

The prospects for marketing strategy and the marketing discipline in Era V: is the prognosis promising or problematic?

Shelby D. Hunt

Jerry S. Rawls College of Business Administration, Department of Marketing, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

I thank professors Bernard Jaworski, Brian Jones, Eric Shaw, and Rajan Varadarajan for commenting on my article on 'Advancing Marketing Strategy in the Marketing Discipline and Beyond' and for suggesting ways to advance marketing strategy and the overall discipline in marketing's future 'Era V'. This note responds to some of their queries, critiques, and recommendations related to the past, present, and future of marketing strategy and the marketing discipline.

KEYWORDS

Strategic marketing;
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resource-advantage theory

It is an honour to have one's work viewed as warranting commentaries by other scholars. It is a *distinctive* honour to have one's work viewed as warranting commentaries by such distinguished scholars as professors Bernard Jaworski, Brian Jones, Eric Shaw, and Rajan Varadarajan. I thank all of them for taking the time to read my article on 'Advancing Marketing Strategy in the Marketing Discipline and Beyond' (Hunt, 2017) and for providing their views on the article's claims. I also thank them for suggesting ways to advance marketing strategy and the overall discipline in marketing's future 'Era V'. This note responds to some of their queries, critiques, and recommendations related to the past, present, and future of marketing strategy and the marketing discipline. I begin with summarising the central claims of both my original article and the commentaries.

The central claims of 'Advancing Marketing Strategy' and the commentaries

The central claims of 'Advancing Marketing Strategy' were that the area of strategic marketing (1) had significant *promise* when the marketing academic discipline was founded in Era I (1900–1920), (2) was neglected in Era II (1920–1950), (3) rose to prominence in Era III (1950–1980), (4) has become a 'fragment' in Era IV (1980–present), and (5) has prospects that are both promising and problematic in marketing's future 'Era V' (2020-?). To support the

CONTACT Shelby D. Hunt  shelby.hunt@ttu.edu  Jerry S. Rawls College of Business Administration, Department of Marketing, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

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claims, the article provided both historical evidence and the analyses of prominent, current commentators on marketing strategy and the marketing discipline.

Given that 'Advancing Marketing Strategy' covers over 100 years of marketing thought and my credentials as a marketing historian are modest, I had reason to fear that the article would have some 'fatal flaw' or omission. The central claims of the three commentaries suggest my fears were unfounded. Indeed, Jaworski (2017, pp.2, 6) finds the article to be 'an insightful, precise essay on the nature and contribution of the field of marketing', which identifies problems that 'go right to the heart and soul of marketing', and he 'agree[s] with all Hunt's comments and recommendations about how to reverse the slide' towards irrelevance. Similarly, Varadarajan (2017, p. 3) finds the article 'insightful, instructive, and inspiring', and he forecasts that 'one can envision Hunt's article being on the reading lists of doctoral seminars in marketing'. Likewise, Jones and Shaw (2017, p. 2) find that 'we are in almost complete agreement with Hunt's (2017) overall argument that the marketing discipline is troubled, becoming marginalised, has an identity crisis, that the essence of that identity could and should be strategic marketing'. Therefore, the three commentaries focus primarily on extending and reinforcing the major provisions of 'Advancing Marketing Strategy'. Accordingly, this reply examines the recommendations of the three commentaries and responds to several questions that they raise.

The role of organic, indigenous theory in advancing marketing

Varadarajan (2017, p. 17) laments the fact that 'all the 13 theories identified by Merwe, Berthon, Pitt, and Barnes (2007) as pivotal theories in marketing ...happen to be developed in other disciplines'. Although he uses the word 'happen', he does not believe this sorrowful state of affairs to be a *happstance*. Rather, he argues that marketing's reliance on other disciplines' theories stems from the sociology of the marketing discipline, and he cites the arguments in Hunt (1994) and Rust (2006) as supporting evidence. Varadarajan then uses resource-advantage (R-A) theory (Hunt, 2000; Hunt and Morgan, 1995) as an example of how a theory that is indigenous to marketing can successfully have relevance *beyond* the marketing discipline.

Therefore, Varadarajan's comment argues that, if the promise of marketing's future Era V is to be fulfilled, strategic marketing and the marketing discipline must focus on developing theory that is 'organic' (Frazier, 2011) or 'indigenous' (Rust, 2006). That is, marketing's future depends essentially on developing its own theories, rather than simply borrowing theoretical structures from other disciplines.

Response

I strongly agree with Varadarajan's prescription that indigenous theory generation is essential for advancing strategic marketing and the marketing discipline in Era V. As long as marketing views its primary role as 'applying' constructs and theories borrowed from other disciplines, the slide towards academic irrelevance will likely continue. The view that 'marketing is an applied discipline' (which is widely held and often stated) has had the dysfunctional consequence of stunting the development of indigenous marketing theory.

Those readers interested in the process of indigenous theory construction in marketing would be well advised to review the classic work of Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring

(1982), as well as the more recent work of Hunt (2013) and the citations therein. Readers should also note that Varadarajan's discussion of 'the similarities in the competition for resources among firms in the business sphere and plants in the biological sphere' is an example of using metaphors in theory construction. For more on the use of metaphors in theory construction, see Boyd (1979) and Hunt and Menon (1995).

The role of institutes and practitioners in advancing marketing

Jaworski's (2017) comment has several key themes. One is that 'Advancing Marketing Strategy' ignored one of the marketing's important 'assets in play' as it enters Era V: its very strong institutes. For example, he maintains that the Marketing Science Institute and the Institute for the Study of Business Markets 'have played (and continue to play) an important role in shaping the discipline' (Jaworski, 2017, p.4).

A second key theme is his observation that 'it is curious that many marketing doctoral programs do not teach marketing concepts, frameworks, and theories'. Instead, he observes, 'they have shifted almost completely to theory in other fields (e.g., economics, psychology) and, in some cases, do not even view their mission as marketing' (p. 6). Building on his discussion of the extensive problems associated with doctoral education, Jaworski (2017, p. 13) provides a 'five point plan' for 'individual scholars to pursue that benefits the practice of marketing':

- (1) Spend lots of time with practitioners. If necessary, cut research projects.
- (2) Be driven by managerial problems and challenges; ignore the literature.
- (3) Hunt for new concepts, not new theory or tests of existing theory and frameworks.
- (4) Avoid programmatic research; dabble instead. Get out of the box.
- (5) Don't worry about data. Develop your narrative or story and defend it in front of tough executives.

Response

I agree that a deficiency of 'Advancing Marketing Strategy' was that it did not include marketing's highly successful institutes in its list of 'assets' that marketing scholars in Era V will inherit. Indeed, many colleagues in other business disciplines have pointed out that marketing's successful institutes constitute – in R-A theory's terms – resources that provide a significant, comparative advantage for our discipline.

As to Jaworski's (2017) five guidelines for individual scholars, I agree with the first: marketing scholars would be well advised to spend more time interacting with marketing practitioners. My own research and teaching efforts have been enhanced significantly as a consequence of interacting with practitioners during my work experience in sales in the chemical industry, my 'field' research experiences as an academic, and my consulting research. As to guidelines 2–5, I have some reservations.

Contrasted with guideline two, I do not counsel that scholars should 'ignore the literature'. Academic publishing is premised on the claim that one's work makes a contribution to the literature. How can one claim to contribute to a literature about which one professes to be ignorant? As to guideline three, though I agree that scholars should search for new concepts, readers should note that searching for new concepts

and developing new theories are not alternatives. Rather, they are complementary. Scholars should be mindful that concepts (constructs) are key components of the statements that, collectively, comprise the theories that form the grounds for explaining phenomena – and explaining phenomena is the sine qua non of all science, including marketing science.

As to guideline four, I agree that scholars should pursue multiple topics in their research careers; variety is, indeed, the ‘spice’ of academic life. However, doing programmatic research on each topic that one pursues is not just important for advancing the marketing discipline, it often is essential for developing a successful academic career. For example, Professor Jaworski’s many articles on market orientation are an exemplary illustration of a highly successful and important research *programme* – and his academic career has benefitted accordingly. As to recommendation five, though I agree that scholars should be able to develop a narrative and defend it in front of tough executives, I believe that they should also ‘worry about data’. As Varadarajan (2017) argues, the promise of marketing’s Era V depends significantly on developing indigenous theories that are both testable and actually tested. Empirical testing requires ‘worrying about data’.

The role of history in advancing marketing

Jones and Shaw’s (2017, p.2) commentary has three major objectives. One objective is to ‘expand on Hunt’s call for doctoral programs to increase their emphasis on the discipline’s historical and theoretical development’. A second is to ‘critique and extend Hunt’s historical evidence on the early developments in marketing strategy’. And a third is to ‘argue the positioning of Resource-Advantage (R-A) theory as a general theory of competition vs. a general theory of marketing’. I begin by responding to the first two.

Increased emphasis on marketing’s historical and theoretical development

I totally agree with Jones and Shaw’s efforts to ‘expand’ my call for doctoral programmes to increase their emphasis on the discipline’s historical and theoretical development. Like them, I have great difficulty understanding why doctoral programmes are structured in such a manner that they do not provide students with detailed materials on the history of the discipline that their students will profess to have mastered. Furthermore, readers would be well advised to pay close attention to the specific suggestions of Jones and Shaw as to sources that scholars can consult in order to enrich their doctoral programmes with marketing history and theory.

Acknowledge other early contributors to marketing strategy

I agree with Jones and Shaw (2017) that a complete historical treatment of marketing strategy would acknowledge other scholars’ contributions to marketing in general and to strategic marketing, in particular. By pointing readers towards the contributions of Edward David Jones, Harry Tosdal, and William Ashley, they usefully extend my discussion’s focus on Arch W. Shaw as an early contributor to marketing thought. Specifically, their discussion of the early contributions of E.D. Jones is highly informative.

I also agree that ‘historians should be cautious about claiming to discover the first of anything’. However, Jones and Shaw misrepresent ‘Advancing Marketing Strategy’ when they discuss the early works of E.D. Jones in *Mill Supplies* and then claim that ‘Hunt presents [the work of Arch Shaw] as the original work on marketing strategy’. ‘Advancing Marketing Strategy’ was both historically accurate and careful in its wording when it stated: ‘Arch W. Shaw’s (1912) 62-page treatise... may legitimately be considered to be the beginning of the marketing discipline’s academic journal literature, including its literature on marketing strategy’ (p.3). Readers should note that it carefully states ‘academic journal literature’, not the more general claim of ‘original work on marketing strategy’. As Jones and Shaw, themselves, point out ‘most of Jones’ writing was published in trade journals’ (p.5), and ‘Advancing Marketing Strategy’s’ claim focuses on *academic* journals.

Readers should be comforted to know that Brian Jones and Eric Shaw, two highly accomplished marketing historians, provide no evidence of any academic journal article earlier than Shaw (1912) that should be considered as a candidate for the following distinction: ‘the beginning of the marketing discipline’s academic journal literature, including its literature on marketing strategy’. By acknowledging the singular contributions of Shaw (1912), ‘Advancing Marketing Strategy’ acknowledges the importance of marketing history.

The role of R-A theory in advancing towards a general theory of marketing

Jones and Shaw (2017) critically evaluate my arguments that R-A theory is ‘towards a general theory of marketing’ (Hunt, 2017, p.19). Three criticisms frame their critique. First, they claim that R-A theory does not take into account theories of ‘buyers’, ‘the institutional framework’, and ‘the interactive consequences of the marketing system as part of the larger social environment’ (Jones & Shaw, 2017, p.11). Second, the arguments for R-A theory are logically insufficient. Third, a general theory of marketing should include both competition and cooperation.

Response to ‘buyers, institutional framework, and interactive consequences’

As to incorporating a theory of ‘buyers’, readers should note that R-A theory’s very first premise is that ‘demand is heterogeneous across industries, heterogeneous within industries, and dynamic’. Taken in conjunction with R-A theory’s view that competition is segment-by-segment-by-segment, instead of being industry wide, I argue that R-A theory’s incorporation of Alderson’s (1957, 1965) theory of heterogeneous demand constitutes incorporating a theory of ‘buyers’. I also argue that Alderson’s heterogeneous demand theory is a descriptively *accurate* theory of buyers.

As to incorporating ‘the institutional framework’ and ‘interactive consequences’, readers should note that, though it is widely acknowledged that institutions play no part in neoclassical, perfect competition theory, R-A theory specifically incorporates societal resources, *societal institutions*, competitors–suppliers, consumers, and public policy as environmental factors that influence strongly how the process of R-A competition actually *works*. Moreover, works on R-A theory have specifically shown how institutions interact with R-A competition (e.g. Hunt, 2000, 2011). For example, R-A theory is

the *only* theory of competition that can explain how the institution of societal trust can enable the process of competition to enhance an economy's productivity and economic growth (Hunt, 1997b, 2000).

The arguments for R-A theory are logically insufficient

Jones and Shaw's (2017) second criticism of R-A theory is a *logical* one. They argue that my four arguments that R-A theory is towards a general theory of marketing fail because: 'Although they support R-A theory as a GTC, and may also be *necessary* (if no x, then no y) for a General Theory of Marketing (GTM), arguments 2,3,and 4 are certainly not *sufficient* (if x, then y)' (p. 10; italics added).

Response. It is gratifying to learn that Jones and Shaw (2017) find that my four arguments may be *necessary*. However, if I had meant to claim that the four arguments were logically *sufficient*, I would have used different wording. Readers should note that throughout the article I consistently phrase my objective as arguing that R-A theory is *towards* a general theory of marketing. It could be the case that some readers may view the four arguments to be 'sufficient'. But 'sufficient' is not my claim. Therefore, the arguments for R-A theory are logically coherent.

A GTM should include both competition and cooperation

Jones and Shaw's (2017, p.10) third criticism of R-A theory is that the four 'arguments do not support R-A theory as a GTM because competition is only a part of Alderson's (1965) functionalist theory'. They then discuss Alderson's views on the importance of cooperation and his call for a 'theory of cooperation', before they conclude: 'Thus, a GTM must incorporate both a theory of competition and cooperation; and R-A theory is only one of competition but not a theory of cooperation'.

Response. There are two ironies concerning Jones and Shaw's third criticism of R-A theory. Understanding the first irony requires some history. Over the years, my colleague Robert M. Morgan and I have collaborated on two different, but related, research programmes: relationship marketing and R-A theory. As to the relationship marketing research programme, our very first article (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 20) specifically emphasised Alderson's call for incorporating a theory of cooperation into marketing theory by placing it in the epigraph of the article:

The cooperative aspect of economic behavior has been relatively neglected. Economists speak of competitive theory, of pure and perfect competition. There is no corresponding development of cooperative theory, of pure and perfect cooperation (Alderson, 1965. p. 239).

After first drawing attention to Alderson (1965) in the epigraph, the Morgan and Hunt (1994) article proceeded to focus on (1) how effective cooperation was a key factor in explaining relationship marketing success, (2) how effective cooperation was promoted by trust and commitment, and (3) how shared values and other factors were antecedents of trust and commitment. In the article's conclusion, we tied cooperation and

competition together: 'Somewhat paradoxically, to be an effective competitor in today's global marketplace requires one to be an effective cooperator' (p. 34).

So, the first irony of Jones and Shaw's (2017) criticism is that not only did Robert Morgan and I specifically emphasise the *importance* of cooperation and the antecedents of effective cooperation in our first article on relationship marketing, but we also specifically linked the importance of effective cooperation to *effective* competition. Moreover, as Jones and Shaw admonish us for supposedly not doing, we linked both effective cooperation and effective competition to the work of Alderson (1965) in the article's epigraph. As Morgan and Hunt (1994) illustrate, acknowledging marketing's history is both useful and important.

Understanding the second irony also requires some history. When Robert Morgan and I began working on our second research programme (i.e. R-A theory), we wanted to show (among many other things) how and when our theory of cooperation in relationship marketing relates to R-A competition theory. Therefore, in the foundational premises of R-A theory, we did two things. First, we maintained that 'humans are motivated by constrained self-interest seeking'. That is, 'both consumers and managers are constrained in their self-interest seeking by considerations of what is right, proper, ethical, moral, or appropriate'. With the delineation of this premise, we were later able to explain how trust can exist among parties, which contributed to our ability to incorporate cooperation. Second, we specifically included 'relational resources' as one of the seven types of prototypical resources that firms can have. That is, the cooperative relationship between, for example, firms and their suppliers or customers can constitute valuable resources for firms in competing for marketplace positions of competitive advantage and, thereby, achieving their primary objective of superior financial performance.

The original article developing R-A theory, i.e. Hunt and Morgan (1995) neither explicated further the concept of 'relational resource' nor discussed further how R-A theory incorporated cooperation. However, shortly thereafter I began working on a detailed explanation of how R-A theory incorporates the cooperation that we had argued for in Morgan and Hunt (1994). The culmination of this work was Hunt (1997a), 'Competing through Relationships: Grounding Relationship Marketing in Resource-Advantage Theory'. This article, one of the earliest articles in the R-A theory research programme, argues:

although neoclassical, perfect competition theory cannot provide a theoretical foundation for relationship marketing's "cooperate-to-compete" thesis, the recently developed "resource-advantage" theory of competition can do so. Furthermore, this article uses resource-advantage theory to address the relationship portfolio conundrum. Specifically, the paper argues that firms should develop a relationship portfolio that is comprised of relationships that constitute relational resources. (Hunt, 1997a, p. 431)

Therefore, contra Jones and Shaw (2017), R-A theory incorporates a theory of cooperation *within* its theory of competition. As such, it responds to Alderson's (1965) call.

What, then, is the second irony? It is that Hunt (1997a) was published in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, the very journal that is now publishing (1) 'Advancing Marketing Strategy', (2) the commentary by Jones and Shaw (2017), and (3) this reply. I hasten to add that I do not fault Jones and Shaw for being unaware of the arguments in Hunt (1997a) that show how R-A theory incorporates cooperation. The works constituting the

R-A theory research programme are extensive, and no one should be faulted for being unaware of all the publications.

Therefore, to conclude my response to Jones and Shaw's (2017) third criticism of R-A theory, R-A theory is a theory of competition that incorporates a theory of cooperation – as called for by Alderson (1965). Furthermore, if other marketing scholars agree with Jones and Shaw that GTM should include both a theory of competition and a theory of cooperation, the preceding constitutes a *fifth* argument that R-A theory is *towards* a GTM. I look forward to using the argument in future publications, and I thank Jones and Shaw (2017) for prompting me to do so.

A concluding note

A decade before Wilkie and Moore (2003) partitioned marketing's history into four 'Eras', an article titled 'Marketing is...' (Hunt, 1992) asked two questions. First, what *is* marketing? Second, what will marketing *become* in the future? As an answer to the first question, the article proposed what later came to be called the 'responsibilities framework' (Hunt, 2007, 2010). As the original article put it, the responsibilities framework argued:

Marketing is a university discipline that aspires to be a professional discipline and that, accordingly, has responsibilities (1) *to society*, for providing objective knowledge and technically competent, socially responsible, liberally educated graduates, (b) *to students*, for providing an education that will enable them to get on the socioeconomic ladder and prepare them for their roles as competent, responsible marketers and citizens, (c) *to marketing practice*, for providing a continuing supply of competent, responsible entrants to the marketing profession and for providing new knowledge about both the micro and macro dimensions of marketing, and (d) *to the academy*, for upholding its mission of retailing, warehousing, and producing knowledge, its contract with society of objective knowledge for academic freedom and its core values of reason, evidence, openness, and civility. (Hunt, 1992, p. 311)

Addressing the second question, what marketing will become in the future, the 1992 answer was simply, 'Ah, that is up to us, isn't it?' (Hunt, 1992, p. 311).

Now, almost three decades later, 'Advancing Marketing Strategy', the three commentaries, and this note prompt the following question: Is the prognosis for marketing's future Era V promising or problematic? On reflection, my answer is: That is up to us, isn't it? What is your answer?

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Notes on contributor

Shelby D. Hunt is the Jerry S. Rawls and P. W. Horn Professor of Marketing at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. A past editor of the *Journal of Marketing* (1985-87), he is the author of numerous books, including *Marketing Theory: Foundations, Controversy, Strategy, Resource-Advantage Theory* (M.E. Sharpe 2010) and *A General Theory of Competition: Resources, Competences, Productivity, Economic Growth* (Sage Publications 2000). One of the 250 most frequently cited researchers in

economics and business (Thompson-ISI), he has written numerous articles on competitive theory, strategy, macromarketing, ethics, relationship marketing, channels of distribution, philosophy of science, and marketing theory.

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