

The Evolution of Marketing Theory in the United States and Europe

Marketing
Theory

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Current Developments in Marketing Theory

In an effort to reduce the apparent confusion that has come about because of what Bartels[1] referred to as "the identity crisis" in marketing, a trend towards the re-examination of marketing theory has been seen in both the United States and Europe since the mid-1970s. In contrast to the lack of attention given to the study and development of marketing theory in the early years of that decade, the last 15 years has been a period of renewed and expanded interest. Evidence of this trend can be seen by the number of theory-related articles published in the *European Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Marketing (JM)* since 1974, (see Table I).

The fact that the number of articles has been steadily increasing and that a significant amount has been published in the 1980s also supports the perception that the study of marketing theory is on the rise. And, in fact, the American Marketing Association, the publisher of the *JM*, has held several conferences during the 1980s on this theme.

The apparent need to study marketing theory further may be a result of the intense debate by both American and British educators as to the relevant applications of marketing. While some see marketing as being relevant only to business firms, others see marketing as a fundamental social process[2]. In addition, it has been pointed out that demands have been made that marketing should be able to cope better with the life-and-death problems raised by ecologists, humanists, social critics and consumerists[3].

Other demands for a more detailed look at marketing theory development have come from the academic communities throughout the USA and Europe. While there is no best way to teach any discipline, including marketing, there is general agreement that a set of priorities needs to be established to instruct students to be more aware of what is happening and how marketing professionals make decisions[4].

Recent research indicates that American and European academicians also agree on the fact that relatively little attention has been placed on the theory

of marketing at the graduate level of study. The clear recommendation has been to have marketing theory development rapidly incorporated into graduate marketing courses offered at both American and British universities[5].

A successful attempt to bring the study of marketing theory back into the mainstream of marketing thought was seen in 1983 when the entire Fall issue of the *Journal of Marketing* became a forum in which scholars in marketing thought could assess the direction of the study of marketing theory. As a result, it appears that the nature of marketing theory has changed from a micro-behavioural to a more macro-behavioural perspective[6].

Table I.
Number of Marketing
Theory Articles
Published since 1974

Periodical	Period I 1975-78	Period II 1979-82	Period III 1983-87
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	3	5	5
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	3	7	15*

* Includes 11 articles from the Fall 1983 issue.

The contributors to the contemporary school of marketing theory look at the field from several different points of view. While some see marketing and marketing theory in terms of its scientific elements[7], others prefer to provide an environmental analysis of the marketing function[8]. Other approaches concentrate on the managerial perspectives for marketing theory[9], and the metatheory perspectives in developing marketing thought[10].

The diversity of these current approaches to marketing theory has provided the field with a richness that was lacking when we examined it in 1974. It is in this context of diversity that we were motivated to conduct this survey investigating the attitudes of leaders in marketing thought towards marketing theory.

Methodology

As in our 1974 study of the status of marketing theory, the Editorial Review Board of the *Journal of Marketing* was treated as one sampling unit[11]. And, as noted before, it was felt that this body was an appropriate group of American marketing thought leaders since members not only referee article submissions but also control, to a certain extent, the content of the publication. Further, membership experience spans both theoretical and applied marketing. For purposes of comparability, a structured questionnaire very similar to that used in the 1974 study was used. Of the 86 questionnaires mailed to board members, responses were received from 56 (a 65 per cent response rate).

Also, as was done in our previous study, the Editorial Review Board of the *European Journal of Marketing* was treated as a sampling unit for the study of European attitudes concerning marketing theory. Both current and former

board members were included in this study in order to reach a large number of European marketing thought leaders. Additionally, six European authors who were frequent contributors to the *European Journal of Marketing* (*EJM*) were also included in the European sample. The rationale for the selection of authors and Review Board members was essentially the same as that for the American group. And while it is recognised that the academic-practitioner mix of *EJM* is not exactly the same as that of *JM*, it was still deemed the best comparison available.

Since the *EJM* is published in English, it was possible to use the same questionnaire as the one mailed to *JM* board members. As a result, the possibility of translation errors is eliminated. Questionnaires were mailed to 44 *EJM* authors and Review Board members. Completed questionnaires numbered 22, for a response rate of exactly 50 per cent.

The Samples

In comparing the demographics of the 56 American respondents to the 22 European respondents, we find both interesting similarities and important differences. All of the 56 US respondents received their highest degree from schools located in the United States; of the Europeans, 86 per cent received their highest degrees from European universities, while 14 per cent were educated in American schools.

Only 43 per cent of the Europeans were marketing majors in their highest degree, compared with 82 per cent for the Americans. This finding is most probably due to the American graduate business emphasis on educating its students in more narrowly focused functional areas than is done in European schools. This is particularly important when one considers that over 40 per cent of the European respondents had been teaching for more than 20 years, while only 25 per cent of the American respondents had been teaching this long.

Findings

Our first series of questions addresses the general issue of how important the respondents consider marketing theory as an overall objective. The results of these questions are shown in Table II. It is very interesting to note that in every case the European respondents tended to give a higher rating to the importance of marketing theory as an objective than did the US respondents. However, in only two cases were these differences statistically significant.

The European respondents showed significantly stronger agreement with both the statement that the quest for theory in marketing is a worthwhile objective and the statement that marketing theory has significance for marketing academics. A detailed analysis of the data reveals that 73 per cent of the Europeans strongly agreed with the first statement compared with only 57 per cent of the US respondents who strongly agreed with that same statement. In fact, none of the Europeans expressed any disagreement with either of these statements, while 4 per cent of the US respondents expressed slight disagreement.

Statement	European			United States			<i>p</i> -Value of <i>t</i> -Test Means
	1987 Mean ^a	Agreement ^b 1974	1987	1987 Mean ^a	Agreement ^b 1974	1987	
Marketing theory has significance for the marketing academic	+2.73	78.6	100	+2.41	97.4	96.4	0.051
The quest for theory in marketing is a worthwhile objective	+2.73	92.9	100	+2.36	87.5	98.2	0.023
Marketing theory has significance for the marketing practitioner	+1.77	100.0	100	+1.70	95.0	92.8	0.766
Every researcher in marketing ought to ask him/herself the question, "What is the practical applicability of my findings?"	+0.32	66.7	63.6	+0.21	52.5	55.4	0.836
The pursuit of a general theory of marketing should be a goal of marketing theorists	+0.09	80.0	54.5	-0.18	72.5	43.8	0.618

^a Where strongly agree = +3 to strongly disagree = -3.

^b The percentage of all respondents expressing agreement with this statement in the 1974 study and the 1987 study, respectively.

Table II.
European/US Attitude
Comparison on
Marketing Theory(ies)
as an Objective

The most surprising finding in this section was the discovery that only 54 per cent of the European respondents and 43 per cent of the US respondents agreed that the pursuit of a general marketing theory should be a goal of marketing theorists. This suggests that many marketing academics may prefer that marketing theorists focus on a specific dimension of theory or area of study rather than attempting to develop a comprehensive marketing theory.

A comparison of these results with the results reported in our 1974 study yields several interesting findings. First, there has been a large increase in the importance that Europeans place on the significance marketing theory has for the marketing academic. In 1974, only 78 per cent of the European respondents expressed any degree of agreement with this statement, while in our 1987 study, 100 per cent of the European respondents agreed.

Also noteworthy is the finding that in 1974, approximately 80 per cent of the Europeans and 73 per cent of the US respondents felt that the pursuit of a general theory should be a goal of marketing theorists. As discussed earlier, these percentages in 1987 have dropped to 54 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively. This reinforces the belief that an increasing number of marketing thought leaders are beginning to question the viability of a general theory of marketing and, at least for the time being, are willing to focus their attentions on developing theories about specific dimensions of theory or areas within marketing.

The second major area of investigation dealt with an assessment of the present level of marketing theory development. For this part of the study, each respondent was again asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with seven specific statements dealing with the issue of the present level of development of marketing theory using the same six-point scale discussed earlier. The results of these responses and the responses from the 1974 study are presented in Table III.

The strongest level of agreement for both Americans and Europeans concerned the statement that "marketing has not had the number of writers or researchers concerned with the pursuit of theory that have been found in other areas of the social sciences". Here, 68.2 per cent of the European respondents expressed agreement compared with 81.4 per cent of the Americans; however, this difference was not statistically significant according to our *t*-test of the means. This suggests that a much larger percentage of marketing academics may, in fact, be concerned.

The only area that showed a significant difference between these two groups was the statement examining whether "problems with quantifying most marketing variables is the major obstacle to developing marketing theory". Only 16.1 per cent of the US respondents agreed with this statement, while 40.9 per cent of the Europeans were in agreement with it. The 1987 results were remarkably similar to the 1974 findings, where the percentages were 23.1 and 40.0 per cent, respectively.

Possible explanations for this difference may lie in the greater abundance of data available to American researchers, about US firms, or the more mathematical orientation of many of the American business schools as compared with the management orientation of many of the European schools, or perhaps the access of most American academics to large, powerful computer systems. However, this difference suggests a possible area for further exploration by researchers.

It is very encouraging to note that both groups were in strong disagreement with the statement that "No theory or theories of marketing currently exist".

Statement	European			United States			<i>p</i> -Value of <i>t</i> -Test Means
	1987 Mean ^b	Agreement ^b		1987 Mean ^a	Agreement ^b		
		1974	1987		1974	1987	
Marketing has not had the numbers of writers or researchers concerned with the pursuit of theory that have been found in other areas of the social sciences	+1.09	73.3	68.2	+1.32	79.5	81.4	0.633
Writers and researchers in marketing typically have not been concerned with building on the work of their predecessors, as has been true in certain other social sciences	0.00	33.3	50.0	+0.18	52.5	41.8	0.972
Problems with quantifying most marketing variables are the major obstacle to developing marketing theory	-0.45	40.0	40.9	-1.20	23.1	16.1	0.057
Economic theory has provided more concepts for the development of marketing thought than has any other social science	-0.71	33.3	28.6	-1.00	52.5	40.4	0.321
The firm's emphasis on solving marketing management problems has slowed the development of marketing theory	-0.57	6.7	36.4	-0.32	35.9	31.0	0.642
No theory or theories of marketing currently exist	-1.57 ^a	26.7	9.1	-1.91 ^a	10.0	12.6	0.298

^a Where strongly agree = +3 to strongly disagree = -3.

^b The percentage of all respondents expressing agreement with this statement in the 1974 study and the 1987 study, respectively.

Table III.
European/US Attitude
Comparisons on the
Present Level of
Development of
Marketing Theory

This is particularly important when comparing the European responses in the 1974 study, where there was 26.7 per cent agreement with this statement, to the current figures of only 9.1 per cent. This conclusion is further supported by the general tone of the findings of this study which found that Europeans are consistently placing considerable emphasis on the development and teaching of marketing theory throughout their academic institutions.

Theory in the Classroom

The third major area of investigation dealt with the importance of theory in the classroom. The results of this area of interest are presented in Tables IV and V.

As Table IV indicates, there is some significant difference between the Europeans and the North Americans concerning this issue. Both groups express a very slight agreement with the statement, "Since the first marketing course taken by an undergraduate is often his or her only marketing course, it should be 'practical application' oriented", and the larger level of agreement by Americans was not statistically significant. However, it is interesting to note the changing attitude of the Europeans. In 1974, only 30.8 per cent of the respondents agreed, but, by 1987, that percentage had climbed to 50.1 per cent. Perhaps this is in part explained by the evolution of some European business schools towards a more "hands-on or real-world" approach to business education, more in the style of most American business schools.

However, as the second statement in Table IV reveals, the Europeans appear to have added the practical orientation to their undergraduate marketing course, in addition to their strong emphasis on theory, rather than replacing the teaching of marketing theory with this practical approach. Indeed, the Europeans showed significantly stronger disagreement with the statement "Knowing marketing techniques is more important for undergraduates than understanding marketing theory" than did the American respondents. This finding is consistent with the parts of the study which revealed a strong theory orientation by most Europeans.

The importance Europeans place on the development and teaching of marketing theory is also reflected in the pedagogical content of their marketing course. As Table V discloses, at both the undergraduate and at the Master's level, the European respondents place a much greater emphasis on marketing theory than do US respondents. Indeed over 60 per cent of the American respondents placed little or no emphasis on marketing theory at either the undergraduate level and the Master's level.

It is only at the PhD level that a reversal in this trend is natural. At this level, nearly all the US respondents indicated that they placed moderate or heavy emphasis on marketing theory. Again, this supports the conclusion that Americans tend to view marketing theory as something that belongs in the classroom under the control of academics for academics, while the Europeans tend to see marketing theory as something that is helpful to marketing practitioners dealing with the real world.

Table IV.
European/US Attitude
Comparisons on the
Importance of Theory
in the Classroom

Statement	European			United States			<i>p</i> -Value of <i>t</i> -Test Means
	1987 Mean ^b	1974	1987	1987 Mean ^a	1974	1987	
Since the first marketing course taken by an undergraduate is often his/her only marketing course, it should be "practical application" oriented	+0.14	30.8	50.1	+0.64	56.7	58.2	0.233
Knowing marketing techniques is more important for undergraduates than understanding marketing theory	-1.09	7.7	18.2	+0.13	46.7	45.5	0.003

^a Where strongly agree = +3 to strongly disagree = -3.

^b The percentage of all respondents expressing agreement with this statement in the 1974 study and the 1987 study, respectively.

Table V.
Emphasis Placed on
Marketing Theory at
the Different
Educational Levels

	None (%)	Little (%)	Moderate (%)	Heavy (%)	Degree Not Offered (%)
<i>Undergraduate Level</i>					
European Respondent (n = 19)	0.0	36.8	42.1	5.3	15.8
US Respondents (n = 55)	26.4	34.0	30.2	0.0	9.4
<i>MBA/Master's Level</i>					
European Respondent (n = 21)	9.5	14.3	61.9	14.3	0.0
US Respondents (n = 53)	15.1	45.3	37.7	0.0	1.9
<i>PhD Level</i>					
European Respondent (n = 20)	5.0	20.0	25.0	35.0	15.0
US Respondents (n = 49)	0.0	4.1	22.4	59.1	14.3

Conclusion

By all measures, it appears that the study of "marketing theory" is perceived as a worthwhile objective in both Europe and the USA. That marketing theory is not only "alive and well" but the subject of increased concern seems to bode well for the future of the discipline. Many changes are apparent in the field with the growth of topic areas, such as business-to-business, services, macro and non-profit marketing. Such a diffusion of energy could well spell a degree of specialisation that would make the study of marketing theory *passé*.

Yet there have been clear streams of interest (and debate) that have spanned the decades. For example, in their recent book, *Marketing Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Sheth and Garrett[12] have a section entitled "Marketing and Science". And, the fundamental question raised in the section is, "Is marketing a science or an art?" Each of the past four decades, the 1950s to the 1980s, is represented by a key article on this topic and, while Anderson's 1983 writing[13] on the question puts Hutchinson's 1950s contribution[14] in the pale in its analytical treatment, the same objective in a sense prevails. Anderson points out that to gain recognition as a science, marketing must develop "...an exemplary body of theory and collection of scientific problems which it can count as solved". He notes the process has begun, as do the European and US respondents to this research, but emphasises that the work is not complete. Perhaps this point alone provides not only a continued interest in this and other fundamental theory questions, but a *raison d'être* for the current increase in the scholarly attention being given to marketing theory.

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