

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient. Scattered across this background are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top left towards the bottom right.

# **ADVENTURES IN MISPLACED MARKETING**

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**Herbert Jack Rotfeld**

The logo for Greenwood Publishing Group, featuring a stylized green leaf icon to the left of the company name.

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ADVENTURES IN  
MISPLACED MARKETING

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# ADVENTURES IN MISPLACED MARKETING

*Herbert Jack Rotfeld*



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## *Preface*

It began because I had a problem. I wanted to teach a graduate course on “marketing and society” and I needed to encourage our M.B.A. students to enroll. I could only get so far on my adorable personality.

My problem had some academic history. Many years ago, in the wake of some major business scandals of the early 1980s, business education programs were directed by the major accrediting organization to require the study of business ethics. At first, most universities added a new course to the list of requirements; at Auburn, the M.B.A. course was titled “Legal Social Ethical Environment of Business.” Unfortunately, discovering that many students were concerned only with pragmatic directives on how to be financially successful, many schools (including Auburn) responded by dropping the course requirement, claiming that the basic material was integrated into other courses in the program.

Whether such “integration” actually occurs at any school is questionable. But regardless of whether my colleagues performed as they claimed, the course was changed from a degree requirement into a department elective. I thought an unofficial course title of “misplaced marketing” would generate student interest.



It seemed intuitively obvious that marketing's social issues easily fit dictionary definitions of "misplaced" in that a marketing perspective had either been lost or misdirected. Other times, marketing tools were abused. After all, many criticisms of business involve firms that do not use or apply a marketing perspective when they should. Other critics attack what they perceive as marketing's failure to consider the societal impact of business decisions. I also noted, with growing fascination, that marketing—and especially advertising—is often attacked as undesirable when, in reality, the critic's real desire is to restrict, ban, or outlaw the product or service marketed.

Writing about misplaced marketing started with a phone call in early 1996 to Gregg Cebrzynski.

"Hi. This is Herb Rotfeld. You still having fun as managing editor?"

"Herb, how are things in Auburn? It's been a while since you've sent me any new essays for *Marketing News*. We haven't received a letter of complaint for months."

"Actually, I was wondering if I could write a regular ongoing column for you."

"Well, you know our columns are all dedicated to certain topic areas and we're pretty much committed to the current roster of columnists. Did you have something special in mind? A new topic?"

"Something new and different. 'Misplaced marketing.'"

"Sounds interesting just by the title. What is it?"

Okay, so this wasn't the exact conversation. We had talked before on the phone, I wanted to be a columnist and Gregg hadn't heard of "misplaced marketing," but, then, no one had, except for my students.

Anyway, my general description got Gregg interested and, after he reviewed some sample columns, "Herbert Rotfeld on Misplaced Marketing" started running once a month beginning July of that year.<sup>1</sup> Toward the end of 1998 I sent several other misplaced marketing commentaries to an academic outlet, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, where they were reviewed and accepted by the editorial board, with an additional request that I serve as a special section editor for the journal to encourage other people to submit papers on the subject. And when I visited a school in Melbourne, Australia, marketing faculty member Colin Jevons encouraged me to turn my attention to writing a book.

Like the magazine and journal commentaries, this book presents my personal perspective on past and current marketing practices, as well as many nonmarketing activities that could be aided by a marketing view. And this format allows me to present my original thinking on the subject. With short magazine columns or research notes, people read a series of seemingly eclectic essays and they might think "misplaced market-

ing” is only a collection of weakly related stories on bad customer service. This book restores the tapestry initially envisioned when I started using misplaced marketing as a basis for my class.

The downside of writing a book is that I lose any pretense of timeliness. Some of the firms that were the basis for these stories might have corrected some or all of their unfortunate practices. A business once noted for its positive marketplace role might have changed and could now serve as an exemplar of negative practice. Decisions in legal cases could have been reversed or altered on appeal. Since it is impossible to follow every up-to-the-minute change, the examples and personal experiences are presented herein to explain, not to castigate or praise.

Most companies described in this book are not directly identified. Others have fictitious names. Identifying details of many people mentioned in the stories are changed to protect their privacy. Of course, with the names disguised or removed, people who never talked to me or business employees I never encountered might see themselves in the stories. Perhaps more people will feel guilty because they’ll think I am talking about them.

Kim Rotzoll has endured and supported my writing for almost three decades as my teacher, doctoral advisor, and friend. He once explained that “Essay writers put themselves on a limb. They are, after all, expressing thoughtful opinions, often in short supply among many [academic writers].” While I have acquired a degree of fame (or maybe I should say “infamy”) from my essays in magazines and academic journals, even some people who enjoy reading my articles have said that they are “provocative.” They apparently view this as a negative label for a scholar or educator.

It is an unfortunate commentary on modern education that being provocative is now seen as something a faculty member should avoid. Instead of pushing new ideas or perspectives, we are encouraged to provide the intellectual equivalent of a day at the beach for our students and colleagues. An M.B.A. class does not provide a forum for discussion of education philosophy, but the application of misplaced marketing that interests me most stems from the conflict between what education *should* do and what students want from classes. Chapter 12 explains how the marketing of education is not only misplaced, but is also a destructive force for education itself. I restricted the comments on this topic to one chapter, but I barely scratched the surface of my concerns.

Many people inspired and encouraged my work, both now and in years past, such as Colin, Kim, and Morris Holbrook. Colin, Morris, and especially my graduate school classmate Lory Montgomery all gave me crucial help with editing notes and comments on preliminary drafts of chapters.

The opinions expressed herein are my own. And to borrow from comedian Mort Sahl, if there are any readers that I haven't insulted, I apologize.

### NOTE

1. Gregg left the organization in mid-1997 and the series of short-term replacements had me recall Thomas Sowell's statement: "The fact that I have never killed an editor is proof that the death penalty deters." Some editors inserted errors into my columns and I ran disclaimers on my Web page. In this book I re-create parts of those columns with my original perspective intact. The last column for that magazine ran in February 1999, though I am still writing new and original commentaries for *Journal of Consumer Marketing*.

## *Acknowledgments*

Portions of the material for this book develop and significantly expand stories and ideas that were published in various issues of *Marketing News* and *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, plus a book review published in *Journal of Marketing*. Any material that appeared in *Marketing News* from July 1996 to January 1999 and in *Journal of Marketing*, volume 63 (January 1999), is reprinted by a license from the American Marketing Association. Material from *Journal of Consumer Marketing* is reprinted by permission of MCB University Press.

Included below is a full listing of the *Marketing News* columns:

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Volume 15, 1998: issue #6.

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# 1

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## *Myths and Legends of the Modern Marketing Concept*

Marketing is a very difficult topic to discuss with people working in other fields, since everyone seems to be a self-proclaimed expert on the subject. After all, they're experienced shoppers, exposed to advertising their entire lives. They see it and therefore they "know" it. And they're all critics.

Even at social gatherings, marketing people find the introductions followed by all sorts of virulent complaints. I am reluctant to say I am a professor of marketing or that I teach advertising courses. Total strangers quickly blame me, as if I were personally responsible for the television advertising they don't like.

"Where do I work? I'm a faculty member at the university."

"Really? What department?"

"Uh . . . business."

"Oh, I'm interested in business. What do you teach?"

[Pause. Reluctant response.] "Marketing and advertising."

"I hate those *panty shield* commercials."

"I'm sorry, but I have nothing to do with those. They weren't my fault."

When I visited New Zealand, even bus drivers or the clerk at the souvenir store asked me what I thought of a then-current commercial for Toyota trucks in which the characters repeatedly say "Bugger." (That word is of questionable and profane etiology for many Kiwis and the commercial recently had been the basis for complaints before their national self-regulatory Advertising Standards Association.) In the United States, people have followed the introductions by grabbing my lapels and complaining about cigarettes targeting children, as if I personally had designed the campaign.

As one of the most visible of business practices, marketing is criticized by almost everyone, from social critics to government lawmakers to political pundits. Audience manipulation, offensive products, and cultural destruction are among the social ills often laid at the feet of the marketing business. Some students in my classes say they enrolled because they wanted to learn how (not "if") advertising manipulates people's behavior. In keeping with this popular view of the business, *Time* magazine's cover story in a mid-1999 international edition "reported" various tricks and tools of marketing used to manipulate consumers, illustrated by a metaphorical picture of a consumer dancing on a marketing man's puppet strings.<sup>1</sup> Supposedly, consumers are controlled by the mind manipulations of marketing planners, or so many people believe.

Admittedly, this near-paranoid view of marketing power fit with the beliefs held by leading scholars and business people a half century ago under their own views of marketing theory and practice. At that time, firms pursued what is now called a "production orientation," producing what the managers personally believed was a good product; marketing was the job of selling it. If the product wasn't selling, the marketing people were not doing a good job. In mass communications, everyone believed that political propaganda drove the citizens of every nation. In the 1930s, the first widespread scholarly and professional efforts to study how and why mass communications and persuasion might influence the public were impelled by a widespread perceived need to find ways to inoculate the vulnerable citizens of free nations against the much-feared powers of Nazi propaganda. After the war, the fear was communist influences in mass communications.

Today, marketing people know better, or so we hope, since research consistently reveals that people are very resistant to the persuasive efforts of marketing tools. It is generally realized that marketing practitioners can only wish they had the power business critics presume they possess. In reality, they don't. As it says in a once-popular song performed by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, people hear what they want to hear and disregard the rest.

Twenty-five years ago, a documentary interviewer asked noted advertising man George Lois how it felt to have so much power over consumers' minds. But his response was that advertising is *not* mind bending because, as he put it, "No one is that good."<sup>2</sup> The fact is that no one can be that good.

The criticisms might be voiced by people with limited knowledge or understanding of marketing theory and practice.<sup>3</sup> And yet, since marketing practice is not a guild—the business doesn't require any training or education programs for people making marketing decisions—many business practitioners also share these mistaken beliefs. I often tell students that just because they see a big-budget advertising campaign doesn't mean it is a good idea. Years ago, an executive at a major advertising agency insisted that, with a large enough budget, he could persuade men to start wearing dresses to work, a statement that was obviously ignorant of the large and unsuccessful advertising efforts to persuade women to wear dresses of lengths dramatically different than current general tastes.

Therefore, another way of viewing various issues and criticisms of marketing is to think of them as being generated by what I have come to call misplaced marketing: People who could or should be making marketing-based decisions are misplacing their focus, ignoring, misusing, or abusing some basic perspectives that should be followed.

## THE MARKETING CONCEPT

A microbiologist I knew years ago always liked to describe the latest research problem in his laboratory or research dead end by saying that, "Under carefully controlled conditions, organisms behave as they damn well please." What was sarcastically true for his microbes is more true for people. Successful marketing planning and tactics have to take consumers' behavior tendencies into account.

An oblong piece of plastic on my desk with a curved bottom and a flat top can be spun on its axis. But because of the way it is weighted, curved, and balanced, you can only spin it counterclockwise. Even though it is a plain looking piece of plastic, as complicated as a common thumb tack, it inexplicably will resist spinning in the other direction. If it is shoved clockwise, it starts to spin, then wobbles, hesitates, and reverses direction. Similarly, with free-willed consumers in the marketplace, as long as a marketing planner knows the way people want to go and understands why, he or she can try to encourage them to go faster or slower, or try to start them moving in the first place. Trying to get them to move in ways they don't want to will only result in failure.



Some people might believe that marketing people pull consumers' strings. Many people think consumers are controlled by marketing or advertising, but they're not. At best, marketing people try to find those "buttons to push"; they want to understand, explain, and predict exactly how those potential customers will jump when exposed to various aspects of marketing decisions.

The widely accepted "modern marketing concept" has become common and repeated ad nauseam in literature for our trade associations and textbooks. It presents an approach for all product and service planning that takes into account a world in which people have more in common with my obstinate piece of plastic or my friend's unicellular lab organisms than they do with puppets on strings. In short, marketing people can't sell a product unless there is some underlying initial consumer interest or inclination. In theory, the modern marketing concept combines all facets of the product design, price decisions, where the product is available for sale, personal selling and mass communications with an orientation to "satisfy consumer needs and wants."<sup>4</sup> (That's their mantra: "satisfy consumer needs and wants.")

At its core, it shifts the basis of planning from what would otherwise be production-then-sales efforts. Instead, it directs marketing planners to first assess how and why people make various decisions and to use those assessments as the basis for designing products and setting prices. Then, it uses those same assessments to decide how to inform and persuade consumers. A marketing plan can't set a goal to significantly alter consumer beliefs because such changes can't be made. Top-notch marketing efforts failed to sell Edsel cars, the original mididress, or other products that interested no one; no marketing plan could impel Auburn University men to start wearing skirts to class.

Some critics might reluctantly admit to this limit to marketing power, but then blithely assert that all-knowing marketing managers have studied people and know exactly which of consumers' mental buttons to push to get the desired response. And yet, even this supposed power is intrinsically limited. The best available predictions are very difficult, weak, and uncertain. After decades of studies of consumer and market analysis, the most heavily researched predictions are still providing only weak correlations with actual outcomes. Even among the most successful firms that regularly use extensive research as a basis for making marketing decisions, the majority of new products or service innovations fail to entice customers to make a purchase.<sup>5</sup>

In theory, the marketing concept as a planning perspective increases the likelihood that a firm will be successful, but it is far from a promise of certainty. This is not to overstate the power of the marketing concept: It is not a guarantee of marketing success, but it does offer a basic perspective that recognizes the limits of marketer power and, at

the same time, a focus for analysis of marketing problems.<sup>6</sup> Making business decisions based on consumer interests does give anyone a clear way to view customer-firm relations.

Unfortunately, the language of the modern marketing concept can be misleading. It could be read to imply values that it does not possess. Marketing trade associations and college textbooks say that marketing is a matter of satisfying consumer needs and wants, making it seem as if "real" marketing is above reproach and positive. Since this was the predominant worldview of marketing theory and practice when the United States started the modern wave of business criticisms thirty years ago, many educators and practitioners did not understand the problems the critics were raising. Many still don't. Marketing experts (both practitioners and educators) were heard to say, "The marketing concept says that we should 'satisfy consumer needs,' so since we are satisfying consumers, 'consumerism' [as consumer protection was called in the 1970s] isn't really a problem for us."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, saying that "We are just providing a service that people want," at best sounds the same as a drug dealer, a prostitute, or the Prohibition-era gangster, Al Capone.

Irony notwithstanding, even the best reading of such a view presumes that all firms follow this marketing orientation. Many don't. The often-ignored fact is that many firms fail to ask basic marketing questions of "how," "why," or "if" people might be interested in the planned product features or advertising messages. Instead of considering audience views of the world, the managers practice ethnocentrism. Instead of trying to anticipate customer problems, systems are put in place for the convenience of employees. And (more dangerously), while doing a good job using marketing tools to focus on key customer groups, they ignore potential critics' complaints.

Even if all businesses did adhere to the marketing orientation for every decision, it would not necessarily be true that many firms satisfying consumer needs would also serve the interests of society at large. From a societal point of view, what many consumers "want" are not necessarily what they should be getting. So while some organizations do a good job of marketing their goods or services or ideas, many business critics wish that they weren't doing such a good job (because we do not want corporations to do a good job of selling, say, cigarettes).

## WHAT IT MEANS TO MISPLACE MARKETING

Apparently, there is strong disagreements as to how to define marketing. When someone on an Internet discussion line for marketing educators and professionals raised the issue, participants tossed out all sorts of lengthy arguments. Some definitions turned on a variety of

arcane terms and few had any pragmatic implications. Some definitions were the “official” statements of national or international trade associations, while one or two writers claimed that the “best” definition was in the latest edition of their textbook. Yet, through it all, there seemed little disagreement about the marketing concept’s customer orientation as a business philosophy, and the basic tools used by marketing, such as communications, are intuitively obvious.

Fortunately, the definition of misplaced marketing does not require a definition of marketing. Starting with the marketing concept, the definition of “misplaced marketing” consists of two prongs that are both broad and simple.

First, marketing can be misplaced in the sense that it is “lost” or missing when a business, government agency, nonprofit organization, or other group could (or should) follow the basic dictates of a marketing perspective but does not. In these instances, marketing tools or tactics are used without reference to a strategy or customer-based perspective that a marketing orientation would require. Second, marketing can be misplaced in the sense of that it is being used in the “wrong” place. In these instances, it may be “properly” used and applied for a product or service, but its use is still amoral, in that the context or products or marketing benefits for consumers may be detrimental to a societal interest or, at the very least, detrimental to the interests and values posed by critics of business practices.

In other words, marketing activities may be “misplaced” because a marketing perspective or the basic tools of the business are misused, misapplied, abused, or simply the source of social criticisms of business activities. In every instance, the firms that misplace marketing may be financially successful while some present or potential customers are dissatisfied. Social groups that use marketing tools rarely discover how (or if) their public information campaigns fail. Government agencies often don’t ask marketing questions, to the detriment of the public groups they are expected to efficiently serve.

The modern marketing concept may call on businesses to “satisfy consumer needs,” but misplaced marketing shows that marketing practice does not always put the concept to its best use. And, in the end, consumers or society are not “satisfied.”

## SUCCESS WITHOUT THE MARKETING CONCEPT

Based on textbook and trade association literature, conventional wisdom holds that some “smaller” or unsuccessful firms still look at marketing in terms of selling, but the modern marketing concept’s acceptance and use is virtually universal among successful firms.<sup>8</sup> Yet there exist many examples of products or services that do not follow the “marketing concept,” but, instead, provide features in terms of

what designers or engineers say they can produce. While it is seldom discussed in the textbooks, many modern businesses still follow a production or selling orientation.

In these cases, marketing can be misplaced in the sense of "lost." Since they are making marketing decisions simply because the manager finds it interesting, or if the product has a feature because the company "can" add it, but the business decision makers don't ask if they "should," marketing remains just selling. Often, marketing gets "misplaced" because the planners or managers don't ask how the product or service could meet consumer needs.

Everyone has at some time or other looked for a product with certain features and "settled" for something short of what was desired. It is not uncommon to hear store managers state that they "know" the customers, so certain products are never stocked. "My customers aren't interested in that kind of thing," the inquiring customer is told, though the manager never tried stocking it, never even tried to buy one or two and see if they sold, and never sought other opinions.

Some examples are bad service. Sometimes it is a manager or owner seeing rules as more important than service, as when customers of retail stores test doors a few minutes before opening and walk away, while employees mill about inside the store waiting for the clock to chime on the hour for the posted opening time. Sometimes features are added to a product mix because an engineer thought it would be simple and inexpensive to do, not because anyone thought it made the product more desirable for consumers. And some examples are just plain corporate or engineering stupidity: Expensive electronic items often have simple parts like batteries or lights that are expected to die but are nigh impossible to replace. Many service hotlines are always busy and not very helpful. Some offensive ads are just bad messages, the result of business stupidity or ethnocentrism.

Of course, a product is more than the sum of its physical features and a good sales job changes the product itself. And maybe the people who can't find exactly what they want are just out of step with the rest of the marketplace. There might not be enough of them to be considered a viable target market segment—maybe virtually all potential purchasers want the commonly bundled features of, say, stereos that also include AM radios, portable digital radios with clocks, wristwatches with several alarms, and minivans that fill every inch of space with seats, even if a purchaser's primary purpose in buying it is to carry cargo.

Misplaced marketing does not mean a business will fail, especially if all its competitors engage in the same activities. Yet the business is wasting money when advertising is done without any idea or direction of what it can or should accomplish. And all examples of this form of misplaced marketing make for unusual perspectives of businesses toward their customers.

People from the United States are notoriously bad at this, as many of our domestic companies try to ram our products down the throats of the rest of the world and claim “unfair trade practices” when they aren’t bought. Using misplaced marketing, these firms are more ethnocentric than international.<sup>9</sup> U.S. companies often send products to other countries with features designed to satisfy customers in the domestic market without considering the special concerns of consumers in other nations, as if what satisfies consumers in the United States meets the needs of people around the globe.

### WHEN MARKETING SHOULD HAVE BEEN USED

In another sense, marketing gets lost as a result of arrogant ignorance. As I noted at the outset, everyone is a marketing expert, or so they like to believe. Many times, marketing tools are used without any understanding of how or why they should do the job. There are so many efforts in which marketing perspectives could be used, but aren’t.

A fellow student in my graduate school classes saw a massive advertising campaign as the solution for almost every social or cultural problem. Public television stations are facing a funding shortage? An advertising campaign would get more viewers for the shows which, in turn, would generate more funding. Too many people not wearing seat belts? An advertising campaign would convince them to change their habits. Too many children in schools trying drugs? Advertising would convince them not to. The space program is facing problems getting funding from Congress? A public information advertising campaign would show everyone how important the program is for U.S. prestige and new product development.

Beyond my fellow student’s simplistic solutions, from someone who should have known better—she had worked in the business for several years before entering the graduate program—she never really said how or why advertising could or would persuade people to change their habits. She misplaced the basic marketing perspective that would first ask if the advertising could serve a role in changing consumer views and, if so, what type of appeals should be used.

What she recommended fits an all-too-common practice. In many cases, marketing tools are used because some official thinks “something” should be done. But without understanding just how or why marketing could do a job, they often waste money on ineffectual and unnecessary advertising.

There exist numerous examples of cases when people decide to use advertising to “sell” a social idea without any consideration of how or why marketing tools would do the job. In many instances, the term could be “misplaced social marketing,” referring to marketing cam-

paigns that are myopically seen as the solution to social problems.<sup>10</sup> Many public information campaigns fail because they are created around what the managers want to say instead of an understanding of what would persuade or change the behaviors of a target audience. Arrogant ignorance outweighs marketing planning to the detriment of the campaign's ability to accomplish anything.

National and local government agencies in several countries have been running very strong television commercials describing the dangers of drunk driving, speeding, failure to use seat belts, and other unsafe driving behaviors. The advertising messages all say, "Do these things and you will die, or be so badly injured you will be sorry you survived." The advertising images are often very graphic. Reductions in fatal crashes are credited to the campaigns and increases in the death toll are blamed on bad advertising, yet a failure to ask marketing questions means the actual role or value of the advertising is questionable at best.

In New Zealand, city school districts no longer require children to attend the nearest neighborhood school. Instead, parents could send them to whatever public school they think might be doing a better job of providing a quality education. Since each school is funded based on the numbers of students that enroll, the school administrators believe that they must advertise to attract students. Just what those ads should say, or if advertising should be used at all, is never really questioned, but the schools feel they must do "something" to attract students. So they advertise. Comparable situations are also found in places such as Australia or parts of the United States where local schools or universities feel they are competing to attract students.

Under this same category, we should include the unfortunate story of trade associations that seem more bent on serving internal needs than those of dues-paying members. If the association is old, large, and influential, it may lose touch with members and retain its position by use of power instead of marketing. It may lose members and incur the eternal enmity of many who stay by failing to consider how to satisfy member wants and needs. People quit, but the organization is so large that no one notices.

All these failures—to not use marketing or to use it poorly—are clearly lost opportunities. The results are unfortunate and frustrating.

### **NOT ALL CONSUMER NEEDS "SHOULD" BE SATISFIED**

The most vexing problem for marketing people comes from those instances when marketing is accused by pundits, activists and public policy makers of being misplaced when it is properly used and ap-

plied. Politicians, movie or music producers, cigarette companies, distillers, gun companies, and pornographers often do a good job of following the dictates of thorough strategic marketing, while many people might wish that, at least for them, marketing was not used.<sup>11</sup> In practical terms, marketing is not necessarily misplaced in the sense of “lost,” but, to critics, its power is misused or abused or misdirected.

Politicians should be leaders, using marketing theory and practice to, at most, sell their ideas to the public, instead of using marketing to adapt to a marketable image, as dictated by current public opinion polls. No “leader” should base policies on a marketing plan, since “leader” should not mean “good reader of polls.” Cultural artifacts should grow from the populace, not be designed according to a marketing strategy, or so we are often told. In addition, to critics of these products in various nations where they are legal, guns, cigarettes, pornographic movies, and gambling games should not be efficiently and profitably delivered to “satisfy consumer needs,” no company should be allowed to maximize its profits with these products, and *never* should these products be marketed to children as a target segment.

It should also be noted that, from a social or societal point of view, not all things customers “want” are what they should be getting. Marketing might also be misplaced in the sense that satisfying consumer needs might be contrary to those of the greater society. More than two decades ago, when the first oil shortages forced car companies to offer more efficient products, the solution was to produce smaller and lighter vehicles. But one U.S. company tried to delay, offering a downsized version of its luxury car line but strongly promoting the still available “original,” full-sized, gas-guzzling version (clearly for the U.S. market, I often say, complete with rotating gun turret). The affluent consumers who cared little about rising gas costs might have been served, but not the social goal of oil conservation.

Of course, even if critics believe that marketing is misplaced, that does not necessarily mean it should be banned, but it could be a source of “problems” (or, at least, a basis for criticisms of various aspects of marketing practice). Calling the problem “misplaced marketing” provides a context for understanding mistakes or unintended consequences (though it does not account for events such as heads of American cigarette companies appearing before the U.S. Congress—as they did a few years ago—and swearing their belief that nicotine was not addictive and that there was no link between smoking and cancer).

And, sometimes, what might be seen as good marketing could be harmful to both the “product” and society. The “product” should not be deformed just to serve the dictates of a marketing plan, especially if those changes reduce product quality while not better serving customers or society. In the marketing of education, schools and univer-

sities have often focused on “benefits” other than education, such as sports teams or jobs graduates might try to fill. These might be reasons why some people choose a school, but by presenting these benefits as important, the marketing of education has caused harm to education itself, as both parents and students lose sight of the basic values of education itself. There exists some valid basis to blame marketing for education’s deterioration when educational leaders distort their school’s priorities in order to meet what they see as the needs of a marketing plan.

### WHY “MISPLACED MARKETING”

When I coined the term “misplaced marketing,” it was intended to encompass a broad perspective for all the times that marketing could be misplaced because it is misapplied, misused, abused, or simply the focus of social criticisms. These are not all marketing mistakes, though it makes it easy to see where some products failed. The creators of the Apple Newton misplaced marketing and totally misunderstood consumer views for that type of product, while the makers of the successful Palm Pilot did not. But many firms can be (and are) successful by following a production orientation, depending on either market power or luck. Government and nonprofit organizations do not need to be successful in the business sense, but the public might be better served if they did not misplace marketing perspectives in planning activities. And in many cases, firms might be better off (at least in the public relations sense) if they did not use all the marketing tools at their disposal, since the marketing could readily become the focus of public criticisms or products or services that various activists do not like.

Some readers might see an intrinsic problem with misplaced marketing in that what is “misplaced” is the marketing concept. Does it really define marketing? There have always existed some criticisms of the concept’s pragmatic utility, with some saying that it tends to be removed from the reality of marketing practice.<sup>12</sup> It even seems limited in marketing education. Many textbooks use it as the starting point of a “history of marketing thought,” then seem to ignore it when giving more details on concerns of research or practical activities.

By accepting the marketing concept herein, I am not endorsing it as much as using its basic view of the limits of persuasion power as a way to assess various marketing activities.

On the other hand, misplaced marketing is also an oblique response to a survey of marketing educators in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand that found little agreement as to whether there exist any core perspectives on marketing as an academic discipline.<sup>13</sup> Since the marketing concept provides a general basis for viewing market-



ing perspectives or problems, I often thought it could have been that core of the discipline. Misplaced marketing is just my own idiosyncratic twist.

Misplaced marketing offers a perspective for analysis, a basis for studying problems and situations. If the marketing concept doesn't give us a way to deal with these ideas, then all we have in marketing is a collection of obvious generalities and wishful thinking with limited apparent business value (plus terms that you won't find in any dictionary). After decades of research, the academic discipline and the realm of business practice should be more than that.

## NOTES

1. *Time*, August 2, 1999, pp. 39–43. This prominent cover story only appeared in the international edition, while the North American covers focused on the then-recent death of John F. Kennedy, Jr.

2. "Adland: Where Commercials Come From," 1974. While George Lois had more camera time than anyone else, this sixty-minute documentary of the advertising business included interviews with several other executives, copywriters, and actors. Discussions included the work and philosophies of George Lois, Jerry Della Femina, a casting director, a child actor's father, and a used car dealer in California who sponsored late-night movies on the local television station.

3. In politics, it is still believed that heavy use of advertising can "buy" an election, despite repeated showings of big-spending campaigns failing to win voters. For many years, the U.S. government has broadcast radio programs into Cuba based on a belief that such propaganda can make Fidel Castro's supporters change their minds and start to oppose him.

4. There are various discussions and evaluations of what is meant by the marketing concept, but the basic idea has become synonymous with what is known as "having a customer orientation," meaning the firm starts by knowing (or trying to know) the customers and satisfying those people at a profit. This quote is taken from Franklin S. Houston, "The Marketing Concept: What It Is and What it Is Not," *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 50 (April 1986), pp. 81–87.

5. Some of the extensive research behind these basic truisms of the business are reviewed in Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: It's Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). He notes in his preface (p. xiii) that "Advertising agencies are stabbing in the dark much more than they are practicing precision microsurgery on the public consciousness."

6. Don Esslemont and Tony Lewis, "Some Empirical Tests of the Marketing Concept," *Marketing Bulletin*, vol. 2 (1991), pp. 1–7.

7. I've never encountered a statement of the marketing concept indicating that it can (or should) be driven by altruism, nor has it been used as the foundation of a book on business ethics. On the contrary, first and foremost, a firm seeks to satisfy its own needs. A business must be profitable and a nonprofit