

Raise your hand if you have never taught the 4 Ps!

From marketing management to practice lens

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Abstract

No matter the country, an introductory session to marketing management generally refers to the marketing mix concept, a frame that organizes the descriptive and normative statements of this discipline for more than fifty years (Baker and Saren, 2010, 14–18). We have to explain why, in spite of multiple critical evaluations; it is still being widely used today. Thanks to the practice lens we suggest some avenues to escape from its hegemony.

1. According to its main proponent (Borden, 1964) the concept consists of two components: the mixture metaphor and a list of main activities that need a decision from the marketer. To select the right set of controllable instruments, the firm must focus on the variables that can achieve a certain type of response from its target market because: “*The great quest of marketing management is to understand the behavior of humans in response to the stimuli to which they are subjected*” (Borden, 1964, 9). Several authors suggested a classification of such instruments, but of the many developed schemata only McCarthy’s 4 Ps has survived (McCarthy, 1960). Popularized by the most famous marketing textbook (Kotler, 1967), 4 Ps has become the ‘dominant design’. However, this tractable framework does not dominate the field because of its truer depiction of reality compared to other ones, it is a dominant depiction because it leads to a conformism that is difficult to resist (Marion, 2010).

The marketing mix concept however has been criticized in several respects. It is accused of having a one-way (stimulus/response) character: customers are persons *to* whom something is done rather than *for* whom something is done (Dixon and Blois, 1983). Streams of research in B2B (Håkansson, 1982) and services (Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 2010) thus reject the universal

calling of the concept and have developed the *relationship* metaphor. Proponents of memorable experiences (Pine II and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999) suggest that business is staging an event and customers are actors in such a theatre. The Service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lush, 2004) emphasizes collaboration: customers are no longer persons *to* whom something is done but persons *with* whom something could be done. Lastly, a new configuration of the consumer has been enacted by consultants' discourses that promote neurosciences to anticipate consumers' response (Fouesnant and Jeunemaître, 2012; Schneider and Woolgar, 2012). This stream of market research posits that the consumer ignores why s/he buys certain products because subconscious forces largely motivate purchasing decisions.

The following table associates these metaphors with the distribution of competence between the subject of demand (shopper, buyer, customer, consumer) and the subject of offer (seller, provider, department manager, marketer).

Metaphors	Distribution of competence	
	Subject of demand	Subject of offer
Marketing mix	<i>React</i>	<i>Act upon</i>
Relationship	<i>Interact</i>	<i>Act for and upon</i>
Collaboration	<i>Co-product</i>	<i>Act with</i>
Memorable experience	<i>Enjoy staging</i>	<i>Stage an event</i>
Neurosciences	<i>Incompetent</i>	<i>Act upon</i>



Each of these propositions is not truer than another. Each metaphor frames the situation in order to configure the subjects of exchange. Any metaphor has a magnifying effect, therefore distorted, on reality. It has not the power to conceptualize a pre-existing reality only; it has the ability to structure reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The relevant question is not so much how well it describes reality but what reality it describes. Using of a metaphor may be fruitful, providing a way to view reality so as to generate insights, avenues worth exploring, and possible consequences (Busino, 2003). But some applications of metaphors are more pernicious (Brown, 2008) such as idiotically applying the 4 Ps in the fields of B2B or services (Möller, 2010) or to social marketing complexity (Tapp and Spotswood, 2013) or, worse, as disqualifying consumer's self-reports as neuromarketing does.

Especially with respect to innovation processes, the 4 Ps are hindering. They prompt exploitation of existing situation and foster incremental innovations instead of focusing on exploration of uncertain situations (March, 1991). If we follow Schumpeter (1911) and Abernathy and Clarke (1985), it is not possible to restrict the field of innovation to transactions and relationships with clearly identified customers who are able to express their needs and whose preferences have already been identified. Marketing management gurus (Levitt, 1960; Kotler, 1967) are unable to understand that an innovation at the same time configures an offer and its customer, a solution and a problem (Marion, 2009). Focusing on individual choice, they are also at odds with practice-based studies.

As a provisional conclusion we ask how the subject invited to apply the 4 Ps is configured. If we want to train a marketer able to exploit well-defined exchange situations in order to be a good seller, this toolbox is quite sufficient. It enables the selection of the right stimulus to influence customers' behaviour in the short-term. However, if we want to prepare future entrepreneurs to explore new situations the right starting point is not to address "Given needs..." as Levitt (1960) asserted but to wonder: "*How do subjects practice in everyday life?*"

2. Practices are “ways of doing” (Certeau, 1980, 9; Du Gay, 1996, 75-95) some activity (shopping, cooking, gardening, cycling, etc.) by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life. Consumption is *another* production (Certeau, 1980). Individuals are always involved in the performance of practices. Practices only exist to the extent that they are reproduced in one way or another. Otherwise they will cease to exist and only traces survive (Nicolini, 2017). The practice lens offers a new vista on use and users by foregrounding activity, process, interaction, embodiment and materiality (Warde, 2005, 2014).

However there is no practice theory, at least not where theory is understood as a system of general propositions (Abend, 2008). The family of practice-based studies are just sharing a number of common assumptions. They promise a new way to navigate between actors and system, agency and social structure (Nicolini, 2017; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017). In spite of divergences regarding the definition of practices as “performances” (Nicolini, 2016, 2017) or “entities” (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson, 2012) and the role of “competence” *versus* “teleoaffective structures” (Warde, Welch, and Paddock, 2017) there are numerous family resemblances. First of all, the examination of practices does not imply a return to individuality. “Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse” (Certeau, 1980, 9-10). When looking at shopping or cooking, rather than taking a subject (customer or cook) or an object (product or utensil) as the unit of analysis, the practice lens is focusing on the practices/objects relationships. It challenges the role of individual decision and emphasizes the material devices implicated in shopping activity as well as in everyday life and underscore routine and embodiment. The question concerns modes of doing and not directly the subjects who are their authors.

For designers and marketers who are interested in how an innovative object shapes and is shaped by integrative practices to which they participate, we introduce several concepts: *script*, *appropriation*, *distribution of agency*, *adjustment* and *agencement*. *Scripting* (Akrich, 1987) refers to the means (material and semiotic) by which an object configures its user (Woolgar,



1990). Whether intentionally or not the design of an object defines a framework of action together with the 'model' subject supposed to interact with the object (Eco, 1985). A script can be relatively open (flexible) or closed (prescriptive). *Appropriation* highlights the active part that users play in accommodating an object into everyday life. It is not a step but a process that transforms subject and object recursively. Through the *distribution of competence* between the object and the subject, the latter internalizes how to do "with" the former, and embodies "way of doing" through mutual *adjustments*. *Agencement* refers to the integration of an object within the 'constellation' of objects already used or possessed within an individual's life-style. Consumers are actively engaged in integrating complex arrays of material goods (Watson and Shove, 2008; Marion, 2003), a process strengthened by offerings that are provided in kits (all the ingredients are provided for a successful recipe, for example) or systems of technological interdependence between products and services (computer, printer and hot line, as another example). Objects are constantly re-qualified during their social career, a life history that never really ends (Kopytoff, 1986). As the saying goes 'to adopt is to adapt'. Even when objects appear stable, their appropriation and agencement remain a continuous process of transformation. In other words, the design of an object continues in practices, where mutual adjustments and the subject's attachment (embodied and affective) are shaped.

Schatzki (1996) draws the distinction between 'dispersed' and 'integrative' practices, the latter (shopping, cooking, eating or driving) being the most interesting for the study of use. How do we recognize the existence of an integrative practice? According to Warde (2014), a reasonable set of indicators is the following: 1) the existence of a know-how able to be transmitted and could be written; 2) a significant allocation of time to an activity by people knowing what they are doing and able to report it; 3) the presence, actual or potential, of some disputes among practitioners about the standards of the performance and; 4) suites of specialised equipment devoted to an activity (utensils, tools, machines, devices or space).



The practice lens offers a way to combine the forms (embodied, material, cognitive, affective) of procedures through which subjects of consumption shape their everyday lives. It blurs the traditional frontiers between work and leisure, passivity and inventiveness, dependence and freedom, popular culture and high culture.

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