Routledge Studies in Marketing

MARKETING, RHETORIC, AND CONTROL

**THE MAGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF
MARKETING THEORY**

Chris Miles

Marketing, Rhetoric, and Control

Marketing, Rhetoric, and Control investigates the tensions that surround the place of persuasion (and, more broadly, control) in marketing. Persuasion has variously been seen as an embarrassment to the discipline, a target for anti-marketing sentiment, the source of marketing's value in the modern organisation, a mysterious black box inside the otherwise rational and logical endeavour of enterprise, and a rather insignificant part of the marketing programme. This book argues that this multifarious reputation for persuasion within marketing stems from the influence of two quite oppositional paradigms—the scientific and the magico-rhetorical—that ebb and flow across the discourses of its discipline and practice.

Constructing an interface between original, challenging close readings of texts from the beginnings of the Western rhetorical tradition and an examination of the ways in which marketing has set about describing itself, this text argues for a Sophistic interpretation of marketing. From this perspective, marketing is understood as providing intermediary services to facilitate the continuing exchange of attention and regard between firm/client and stakeholders. It seeks to manage and direct this exchange through an appreciation of the changing rational and irrational motivations of the firm and stakeholders, using these as resources for the construction of both planned and improvised persuasive interactions in agonistic (or competitive) environments.

This book is aimed primarily at researchers and academics working in the fields of marketing, marketing communications, and the related disciplines of marketing theory, critical marketing, and digital marketing. It will also be of value to marketing academics in business schools, including those working in the areas of media and communication studies who have an interest in commercial and corporate communication, brand use of interactive media, and communication theory.

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Routledge Studies in Marketing

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Marketing Theory

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First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-66727-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-61898-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

For Şebnem

Taylor & Francis

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a number of people who have made the conception and writing of this book an easier process. Both Nicholas O'Shaughnessy and Yasmin Ibrahim encouraged my research on rhetoric and marketing from an early stage and acted as sympathetic, influential sounding boards at the start of this project. I am very grateful for the sterling support that I have received in my work from Janice Denegri-Knott in her capacity as Head of Research for the Department of Corporate and Marketing Communication at Bournemouth University and also as the Head of the Promotional Cultures and Communication Centre there. Other colleagues at Bournemouth University, particularly Rutherford and David Alder, have also been very generous in listening to my ramblings and offering sage advice (most of which I have flatly ignored in the interest of consistent cantankerousness). Tomas Nilsson has been an enthusing conversational partner for much of the writing of this book and his commitment to the rhetorical nature of marketing and management work is energizing. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Şebnem, to whom this book is dedicated, for always supporting me, inspiring me, keeping me sane, and helping me to remember the magic power of language every day.

Introduction

In this study, I investigate the tensions that surround the place of persuasion (and, more broadly, control) in marketing. Persuasion has variously been seen as an embarrassment to the discipline, a target for anti-marketing sentiment, the source of marketing's value in the modern organisation, a mysterious black box inside the otherwise rational and logical endeavour of enterprise, and a rather insignificant part of the marketing programme. I will argue that this multifarious reputation for persuasion within marketing stems from the influence of two quite oppositional paradigms—the scientific and the magico-rhetorical—that ebb and flow across the discourses of its discipline and practice.

The scientific endeavour can be characterised as an effort to strip human investigation, and subsequent practice, of any confounding subjective influence, to objectively lay bare the workings of the natural world without becoming ensnared in the illusions of ideology, religion, myth, and received wisdom. Fundamental to all of these harbingers of error is that they are embedded in language. The careless use of language has been seen as the enemy of the objective discovery of truth since the birth of the modern scientific method (Stark, 2009). The early experimentalists of the Royal Society, for example, sought to eradicate figurative language and cultivate a plainness of style that focused not upon “The Artiface of Words, but a bare knowledge of things” (Sprat, cited in Longaker, 2015, p. 16). This attitude has also suffused much of the intellectual history of economics, commerce and management, where the patina of objective, ‘scientific’ discourse is important in persuading actors of the unbiased, incontrovertible logic of theories, policies and decisions (McCloskey, 1985; Miller, 1990; Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Yet, as my own language here implies, the valorising of a plain and factual style, shorn of rhetorical figuration and emotional appeals, is itself a clear rhetorical strategy. Persuasive language does not have to appear florid and overflowing with figuration—it can instead adopt an empirical tone, relying upon the rhetoric of tables and matrices, to seduce readers into believing that the ‘logic of science’ is operating across its discourse. When academic and practitioner voices speak of banishing persuasion and rhetoric, then, they are often simply taking the opportunity to implement a

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particular rhetorical strategy of their own, a strategy which at many level is concerned with the manufacturing and maintenance of control.

In order to examine the place of persuasion within marketing theory, one inevitably will have to explore the relationship that the discipline has with scientific discourse (and scientific methodology as a discourse strategy). Yet, as I have already indicated, there is another discourse paradigm that has just as much influence over the development and self-construction of the marketing discipline—the magical worldview. Here, language is something that can enchant, cast a glamour, control from afar, and influence without recourse to logic or facts. Knowing the right set of words (the appropriate incantation) can give you power over others and reduce the confusion of everyday life. Such a power is naturally attractive to us all—but marketing practitioners, who deal constantly with the effort to find the right combination of words to invoke their brand's benefit as effectively as possible are perhaps closer than any other contemporary profession to the allure of the magical paradigm of language. Marketing theorists, who seek to formalise and explain the practice to themselves, their students, and (hopefully) professionals, are inevitably exposed to the assumptions of magical influence that I will show are common across the discipline. They might react to these assumptions, try to exorcise them, construct their theories in order to leave no room for them—but they inevitably become open to infection by them just as they are at the mercy of the assumptions of scientific discourse.

I intend to show that at the root of both the scientific and magical paradigms of language is the same basic concern—control. Marketing is obsessed with control—it is its very lifeblood. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that marketing theory and practice constantly flip-flop between scientific and magical approaches to language. However, the relationship between the two is not a simple binary one, and it is the tradition of rhetoric which gives important clues as to how they bind together. The study and practice of rhetoric (the classical art of persuasion) has similarly been entwined within variegated constructions of rationality and irrationality throughout its theory and practice. I will demonstrate that marketing is an institutionalised contemporary manifestation of the rhetorical enterprise, particularly as the Sophists conceived of it, and as such can greatly profit from a careful consideration of the history of its mother discipline and the way in which society has at turns embraced and demonised it. This is particularly important at this stage of marketing's evolution. Concerns regarding marketing's authenticity, transparency, manipulative intentions, and effectiveness are rife both within and without the discipline. Marketing academics, with varying degrees of alarmist language, worry about the future of both the academic discipline and the profession (Thomas, 2006; Merlo, 2011; Varey, 2013; Clark et al., 2013; Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009) while report after report demonstrates the crisis of trust that brands face online due to annoying and intrusive control-oriented marketing practices (Daly, 2016). Theories (or proto-theories) such as the Service-Dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004)

can be seen as attempts to re-define marketing in the face of such threats, yet they do this at the cost of making marketing less and less relevant. What is needed, instead, is an honest approach to the centrality of control to the marketing enterprise, one which can bring nuance and insight to the consideration of control rather than simply trying to act as if it is not (or should not be) there. This is what this study attempts to do by making a case for understanding marketing as a Sophistic enterprise, one which is focused upon the control (or management) of attention (or what I will call regard) through a persuasive, interactive engagement with stakeholders in an agonistic (i.e. competitive) environment. In order to argue this case, the reader must be taken through a number of stages and exposed to some quite diverse areas of scholarship and practice. I will now outline the course of the argument that I will be developing over the next nine chapters.

Synopsis

The first part of the book establishes the extent to which rhetoric has already figured as an object of marketing scholarship. In order to do this, and to prepare the reader of the development of my argument in later chapters, I start with an overview of the history of Western rhetoric. What writing there has been to date on the place of rhetoric within marketing practice and theory has tended to have to skip heavily when supplying the historical and developmental context to rhetoric. This acts as a disadvantage for the further acceptance of rhetorical perspectives in the discipline because it leaves most readers with only a cursory understanding of what rhetoric really is and how much depth there exists in the scholarship that has grown up around it for more than two thousand years. If all we know of rhetoric is that Aristotle said that there were three different types of persuasive argument (*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*) and that it also has something (though we might not be sure what) to do with metaphors and figures of speech, then it is not surprising that we might not appreciate how much insight rhetoric can give us into the whole gamut of marketing thought. While there are many worthy primers of rhetoric available to the interested reader (Conley, 1990; Murphy et al., 2014; Kennedy, 1994; Smith, 2003; to name but a few), there are none that seek to summarise the story of the discipline for a marketing audience. Consequently, I will endeavour to lay out the important aspects of the study and practice of rhetoric as they will relate to my later, more involved, arguments regarding control, scientism, and magical thinking. Those readers who are already familiar with the rhetorical tradition are urged to jump straight to Chapter 2. It is here that I review the different ways in which marketing scholars have already engaged with aspects of rhetoric. For in linking rhetoric and marketing I am thankfully not starting *ab initio*. Even before Tonks' (2002) clarion call for rhetoric to have a "central location in making sense of marketing management" (p. 806) there had been a growing weight of research investigating the part that traditional

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rhetorical approaches to persuasion could have in explaining the power of textual and visual tactics in advertising and public relations (Bush and Boller, 1991; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1996, 1999; Scott, 1994; Stern, 1988, 1990; Tom and Eves, 1999). This tradition has continued and broadened in recent years, with scholars such as Brown (2002, 2004, 2005, 2010), Hackley (2001, 2003) and myself (Miles, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) using rhetorical framings to discuss the ways in which marketing speaks about itself and how academics and practitioners use discourse to construct various aspects of what it means to be doing marketing. Chapter 2, therefore, brings us ‘up to date’ with the small but significant ‘rhetorical turn’ in marketing.

If, so far, marketing scholarship has not been overly receptive to arguments that it should be interpreted as an instantiation of rhetoric it is worth investigating just how it is that marketing does actually see itself. Chapter 3, therefore, begins by examining the foundation myths of marketing, looking at where scholars think the discipline comes from and how it has been thought to have developed in its formative years. Central to this examination is a consideration of the way that marketing has sought to define itself as a science and the sometimes quite vociferous debates that have flared up around this issue, particularly between those promoting a ‘relativistic’ interpretation of marketing truth and those supporting a far more empirical, ‘realist’ one. These debates are important for the stage that they set for my later analysis of the Sophistic character of the marketing enterprise, but they can also be analysed as attempts to run away from considering marketing’s true nature as a discipline of rhetorical control. This leads me directly to a discussion of the centrality of control in any consideration of marketing practice and theory. I start this discussion by tracing an alternative history of marketing in what Beniger (1986) has called the “crisis of control” (p. 219) accompanying the Industrial Revolution. I will argue that modern marketing developed as a technology of control designed to stimulate and direct consumer demand and that these origins have continued to direct its evolution, despite the manifold extensions and re-focussings that the practice and discipline have undergone in the following decades. Marketing’s ability to control consumption is dependent also upon the intermediary position of the marketing practitioner. The description of marketers as ‘middlemen’, though common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has largely fallen by the wayside. However, I will argue that the phrase holds an important key to the way in which the modern profession can be seen as reflecting a truly ancient dynamic. This is a cue for our first return to Plato and his dealings with early marketers (or retailers and traders) in order to worry away at the origins of this middle position of the marketer. Marketing historians have often reached for Plato when they have wished to underscore the esteemed history of the discipline, and I will consider the rhetorical ramifications for such an appeal. This will also serve as context for my oppositional reading of Plato’s description of marketing middle men which occurs in Chapter 4. Chapter 3 finishes with a consideration of marketing

scholarship's unquenchable desire to increase its scope as far as possible and relates this to the issue of exchange, a concept which has been repeatedly put forward as the one motif which can unify all marketing thought.

Chapter 4 builds upon the discussion of exchange that finishes the previous chapter and uses it to present an initial conception of how marketing can be considered an instantiation of the rhetorical discipline. I begin by exploring the ramifications of understanding marketing as an attempt to control the flow of value. I adopt the idea of the marketer as an intermediary but also return to Plato's discussion of the origins of the marketer in order to provide a detailed, Sophistic, oppositional reading of how the *urmarketer* functions in society. This allows me to offer an initial definition of marketing as rhetoric, a definition which is then qualified, expanded upon, and altered over the course of the chapter and its examination of the ways in which Plato deals with the infecting, liminal, dangerous presence of marketing in his ideal city-states. The chapter culminates with an argument, following Lanham (2006), for basing an understanding of marketing as rhetoric upon the provision of services to facilitate the exchange of attention.

Having argued for the broadly rhetorical nature of marketing, in Chapter 5 I make the case for considering marketing as particularly Sophistic. Once again, I return to Plato and the issue of the middle position of the marketer and demonstrate how that philosopher treated the Sophists in a very similar way—as infecting, dangerous outsiders who threatened the balance of society and the morals of those who composed it. On this basis I examine the legacy of Sophism, asking what made it unique as a rhetorical approach and what made it so threatening to Plato and Aristotle. This leads to a discussion of the way in which marketers are seen in modern society, and how the sorts of accusations and negative sentiment that are routinely thrown at marketing are similar to the ways in which Plato and his philosophical descendants saw both the marketers of their time and the Sophists. I argue that the reason for this similarity comes down to the fact that marketers (both ancient and modern) and Sophists were both performing very similar roles in society based upon controlling attention and the appreciation of value. Finally, I consider the question of why, if the links between rhetoric and marketing are so clear, has there been so little effort made by scholars of rhetoric to engage with marketing?

Much of Chapters 4 and 5 is concerned with the consequences of millennia of public and scholarly unease with marketing and rhetoric, with attempts to control others for commercial, political, or personal gain. A lot of this unease comes from the ways in which rhetoric and marketing remind people of magic. Magic is also about controlling people and things, destiny and luck. And it has a significant part to play in the practice of early rhetoric, particularly Sophistic rhetoric. There are, also, very close connections between marketing and magic, both in terms of the ways that consumers think of products and consumption and the ways that scholars outside marketing have occasionally attempted to explain its power and purpose. The next three chapters of the book deal with how magic, rhetoric, and

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marketing come together. Firstly, Chapter 6 reviews the Western scholarly engagement with magic, the way that it has been defined around attempts at control, and the importance of language in our understandings of what it is. This then allows us to move on in Chapter 7 to a detailed consideration of how the Sophistic approach to language was one based upon a consideration of the magical power of speech. This chapter argues that the deep roots of early rhetoric in ritual and magical performative language constituted a significant part of the threat seen by Plato and Aristotle in the Sophists' teachings and public demonstrations. Consequently, much of the systematisation of rhetoric, its bureaucratisation, can be seen as a series of attempts to expunge magic (as conveyed in ritual patternings, highly figurative language, vivid imagery) from public disputation. Although the 'magical' aspect of rhetoric never truly disappeared, authorities concerned with managing political, legal, and ceremonial disputation and declamation have often tended to take serious measures to keep it on the outside of the establishment. I argue that the practice of marketing can be seen as the last refuge of the magical roots of magic, and it marks, ironically, a (qualified) triumph after many millennia of marginalisation of this tradition. Chapter 8 then considers a number of instances in non-marketing and marketing scholarship where marketing or consumption have been identified with magic or sorcery. Examining the work of Williams (1980), Williamson (2002) and Jhally (1989), amongst a number of others, I argue that scholars working outside the marketing academy have often used the accusation of magical practice against marketing as a way of damning it, or publicly shaming it and the capitalist system that they argue utilises it to spread a glamour in front of the reality of the production and consumption process. As a counter to this, I also examine the consumer culture theory literature that seeks to uncover the magical thinking behind consumption experiences. I argue that as insightful as it is, this strand of marketing scholarship turns away from any real engagement with the magical nature of marketing itself, rhetorically positioning the consumer as the only agent in the creation of consumption magic. While it, therefore, recognises the continuing importance of magic in the modern market, it tells only half of the story. Instead, if we examine the relationship between magic, rhetoric, and marketing, we can fully appreciate the position of the marketer as both magician and rhetor.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 9, returns to the establishment of a Sophistic understanding of marketing, and works towards presenting an improved version of the definition of marketing originally presented in Chapter 4. The chapter revisits and deepens major themes from the previous chapters in order to arrive at a more rounded conception of marketing as rhetoric. It considers the value of relativism, improvisation, magical thinking, and an agonistic perspective in understanding what makes marketing powerful, desirable, and unique. It also argues that, without a recognition of the centrality of control to what marketing does, a full understanding of marketing's place in society will be always out of reach.

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