The Gender of the Consumer: a Feminist Perspective on the Marketing Concept
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The marketing concept is a central tenet of marketing theory and practice which enjoins firms to adopt a "consumer orientation." A typical expression of the marketing concept is that "the key to achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than competitors," (Kotler and Turner 1989, p. 17).

While this concept has been subjected to critique from several quarters, our insight into the underpinnings and implications of the marketing concept is enriched when a feminist perspective is applied. In order to do so, it is necessary to examine the (1) historical genesis of the marketing concept, (2) the social constructions of reality which support it, and (3) the possibilities that exist for re-writing this tenet of marketing theory. The following paragraphs indicate the kinds of issues to be discussed under each heading.

One historical factor relevant to a feminist perspective on the marketing concept is that, during roughly the same period when the marketing concept was first articulated (the 1950s), a "mythical idea" that 85 percent of every family dollar is spent by women" (Davis 1976) was widely believed. In effect, the "gender of consumer" -- at least for household goods and services -- was assumed to be female. Unlike in other disciplines, such as organizational research, where women are an absent element in early theorizing, in marketing, women have occupied a central position. Many early studies of consumers used women, primarily housewives, as subjects; when one consumer was assumed to be able to speak for others in the household, it was typically women who were questioned. Although such practices have changed somewhat, and men have been "written into" consumer theory in the intervening years, gendered assumptions may remain implicit in the marketing concept.

To clarify what these gendered assumptions may be today, it is useful to examine the socially constructed reality which surrounds and supports the marketing concept. These social constructions are conveyed and perpetuated partially through the rhetoric of marketing, in which such terms as "targeting" the consumer, and "segmenting" and "penetrating" consumer markets figure prominently. Arndt (1985) labelled some of the dominant marketing rhetoric militaristic, and implied that the customer is essentially construed as the enemy when such a militaristic world view dominates the construal of reality. A feminist analysis would point out the sexuality and violence implicit in mainstream marketing rhetoric, and suggest an alternative reading of the marketer/consumer relationship. While marketers are seeking to "meet consumers wants and needs," their ultimate goal in so doing is to use them (target them, segment them, penetrate them) for self-serving purposes (achieving organizational goals). This reading has striking parallels to traditional sex role stereotypes concerning male-female relationships. In such stereotypes, a man uses gifts or flattery to court a woman (meets her "needs") in order to achieve sexual gratification (his "goal"). In parallel fashion, marketers court consumers in order to achieve financial gratification. Competitors are like rival suitors; consumers are the "prize" over which they fight.

This feminist perspective on the rhetoric of marketing supports the contention that consumers are socially construed in terms consistent with stereotypes concerning women: as passive entities, easily duped by a superficial show of interest, and essentially powerless. The perspective also suggests that marketers are defined in relation to the consumer in terms consistent with stereotypes concerning men: as self-serving agents, less concerned with permanent relationships than with immediate gratification, and as aggressors.
Analyzing marketing's consumer orientation in this manner opens up new possibilities for the theorizing the relationship between the consumer and the marketer. Clearly consumers are not accurately characterized as largely passive dupes and marketers are not necessarily scheming aggressors. Envisioning other constructions of reality which place more emphasis upon the trust and respect which can characterize relationships may help develop more mutually beneficial consumer/marketer relationships. The paper associated with this abstract develops more fully an historical perspective on the marketing concept, a feminist reading of its implications, and the possibilities for "re-vision," that is, for seeing the marketer/consumer relationship in alternate ways.

REFERENCES

