

TITLE: UNARTICULATED EXPERTISE: TACIT KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND THE MARKETING MANAGER

Introduction: Tacit knowledge, theory and marketing practice

It is taken for granted that marketing management practice is informed by the myriad of standard textbook expertise that exists on the topic. Brown (1998; 1999) highlights that textbooks represent the very essence of the discipline, a point also made by Gummesson (1993; 2002a). Textbooks indicate that in organisations, all levels of marketers will cogitate and act within a standardised framework. If we think of textbook marketing, what comes to mind are commonly recognised concepts revolving around strategic planning processes that stipulate a particular way of managing. Representing marketing in this fashion suggests that firms are either unambiguously adopting these textbook frameworks or are on their way to doing so. In this paper, we will argue that there another practice language of marketing that is used extensively by marketers, but is little recognised in the mainstream marketing management textbook and indeed, in much academic research. With some exceptions, including Hackley (1999); 2000); Kaptan (2013); Arnett and Wittmann (2014); Pereira et al (2012); Patterson et al (2012); Ardley and Quinn (2014), the tacit dimension of marketing is largely ignored. In contrast, in other applied areas of management, literature exists that discusses the tacit, examples include Hindmarsh and Pilnick (2002); Leonard and Sensiper (1998); Leonard and Insch (2005); Mole (2007); Duiguid (2005).

This paper examines the tacit, from a practitioner perspective, based on a series of in depth interviews with marketing managers. In approaching the issue of tacit knowledge, it is useful to make a distinction between it and explicit knowledge. For Polanyi (1966) - widely credited as the pioneer in this area - explicit knowledge is codifiable and transmissible in formal and systematic language. Most marketing textbooks are predicated on this assumption. Evidence from our research suggests however, that it is possible to argue that it is often through the tacit, that marketing accomplishments occur. For Hackley (1999), practical marketing skills have an unarticulated dimension. This notion captures what Collins (2001, p. 107-8) suggests is the “ill defined and elusive”, nature of tacit knowledge. Both Collins and Hackley argue that tacit knowledge it as a form of mastery of practice, covering those things that we know how to do. For Hackley (1999), the tacit is practical knowledge, representing those actions that are left out of abstracted theoretical descriptions prevalent in mainstream marketing theory. Practitioners who are accomplished in strategic marketing decision-making, are able to utilise tacit and experientially mediated concepts in coping with marketing issues. In this paper, we seek to explore and establish three core characteristics that represent the basis of tacit knowledge use; these being the intersubjective, the situational and the intuitive. We will then consider the ramifications of viewing marketing from this perspective.

Marketing’s textually driven discourse

Marketing textbooks routinely prescribe how marketing decisions are best made in organisations, using a restricted range of rationally presented, technical tools. These include a range of portfolio-planning matrices, alongside a multitude of additional auditing techniques and analytical frameworks. In most marketing textbooks, it appears obligatory for firms to carry out a seemingly objective systematic process of analysis and planning. The point is to utilise a one-size-fits-all, rational and prescriptive formula as indicated in the following statement: “Once the company has performed a SWOT analysis it can proceed to develop specific goals ... this stage of the process is called goal formulation” (Kotler et al., 2010, p.

105). Scant regard is paid to the local, ongoing situational aspects of knowledge generation as indicated by Quinn et al (2007).

To take another example, in most marketing texts there is at least one chapter, which represents the environment, and its constituent factors in a relatively straightforward and unambiguous fashion (Blythe 2014). Little opportunity exists to question what is included under the simplified headings of the Social, Legal, Economic, Political and Technological environment. Arguably, marketing textbooks fail to capture the complexities and ambiguities involved in managing marketing in local situational contexts, or appreciate the point that organisations create their own environments (Weick 1995). Additionally, marketing's textual (textbook) framework is primarily concerned with managing the substantially critiqued (Constantinides, 2006; Gummesson, 2002a) four Ps of the marketing mix. To accompany this, there is the overarching, relatively simple systemic-based, totemic like discourse of marketing orientation, as a given feature of strategy. In this representation, tacit knowledge gets relegated to a place of minor significance; individual marketing managers are viewed as rational planning and research intermediaries, adeptly executing elements of a pre-ordained marketing mix.

Tacit knowledge: A discourse of marketing practice

Dunne (1999) suggests that the dimensions of a technical, rational discourse are characterised as being objective, generalisable, replicable, controllable, transparent, accessible and unambiguous. For Patterson et al (2012), a key component of marketing decision making is based on intuition, where in their findings, managers 'rail' against the excessive use of logical marketing speak and operate, often, in situations of data deficiency, where good decisions can sometimes be made just on the basis of feelings. In line with this, Mintzberg views the strategist metaphorically as a craftsman, working with clay as a potter. Mintzberg (1987 p67) points out that, "She has an intimate knowledge of her work, her capabilities and her markets. As an artisan, she senses rather than analyses these things; her knowledge is 'tacit'." In a similar vein, Leadbeater (2000) suggests that tacit knowledge is often intuitive, habitual and reflexive. It is a form of knowledge acquired by doing and then communicated by example, a point also made by Tapp (2004), when talking about practical marketing learning. This reflects the social nature of tacit knowledge, obtained through communities of practice Wenger (1998).

Additionally as Boden (1994) points out, the sense of any object is derived from its situation, so marketing decision-making has to be seen to be linked in an indexical fashion to local conditions. This is because it is dependent on those places, situations and people that generate it (Baumard 1999). In essence then, we have here three central basic characteristics of tacit knowledge. Firstly, it is *inter-subjective*, secondly, it is about *intuitive* based judgments and thirdly, it is always inherently *situational* in nature. Through an exploration of these areas, it will be demonstrated that the reductionist model of marketing contained within the textbook strips out the complexity inherent in the management of marketing and the making of strategy. To recognise the role of the tacit in decision making, means the marketing manager is not viewed as a simple planner and systematiser, but more likely, as a sometimes hesitant actor facing a reality that is multifaceted and complex.

Methods and analysis

The study presented in this paper draws on interview data gathered over a period of several years in the eastern region of the UK. The initial aim was to examine individual perceptions of senior marketers in terms of their approaches to the development and implementation of

marketing plans. On a re-evaluation of the research, the majority of managers appeared to place considerable emphasis on their own local interpretation of marketing, based around tacit expertise, rather than on the technical features of orthodox marketing and the analysis, planning and control discourse. In discourse analysis, prevalent structures and functions, represented through key discursive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), are examined, and these provided the basis for the re analysis of the data. The process of discourse analysis employed here, represents an examination of language through patterns and choice of words, and sentence structures (Copley 2010). In total, twenty-six interviews were conducted with various types and sizes of organisations. In this paper, only five of the interviews are featured, but their perceptions are largely representative of other managers. Names of companies and participants have been altered, in order to retain anonymity. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and took place with individuals in a private room within a building of their workplace. All interview recordings were transcribed and then reproduced verbatim.

As Watson (1995, p. 13) points out, there was an important lesson here concerning the transcription of interviews: "... another voice reminded me ... if you have got the energy and time strive to transcribe everything ... you never know what might seem significant until you have reflected on it later." This is precisely what occurred, leading to the production of this paper. During the interviews, a narrative was co-produced between the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Copley, 2010). The discursive validity of the responses provided was dependent on the ability of the respondents to convey meanings in a form that made them locally comprehensible. Our analysis of these accounts provides a focus for an identifiable discourse, namely a tacit one, reflective of the individual manager's sense of reality (Alvesson, 2003). The tacit discourse we outline emerged freely as each interview, enabling informants to talk openly and explicitly about what constituted their work as marketing managers and the language they employed in its execution.

Situational, intersubjective and intuitive: the characteristics of tacit knowledge

In this findings section we will illustrate that tacit knowledge is conceptually composed of three distinct, but interconnected characteristics. Tacit knowledge as expressed in the interviews appears to be composed of intersubjective, situational and intuitive elements. Firstly, one way to think about the role of tacit knowledge generally in marketing decision making, is to appreciate that it is a considerable way removed from the traditional planning models of marketing, with its emphasis on articulated, codified and rational action. At Print UK, a national chain in the B2B market, Irving, the marketing director, introduces us to the unarticulated nature of tacit expertise.

"You have, the conscious incompetence, and the unconscious incompetence, the conscious competence and the unconscious competence and when marketing philosophy gets into the unconscious competence, you know what is the right thing to do instinctively."

The first of the three areas to consider is the notion of tacit knowledge as being *intersubjective*. This idea of shared understanding is suggested here by Shelia, of Paints UK, a major international paintbrush manufacturer.

"The Boston matrix in all truth, we do that by instinct. You just know that wall brushes, for example, it's a declining market; we won't be spending a million pounds boosting that product sector. So, cash cows and all the rest of it, we instinctively know what they are, it gets drawn out in different ways. We don't plot it around a matrix as such; we don't sit and draw out a Boston

matrix. It is not the sort of thing we consciously sit down and draw up, we know because we know our business, which categories they are in and we make our decisions accordingly.”

Here the emphasis is on the notion of the ‘we’ as in the marketing team, who together, make many of the product decisions in the firm. There is a degree of tacit expertise being shared, based on experience and joint practice knowledge. Lending support to notions of the tacit as intersubjective, in terms of where we obtain our thoughts and knowledge about the world, is Schultz (1967). His phenomenological idea of the ‘lifeworld’ draws not on the idea of the isolated and private individual, but in contrast, intersubjectivity means a constructed social world, where reality is always shared by people. In a similar vein, Leonard and Sensiper (1998), point out that tacit knowledge is developed communally over time, existing more or less complete in the head of each group member. In communities of practice, implicit ways of working and learning co exist together (Wenger 1998). Additionally, as Polany (1966) stresses, the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next is largely tacit, when hidden things are learnt from the words and behaviour of significant others. Most knowledge is accrued in the course of work-based socialisation (Baumard.1999). To emphasise this point, Tapp (2004) in discussing tacit knowledge in marketing, notes that in work socialisation processes, tacit knowledge is exchanged through jointly performed activities as individuals spend time together.

The second area to consider is that of *intuition*. Moustakas (1994) argues that intuition is a primary feature of decision-making, a talent that is directed towards the production of solid and correct judgements in relation to everything in the world that presents itself to the individual. Whilst there has been a number of attempts to define exactly what it means, intuition can be seen, legitimately, to reside in the tacit domain, dealing as it does with instinctive, non-linear type behaviour, often associated with the notion of gut feelings. At Books UK, a global company, Jason the marketing director, points out there is role for intuitive gut feelings, in the new product development process.

“having invested in research we have the results, or should have the results in order to make a thoroughly objective decision, that is what we are trying to do and that is especially important when you have to make 7,000 decisions a year on product, whether you launch a product or not. But at the end of the day, one of the many values of the publishing team...is they have a gut feel for what is going to work and what isn't going to work, and even at the micro level, looking at the cover of a book, they can sense whether it is going to work or not, so I believe there is a role for making those sort of judgement calls...”

As Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) indicate, the tacit dimension of organisations involve situated practices – with this in mind, the final area to contemplate here is the notion of the *situational* dimension of the tacit. Brown (2001 p113), highlights the importance of this localness when discussing marketing decision-making. “Perhaps the most incredible thing of all, however, is that the promulgators of marketing planning places so little store by what is clearly a complex, convoluted and context dependent process.” In terms of the research David, marketing director of Education UK, an international software development company, alludes to the importance of the situational aspects of the tacit when he says that,

“ One of the things I have found, in bringing people to work for us, people have a got a degree in marketing, they have done the classic stuff, and they come in and create a marketing plan, and you look at it and straight off you know it is not going to work. It just doesn't relate to the market place.”

As Baumard (1999) notes, there can be a reluctance in organisations to recruit younger managers without experience. What the young managers know is not local, but is summative of the

explanations society has produced about organisations and marketing. Clive, sales and marketing manager of Slicers UK, an international firm producing meat-slicing equipment, expresses the further significance of local knowledge. His comments show that the knowledge in his industry is context dependent and recondite and by implication, tacit, where action is rooted in a particular type of contextualised understanding.

“I suppose to some extent it does tend to be a black art. Half a dozen customers can be doing the same thing, manufacturing and marketing the same product, but they are all doing it in a slightly different way.”

Conclusion: Tacit knowledge production and the implications for marketing theory generation

Here, some brief implications of the research are considered. It is argued that this paper contributes to our understanding of marketing knowledge production, by indicating that the tacit dimension contributes significantly to decision making. We argue that the tacit has its basis in three areas, namely the situational, the intersubjective and the intuitive. Further research could help to provide greater justification for this typology and evidence for the presence of tacit knowledge in decision-making. Additionally, it is important to think about the actual content of tacit knowledge and to think about how it can be best disseminated. Firstly, though, it is worth pointing out that it is not a question of suggesting that a simple dichotomy exists between the tacit and the rational model of marketing. In terms of practice, marketing is seen as being more pluralistic than the standard framework takes account of (Coviello et al 2002; Murray et al 2002). Intriguingly, whilst an increasing number of marketing scholars expose the diversity of approaches encountered within practice-focused settings, this is seldom the case concerning the content of marketing textbooks. Despite this, other discursive incursions can be seen to have clearly influenced practice. These include for example, entrepreneurial marketing, (Sethna et al 2013); service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, (2008); relationship marketing (Gummesson 2002) and services marketing (Skålén 2009). The problem remains that the tacit - an unarticulated area - is left out of the many (similar) accounts of marketing expertise, present in mainstream texts, where largely rational- technical and universal prescriptions, hold sway.

In terms of our research, it has become clear that each marketing manager contributes to the nature of the pluralism identified above, because he or she has a reservoir of tacit wisdom, which is embedded in the context of his or her own organisation. This knowledge is constantly being drawn on to make marketing decisions. As illustrated, tacit knowledge is intersubjective, situational and intuitive but the challenge is to render this knowledge meaningful in a marketing theory context. A prerequisite here is that it is necessary to accept the proposition that social reality is a constellation of pluralities, where knowledge production is in part, contingent on the three factors identified in this study. Importantly this knowledge will not be able to be codified into one overarching marketing reality, but needs to be represented as many realities. In this sense situational specificity in the forms we have examined here, is an important aspect of the practitioner’s role. Marketing theory needs to model the nature of local tacit diversity and its expertise, in such a way as to ensure its dissemination and acquisition. One attempt to model this diversity is indicated by Jaakkola (2011), who evidenced how professional service practitioners, through the mediating effects of language, reduced highly technical processes into a more controllable and easily exchangeable discourse among marketplace actors. This represents a movement of local knowledge as articulated by practitioners, to the explicit dimension. The realisation of this is a necessary challenge. Textbooks should attempt to develop more meaningful and relevant theories of marketing that reflect the diversity of the discipline. In this respect, tacit knowledge holds an important key to future theory generation.

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