

ON MARKETING BULL----

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a philosopher's analysis of the concept of bull---- (BS) and applies the development to various related marketing concepts, such as spin, positioning, image, puffery, bluffing, and game-playing. The conclusion is that, although many people closely associate marketing and BS, the two concepts are not the same. Upper division marketing students seem able to differentiate the two, but a few students reveal a confusion. Some even agree with the statement "marketing is just BS," which indicates work that still needs to be done by marketing educators.

INTRODUCTION

Princeton University philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt has provided a service for marketing educators. His little book *On Bull----* (Frankfurt 2005), bestseller for twenty-seven weeks on the 2005 *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction list, systematically analyzes the meaning of a concept that many critics, and perhaps even some educators and practitioners, say is the essence of marketing. Indeed, a Google search of the phrase "marketing bull----" recently produced links to 17,800 web pages, indicating how widely the term bull---- (hereafter known as BS) is viewed as being nearly synonymous with marketing. Web pages reported by the Google search ranged from the just-for-fun Marketing Bull---- Generator that combines random verbs, adjectives, and nouns for insertion into marketing plans to the more serious "I quickly need some marketing BS" to use in a variety of ways—in reports, in plans, in presentations to clients, etc. The search also produced pages with the omnipresent "Here is another example of marketing BS."

The phrase "marketing BS," however, does imply that there might be other nouns that can be inserted after the adjective, producing the expressions "marketing honesty" or "marketing straightness." This paper develops Frankfurt's investigation into the nature of BS and applies the results to various concepts used in marketing that are said to be BS. Spin, positioning, image, puffery, bluffing, and game-playing, for example, are considered in relation to BS; the paper concludes that such widespread use of the phrase "marketing BS" does not justify equating the two terms. Widespread BS'ing in the name of

marketing, though, does present one significant challenge to educators, namely to clarify in our students' minds the difference between BS and legitimate marketing. Modest data support the need for this extra effort by educators.

The Nature of BS

Frankfurt carefully distinguishes BS from lying. The essence of the former is phoniness or fakery, misrepresenting who one is or what one's motivation is, whereas lying is the misrepresentation of facts, the assertion of a falsehood (Frankfurt 2005, p. 47; on lying, cf. Bok 1978, p. 13). The BS'er is not concerned with facts or truth, but with making a good impression. The "show" is what counts; the BS'er is an artist. The liar, in contrast, is constrained by the objectivity of facts and truth in order to state the opposite. Liars are more meticulous than BS'ers; they are craftsmen, according to Frankfurt (pp. 51-53). Both lying and BS'ing are forms of misrepresentation, but the difference is one of emphasis: misrepresenting the facts (lying) or misrepresenting the self (BS'ing). It is probably a continuum between the two, although Frankfurt does not suggest this, and to an outside observer it is often difficult to discern which is occurring. BS probably should be classified as a species of lying.

A real estate agent, for example, attempting to sell a piece of property, might say to a prospect that she already has three offers, so the prospect had better make an offer soon lest he lose out on a good deal. If the agent in fact has no offers, she is lying, but she may also be BS'ing. As a BS'er the agent is more concerned with looking good as a successful sales person. Thus, the BS'er does not care whether she has zero, one, two, or even three offers—she is not focused on the facts. She cares only about which number would be impressive to a prospect and three happens to be that number. BS'ing is all about how others view the BS'er, but she is free to improvise, be creative, and use imagination. The liar is constrained by the need to deny what is true. The BS'ers' lack of concern with facts and truth leads Frankfurt to conclude that BS "is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are" (p. 61). "Pretentious, impres-

All subsequent, freestanding page references are to Frankfurt 2005.

sive nonsense" might be the simplest characterization of BS.

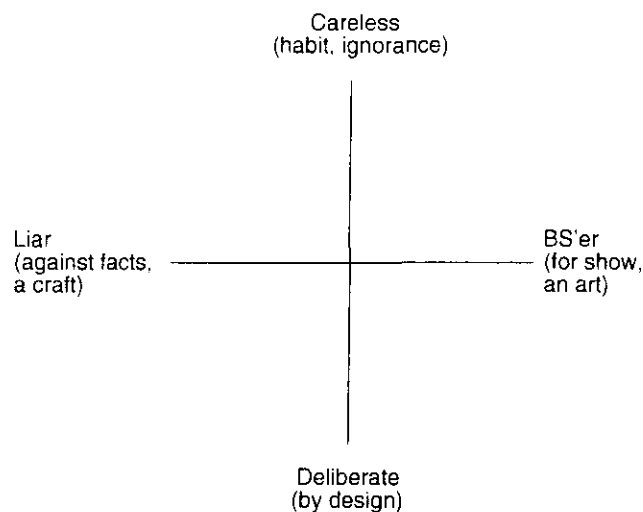
Rather than condemn all BS'ers as unethical, though, a less culpable, careless or ignorant element seems to be involved in the way many act. Relatives of a young man, for example, who has been interviewed by five potential employers, may report to others—to significant others—that the young man received five job offers. An abalone diver, after removing her catch from the shells, may state with authority to an onlooker that ants within twenty-four hours will leave the shells spotlessly clean; a few days later the onlooker notices that the ants are still working and the shells are something less than spotless. In both examples, the relatives and abalone diver are not lying, nor do they seem to be deliberately exaggerating their statements, but they are speaking for effect. They are BS'ing, as Frankfurt would define it.

Bravado or machismo might be other words used to describe the behaviors. Neither is particularly deliberate and both are probably psychological habits of speaking and acting a certain way. Such psychological habits are acquired in childhood and are developed over many years. They are called psychoepistemologies (Branden 1971, pp. 98-108) and everyone has them, some more committed to facts and truth, others less. Ignorance, of course, also plays a part in misstatements, and may be operating in the abalone example, but the treatment of ignorance in speech—that is, how one handles his or her own ignorance when talking—determines whether or not BS has occurred. Manner of delivery and tone of voice, such as speaking "with authority" even though one does not really know what is true, can turn a innocuous statement into BS.

Carelessness and lack of deliberateness in many instances of BS suggest a second continuum in addition to the earlier mentioned one based on the character-traits of lying versus BS'ing. This second continuum would range from careless to deliberate in manner of delivery. Figure 1 illustrates the two dimensions and even suggests that they cross each other at the point of origin. The figure shows that there can be careless liars and careless BS'ers, as well as deliberate versions of both, with many complicated interactions in between.

One further issue that Frankfurt only touches on should be addressed. He observes that we tend to be more tolerant of BS than of lying, often feeling a personal affront when subjected to the craft of a liar but sometimes feeling only irritation at the BS'er, sometimes even admiration for him or her (p. 50).

FIGURE 1



Frankfurt quotes a character from a spy novel who gives his son this advice: "Never tell a lie when you can bull--- your way through" (from *Dirty Story* by Eric Ambler, quoted in Frankfurt 2005, p. 48). Presumably, the consequences of BS'ing are less than those of lying. In a recent interview, Frankfurt put the issue more succinctly: "Why is lying regarded almost as a criminal act?," whereas BS "is sort of cuddly and warm. It's outside the realm of serious moral criticism. Why is that?" (quoted in Edidin 2005). Frankfurt does not attempt to answer his questions, but the issue seems most relevant to the field of marketing where many related concepts often fall under the rubric of BS, yet also are viewed with admiration or at least with a twinkle in the eye.

A clue to answering Frankfurt's questions may be found in the attitudes many people have toward sales and advertising, both of which are admired and heartily condemned, although not necessarily by the same people. The admiration derives, no doubt, from the artistic element of marketing—the creativity and imagination that Frankfurt notes is prominent in the skill of the BS'er. The condemnation comes from the less than truthful statements—or, at least, what are perceived to be so—of sales representatives and advertisers, all or most statements of which are assumed to be BS. The clever crook and other antiheroes of modern culture, especially the ones portrayed as underdogs trying to overcome enormous odds or obstacles, may contribute to a confusion between fiction and BS. In any event, several concepts applied in the sales and advertising areas are used interchangeably with BS. It is to some of these concepts that we will now turn.

Related Marketing Concepts

Spin is perhaps the newest term to be associated with marketing BS. According to public relations consultant Robert Dillenschneider (1998), the term was coined by *Time* magazine in 1988 and originally referred to "the ability of politicians to position themselves cleverly on complex and controversial issues"—positioning, in other words, for politicians. Today, however, spin has come to mean fabrication, the altering of "facts through a deliberate and reckless disregard for the truth. Spin is to public relations," Dillenschneider passionately concludes, "what pornography is to art." The analogy might be extended to include: what BS is to marketing honesty. Today, spin is used to describe many activities of public life, including marketing, and it is deservingly viewed as BS or worse.

Sometimes spin just means understanding, as in the phrase, "What is your spin on things?" When understood in its original sense as positioning in political marketing, spin is harmless, but the term positioning itself, because it is intertwined with the notion of image, is widely misunderstood as a form of BS. Positioning is the management of a product's (or company's) image in relation to the competition (Ries and Trout 1972; Schiffman and Kanuk 1994, p. 11). And image is the set of beliefs that consumers hold about a product. Therein lies the problem. The set of beliefs held by consumers about one's product may or may not correspond to reality; images may be based on facts or they may be phony. Because the latter is possible, it has been a short step for the critics of marketing to conclude that the aim of marketing (and some marketers, possibly including Ries and Trout, may indeed hold this as their guiding premise) is to create phony images (with "perception is reality" being their slogan). Positioning, then, is the means to that end, and the entire marketing endeavor is concluded to be spin and BS.

Frankfurt (in Edidin 2005) commented that the closest similarity to BS in the philosophical literature comes from the work of Socrates, who fought most of his life against the Sophists and their sophistry. Fallacious reasoning, made in a notable and persuasive way to win the listener over, is the essence of sophistry. Advertising is often said to be sophistical, and a species of sophistry is puffery. The two concepts are then used to censure marketing as just a lot of BS. And it is true that there is much sophistry and puffery in advertising, but there is also much confusion over what constitutes good (honest and effective) advertising and what does not. Puffery itself is a term little understood even by marketers and frequently becomes confused with metaphor,

attempts at humor, and the use of other literary devices. See Preston (1975, pp. 13-20). Saying, for example, that "Coca-Cola is the real thing" is just a claim to being the original cola soft drink and that a gasoline puts a "Tiger in your tank" is literary license to claim power in the gasoline. The facts may be challenged, but the slogans themselves are not puffery.

Puffery is extravagant praise and a variation of it is what advertising practitioners call "brag and boast." When it comes to the identification of what constitutes effective advertising, though, David Ogilvy (1963, p. 151) and the direct marketing industry have settled the issue. As Ogilvy put it, facts will always outsell flatulent puffery and direct marketers have long promoted the findings of their split-run tests, which put puff-filled and fact-filled ads against one another, only to show the fact-filled ads outpulling the puff-filled ones every time. (See Caples 1982.) Unfortunately, the message has apparently not gotten through to many general marketers and advertisers, as well as to the general public. Ogilvy's use of the term "flatulence" only underscores puffery's connection to BS.

The one concept that perhaps sums up most people's associations of BS with marketing is what Kirkpatrick (1994, pp. 32-34) calls the "salesman's fallacy," a form of marketing myopia that overemphasizes sizzle and benefits at the expense of product features (and steak, to complete the sizzle metaphor). This type of salesperson often resorts to all of the above BS'ing techniques and his or her motto amounts to: "I can sell anything to anyone" and "no prospect must walk away unsold." High-pressure, promise-them-anything selling of the type associated, rightly or wrongly, with used-car salespersons is what critics would label "typical marketing BS." Salesman's fallacy is also connected to the selling era of marketing history and the selling concept of business management, both frequently discussed in the early chapters of principles of marketing textbooks. The existence of historical periods, however—production, selling, and marketing (based on Keith 1960)—has been disputed (Fullerton 1985; Jones and Richardson 2005). Nevertheless, the concepts that these alleged eras have defined can be applied as concepts to existing businesses and marketers. And the selling concept does, at least in the minds of many critics, take on the appearance of BS.

Yet confusion again arises here. Sales people are often admired for their ability to withstand and overcome repeated objections to persuade the most difficult prospects. And they are admired for their elo-

quent glibness that in American culture probably dates back to the nineteenth century days of tall talk and booster talk. According to historian Daniel Boorstin (1965, p. 290), "No language could be American unless it was elastic enough to describe the unusual as if it were commonplace, the extravagant as if it were normal." Tall talk, not unlike that of some present-day salespersons, "blurred the edges of fact and fiction" and booster talk was a "language of anticipation" where "men acquired a habit of innocent overstatement" (p. 296). Hyperbole and the blending of truth with literary embellishment seem to be an integral part of our heritage. Could this be what makes BS "cuddly and warm," to use Frankfurt's expression?

Last in this catalog of BS-related concepts are two notions that have been applied to business in general, not just to marketing: bluffing and game-playing. Frankfurt (2005, p. 46) states that bluffing is more closely related to BS than to lying. Albert Z. Carr (1968; 1971), however, openly endorses what many critics have all along thought about business, namely that it is just a game and that the rules and ethics of private life do not apply. Thus, according to Carr, bluffing and not telling the whole truth are acceptable practices in the business life. Carr's paper and book have caused much discussion since their publication—perhaps stirring the pot was precisely his motive. The best philosophical critique comes from Sullivan (1984) who reduced Carr's comments to fog and smokescreens, almost, but not quite, calling Carr's work BS.

Nonetheless, the notion of "playing the game" is prevalent, not just in business, but also in academia. The publish-or-perish requirements for tenure and accreditation certainly put an emphasis on quantity over quality (Abelson 1990; Van Wyk 1998), encouraging the development of twenty and twenty-five page vitas, filled with what some colleagues will openly admit is "pretentious, impressive nonsense." As part of playing the academic game, Logue (2004) observes that the need to be cited by others has led to "citation circles," agreements among scholars to reference each other's papers; it has also led to a double standard between students and professors in terms of what is and is not considered plagiarism. Further, the peer review process itself cannot be described as sacrosanct—Socrates, after all, was executed by his peer reviewers, Galileo was put under house arrest by his, and historian of science Thomas Kuhn (1970, p. 5) has observed that one aim of establishment science is to prevent the emergence of new ideas. Marketing scholar Morris Holbrook (1986), highly experienced on both sides of the peer-review aisle, calls this part of the academic

game "sodomasochism." And, finally, there are the obsessions with media rankings that business schools have acquired recently; "looking good," as Gioia and Corley (2002) point out, apparently is better than "being good." BS seems to be essential to the marketing of academics!

Student Perceptions

A discussion of marketing BS would not be complete without a look at how our students understand the two terms. A single item questionnaire was administered in three upper-division marketing classes on the first day of fall quarter 2005 at a California State University. The item reads: "Marketing is just bull----. There is no difference between the two." A five-point Likert-type agree-disagree scale was provided for response, as well as two optional open-ended comment lines. Sample size was 97. Table 1 summa-

TABLE 1

"Marketing is just bull----. There is no difference between the two."

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Count	1	4	19	29	44	97
Percentage	1.0%	4.1%	19.6%	29.9%	45.4%	100.0%

One-Way Chi-Square (equal quintiles): $p = 0.000$ ($\chi^2 = 65.63$)

Skewness = 0.884 (standard error = 0.096)

rizes the responses to the Likert item and Tables 2A and 2B display the open-ended comments. Seventy students were marketing majors, eight were international business, and fourteen were double majors between marketing and international business. (The international business major is housed in the Marketing Department at the author's university). Of the remaining five students, three majored in other business disciplines, one in computer science, and one in hotel and restaurant management.

Table 1 indicates a strongly significant finding that upper division students disagree with the linking of marketing and BS. Tables 2A and 2B, however, present subtler interpretations of the students' responses. (Two additional students wrote comments that were not included in the tables; one, apparently an editor, wrote, "no difference between what two?," and a second wrote the to-be-expected "that statement is bull!!!") The comments in Table 2A are grati-

Table 2A

Marketing is just bull----. There is no difference between the two. Comment? - Positive		
	Count	Pct
Every business uses marketing; it's integral.	10	50.0
Marketing requires research, strategies, theories, positioning; it highlights product quality; it includes psychology.	4	20.0
Other positive comments	6	30.0
	20	100.0

Table 2B

Marketing is just bull----. There is no difference between the two. Comment? - Negative		
	Count	Pct
It is bull, schemes, creating needs and wants, persuading consumers by any means to buy what they don't need.	3	33.3
Some BS in all marketing; half BS, half quality of the product.	3	33.3
I really believe in this bull----. Best way to do sales.	3	33.3
	9	100.0

lying to a marketing educator, but a few reveal a certain amount of inarticulateness and possible lack of full understanding of the difference between marketing and BS. The category of "other positive comments" in particular show this lack of precision. One student said, "Marketing is deep; there are many things about marketing." Another said, "Some of it is common sense and others you have to learn through experience." And still one more said, "Marketing gives you different outlooks on situations. But people can also do very well." Perhaps these comments are made by weaker students, perhaps they are the result of rushing to be done with the questionnaire. The conclusion has to be that not all upper division students can fully differentiate in their minds marketing from its less savory comparisons.

This last point is only emphasized by the comments made in Table 2B. Nearly ten percent of the sample equates marketing to BS. Indeed, twenty-five percent of the sample in Table 1 responded with a "Strongly Agree," "Agree," or "Neither" to the Likert item, indicating if not agreement with the equation of marketing and BS, then uncertainty about what the difference between the two concepts is. Despite the many limitations of this brief survey, the data seem to indicate that most upper division students do understand the fundamental nature of marketing, yet the data also indicate that marketing educators need to work harder at getting through to the minority who apparently find it difficult to associate marketing with honesty or straightness.

Conclusion and Need for Further Research

From the conceptual or theoretical standpoint, marketing can be clearly differentiated from any form of BS. The phrases "marketing honesty" or "marketing straightness" are not contradictions in terms. Indeed, according to Ogilvy and the direct marketing industry, honesty and straight-shooting are essential to marketing effectiveness. What remains unresolved, though, is Frankfurt's puzzle about the "warmth" and "cuddliness" of BS. Why is BS viewed that way? Is it a confusion between fact and fiction? Or a remnant of the American cultural heritage that enjoys tall tales. Surely other cultures share our (slightly naughty?) admiration for BS, but such an investigation, as well as an attempt to resolve Frankfurt's puzzle will have to await another day. The dimensions, and especially the interactions, of Figure 1 pose a considerable challenge to researchers, but they do need to be measured. The results of such a study may then create new understanding of the difference between lying and BS'ing, as well as moral culpability.

As for student perceptions, further research needs to probe the differences between marketing and non-marketing, particularly non-business, majors. The strong hypothesis likely would be far more acceptance of the marketing BS connection among non-marketing majors than among marketing. In addition, finer discriminations should be made among the marketing majors themselves, to discern who pre-

cisely does and does not understand the difference between marketing and BS and how and why they have come to this understanding. Such independent variables as number of units completed, GPA, gender, sales emphasis or not, and ethnic background may shed light on this problem. For now, though, the marketing educator can rest assured that most advanced marketing students hold healthy suspicions of any link between marketing and BS.

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