vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, "The customer comes first, always!" is a slogan many employees should take (almost) literally.
- Adopting a strong customer orientation does not mean firms must subscribe to a market-pull philosophy or rely predominantly on traditional marketing research to gauge customer needs, wants, and preferences. Sometimes resources must be committed to developing new technologies and core competencies long before specific end-products can be envisioned and payoffs can be estimated reliably. Further, although professional marketing research is a valuable tool, it has significant limitations. Those who rely on it excessively and do not understand its pitfalls are apt to pursue cosmetic rather than substantive product improvement and risk overlooking or rejecting product innovations from which visionary firms willing to lead and educate customers may earn vast fortunes.
- Though innovation often explains success, innovation is not confined to developing radically new technologies and products that spawn new industries or dramatically change the way people live. Extraordinary success, such as Wal-Mart's, often stems from combinations of numerous innovations that, individually, are almost imperceptible.
- As enlightened customer advocates and functional specialists who understand customers, marketers can make important contributions at all corporate levels. Yet, overemphasizing marketing is as hazardous as overemphasizing production, finance, or any other functional specialty.