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Exploring Paradox in Marketing Strategy: Managing Ambiguity Towards Synthesis

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Exploring paradox in marketing: managing ambiguity towards synthesis

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Abstract
Purpose – The objective of this paper is to explain the conceptual framework of paradox.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a theoretical approach. It outlines marketing's current and limited interest in the notion of paradox and highlights the difference between a classic paradox, the tension between transactional and relational marketing, and the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) research program.
Findings – A future research agenda for paradox and marketing is speculated on, addressing issues such as likely domains for exploration, methodology, as well as the type of organizational structures and marketing leadership required. Finally, there is reflection on how paradox engineers a strong bridge between theory and practice.
Originality/value – The paper reveals useful information on paradox and marketing.

Keywords Marketing strategy, Predictive process

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.

Introduction: the nature of paradox

The notion of paradox is not novel. It has long interested philosophers, psychologists, and more recently, organization studies scholars (Lewis, 2000). Yet, the conception and sense of what constitutes paradox, or a paradox, are broad (Quine, 1966). An understanding of paradox can commence usefully in its dialectical roots going back to Greek philosophy. These view the world in binary modes, such as masculine/feminine, mind/body, culture/nature and so on. In this tradition, dialectical enquiry extends these dualities to the study of other phenomena in society. Such study may involve a thesis, an (usually contrary) antithesis, from which process a synthesis may emerge. By its very nature, a synthesis is something created new that is discontinuous with thesis and antithesis. Over time, this synthesis can become the new thesis as the dialectical process recycles and continues.

In this sense, a paradox centers on the idea "that polar opposite conditions can simultaneously exist, or at least can be potentiated, in the same thing" (Mick and Fournier, 1998, p. 124). A paradox reveals itself as a phenomenon or a situation where two apparently contradictory factors or tensions appear to be true at the same time (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). A long-established interpretation of such a paradox is to view it as a dilemma. One factor or the other is then chosen in resolution to this dilemma. Dilemma is presented as a predicament of choice – one or the other. The often-used expressions "horns of a dilemma" and "between a rock and a hard place" capture this quandary. In this view of dilemmic choice, one factor or tension is privileged over the other; one attempts to dominate, colonize, or exclude the other.

Furthermore, even where a trade-off is considered between two forces, one remains in the ascendant and the overall outcome is a win–lose proposition. It is argued that dilemmas, and in particular dilemmas of ideology, are fundamentally enabling rather than inhibiting and help people to think meaningfully about themselves and the world (e.g. Billig *et al.*, 1988). However, this paper argues that such either – or dilemmas represent an idea of paradox that is unhelpfully exclusive, totalizing, and ultimately of limited value in addressing management and marketing problems. It is symptomatic of a hypothetico-deductive worldview and a dominant modernist logic of scientific realism (Thompson *et al.*, 1997).

However, over the last two decades, another more inclusive notion of paradox has evolved. Cameron and Quinn (1988) and Quinn (1988) claim that by exploring paradox, researchers can move beyond oversimplified and polarized notions to recognize the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of business and organizational life. They see paradox as offering a potentially powerful framework for examining the impacts of plurality and change, helping understanding of divergent perspectives, and coping with disruptive experiences. Hampden-Turner (1990, p. 10) contends that a dilemma can no longer be managed in the same way as a simple binary choice:

> Value creation lies in the capacity of acknowledging those dilemmas which arise from competing and contrasting claims and of combining both … in a resolution which enhances all values in contention.

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For Boisot *et al.* (1997, p. 79) writing on competence theory, paradox "takes us beyond the disjunctive logic that requires us to choose between A or B and moves us towards the conjunctive logic of choosing A and B" in order to reconcile them in a creative synthesis. In like mind and writing for a more generalist audience, Handy (1994), Cannon (1996), and Johnson (1996), see paradox as a useful perspective in breaking the dominant and often corrosive logic in firms.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) study conflicting tensions in a major study of cross-cultural competence. Based on a sample of 46,000 managers from more than forty countries, they identify six dimensions of difference between countries: universalism/particularism, individualism/communitarianism, specificity/diffusion, achieved status/ascribed status, inner direction/outer direction, and sequential time/synchronous time. Reconciling what they refer to as these "values-in-tension" involves a disciplined understanding of each opposing value, coping with contradictory thinking and cherishing creativity:

> The ideal is to manage ambiguity and think in both directions (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000, p. 10).

Lowendahl and Revang (2004), reflecting on issues of strategizing and organizing, set paradox and the resolution of tensions in an "after modern" context. According to these authors, Western societies are evolving inexorably into an after modern era and face new challenges where old solutions have become irrelevant and dysfunctional. However, their embrace of "after modernism" does not involve a dumbing-down of modernism in the manner of some postmodernist writers (Begam, 1996). "Our general argument is that in an after modern context old truths live side by side with new ones" (Lowendahl and Revang, 2004, p. 50). Resolution of a tension necessitates inclusion and plurality. They are endorsed by McKiernan and Carter (2004, p. 7) who write that "the corollary of this after modern sensibility is that the established duality of "either–or" that underpinned much strategic thought has been increasingly displaced by situations best characterized as "both-and" situations." We would argue that these ideas resonate with those of Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher associated with late modernity and theories of deconstruction. As Derrida has attracted a significant interest amongst scholars not only in management (e.g. Cooper, 1989; Jones, 2003) but also in marketing (e.g. Brown, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Stern, 1996; Thompson *et al.*, 1997), it is worthwhile to consider briefly his work in our understanding of paradox.

After Derrida

Deconstruction emerged with Derrida in the 1960s as a radical rethinking of Western philosophy that proposed a distinctive way of reading texts. There are a number of ways a deconstructive approach can help us understand paradox in management and marketing, especially because Derrida's focus in deconstruction is to reveal the ambivalences, the self-contradictions and double binds that inhere in thought and practice (Cooper, 1989, pp. 481-2). Derrida (1997, p. 49) argues that "logocentrism" permeates every aspect of Western thought, making different ways of organizing or understanding the world difficult to conceive. He claims that Western thought is obsessed with creating reality by organizing the world into polar realms. The first of these is always privileged in our culture, while its opposite is nullified, degraded, negated (nature/culture, male/female, organization/disorganization, mental labor/physical labor, production/consumption and so on; in fact paradox itself is often viewed as the negative, degraded opposite of logicality). Thinking in such binary, polar, opposing terms occurs, not because it is natural or intuitive for humankind, but because it is culturally ingrained. This logocentric thinking creates, "a pure and safe conceptual world, in which the second of these terms does not influence, impact or infect the former" (Jones, 2003, p. 9).

Derrida's (1997) idea of the "logic of supplementarity" assists us to understand paradox in different terms. A supplement is something that is traditionally viewed as negative, a secondary option to the original. Derrida, however, calls attention to the strange logic of the supplement showing how the word supplement means both to supplement and to supplant (Derrida, 1997, p. 153). The logic of the supplement helps explain the complicated nature of paradox by showing how the opposite or the Other is included within the same. Brunette and Wills (1989) give a clear example of such thinking. If there were only daytime all the time, around the clock, then the idea of night would not make any sense. Day needs an opposite, paradoxically, in order to exist, because it only has meaning insofar as it differs from something else. Daytime is thus a concept, like any other, which contains both itself and its opposite because if there were only such a thing as day, then we would not be able to think of something such as night. Every concept has its opposite or its Other somehow marked within it.

One of Derrida's fundamental strands of thought is that all versions of Western thinking have tried to marginalize and suppress this sense of the Other that exists (paradoxically) at the very heart of whatever is seen as being the privileged, correct, rational option (Brunette and Wills, 1989, p. 8). The Other, or "*l'autre*", is a key word in Derrida's work (Hillis Miller, 1996). The other becomes a useful way to begin to think about the opposing pulls (such as globalization versus localization) that exert their force on business and the organization, to consider how they interpenetrate, and how it is impossible to separate them, even though they are given opposite spaces in our minds. They perhaps present us with what Derrida calls a "double bind", the idea that we are often in situations where it is both this and that, or neither this nor that (Bennington, 1997).

Definition of paradox

It is this sense of paradox that we propose. Paradox connotes contradictory yet also interrelated elements (Lewis, 2000). It is simplistic to cut a clear division between binary opposites. It is unlikely to be a case of either-or and more likely to be a situation of both-and (or even neither-nor). Every concept has its opposite marked or branded within it. The discourse that evolves to find a way forward usefully includes both dimensions[1]. Exploring paradox, seeking to find a resolution of conflicting yet credible forces, and searching for a synthesis, become an inclusive, multivocal and pluralistic process. In managerialist language, this process should enable maximal win-win resolutions or "the best of both worlds" to be found. Thus, we employ a definition of paradox as a situation where two apparently contradictory tensions appear to be simultaneously credible and where resolution is pursued

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in a non-exclusionary way (see Figure 1). Examples of such tensions in marketing are globalization/localization and transaction marketing/relationship marketing.

It should be stressed that the idea of a synthesis does not represent a final immutable answer. As circumstances and conditions change, so too will a new maximal solution be necessarily sought. The penumbra of another shadows any one solution. There is a continuous and relentless process of seeking synthesis – of moving towards synthesis. To the extent that our concept of paradox disavows a logocentrism, it also rejects the idea of a grand synthesis or any overarching meta-theory. Seeking synthesis and re-synthesis becomes an ongoing process of coping in a contingent world[2]. The words of Hables Gray (1995, p. 8) about the cyborg, an entity that envelopes the mechanic and the organic, are apposite: "We know, from our bodies and from our machines, that tension is a great source of pleasure and power . . . " and he urges his readers to "go beyond dualistic epistemologies to the epistemology of cyborg: thesis, antithesis, synthesis, prosthesis. And again." In more prosaic language, management theorists, de Wit and Meyer (2005, p. 16) conclude:

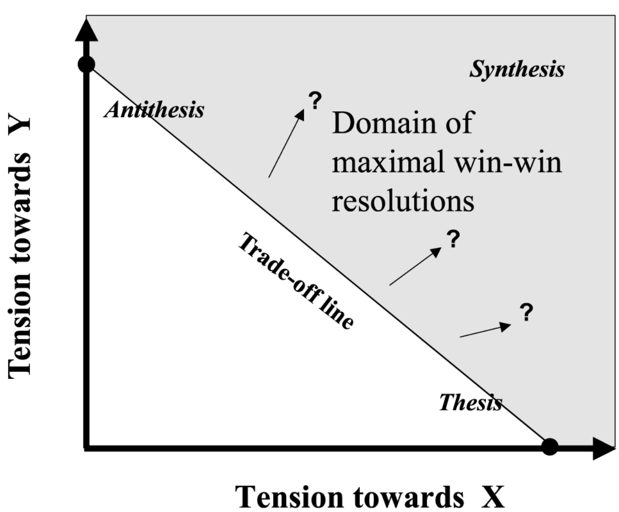
> At best, the problem-solver can find a workable reconciliation to temporarily cope with the [ultimately] unsolvable paradox.

This consideration, as we will see, has implication for both theory and practice.

Paradox in current marketing literature

As the above discussion suggests, interest in paradox has been driven largely by scholars in the domains of strategic management and organization studies. Managing organizational transformation in response to changing competitive dynamics is their primary concern. They view individuals, managers, groups, organizations, and markets "as *inherently* paradoxical, embroiled in tensions and reinforcing cycles at their very core" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). Jettisoning the idea that response to a changing marketplace involves a smooth, linear, planned journey, these scholars consider how contradiction both hampers and encourages decision making

Figure 1 Exploring paradox



and organizational development. Are such considerations of relevance to marketing theory and practice?

Consumer behavior

Mick and Fournier's (1998) examination of the consumption and consuming behavior of technological products is arguably the extant study of paradox in the domain of marketing. They identify what they view as eight central paradoxes of technological products: control/chaos, freedom/enslavement, new/obsolete, competence/incompetence, efficiency/inefficiency, needs fulfillment/needs creation, assimilation/isolation and engagement/disengagement. Based on an extensive interpretivist study involving lengthy and repeated phenomenological interviews with 29 households, they develop a novel framework in regard to these paradoxes, and track their influences on the emotional reactions and behavioral coping strategies of consumers. They contend that their work could be broadened usefully to a cross-cultural context, and that the paradox concept could be used to extend and develop theory in advertising response, consumer satisfaction and relationship marketing:

> In sum, paradox appears to be a highly relevant and resonant concept for advancing knowledge of contemporary consumer behavior (Mick and Fournier, 1998, p. 142).

In a somewhat similar vein, Otnes *et al.* (1997) explore the contradictory tensions, and consequent equivocation, that often underpin consumption. They contend that research in consumer behavior has failed to look at the ways in which the marketplace generates consumer ambivalence. They recognize that ambivalence often manifests itself as an internal versus external tension – between what the consumer internally wishes or feels compared to the reality they face. To this effect, their research examines the antecedents of consumer ambivalence and what coping strategies are used.

Mick and Fournier (1998) and Otnes *et al.* (1997) background their argument against the decline of modernism's faith in progress through science. They contend that the pace, complexity, and unexpected consequences of our scientific times have ushered in a postmodern age in which the human condition is characterized, in large part, by paradoxes. In this, they are building on the work of other postmodern marketing thinkers (e.g. Brown, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Stern, 1996; Thompson *et al.*, 1997). Arguably, these all together provide a formidable intellectual endorsement of possibilities of paradox in marketing in an after modern world.

Marketing communication and branding

Brown (2006) contends that paradox lies at the heart of many of today's successful brands. The old idea that a brand stands for one thing and one thing only, the USP/share-of-mind argument of traditional positioning theory, is yielding to an appreciation that a brand is inherently ambiguous, equivocal, and polymorphic. Not only are brand reputations co-created with consumers, who often ignore or subvert the meanings and messages that advertisers seek to convey (Fournier, 1998), but Brown argues that ambiguity is central to the personality and aura that surround apparently legendary brands like Apple, Nike and Harley Davidson. Drawing on ideas from a novel by Alex Shakar (2001), Brown goes on to suggest that "paradessence" is the key to successful branding in postmodernity.

Many products exhibit a paradoxical essence, or paradessence, in promising to satisfy simultaneously two opposing consumer/buyer desires:

> Products blessed with paradessence somehow combine two mutually exclusive states and satisfy both simultaneously. Ice cream melds eroticism and innocence. Air travel offers sanitized adventure. Amusement parks provide terror and reassurance. Automobiles render drivers reckless and safe. Sneakers grasp earth and help consumers soar free. Muzak is a hybrid of transience and eternity (Brown, 2006, p. 52).

It is up to the savvy marketer to exploit this contradiction in developing and communicating a brand identity – "to cultivate this schismatic core, this broken soul, at the center of every product" (Shakar, 2001, p. 73). Interestingly, Byrne (2001, p. 43) earlier highlights this paradoxical essence in discussing a classic long-established brand of UK dishwashing detergent, Fairy Liquid:

> It scoured the grease off plates and was appreciably stronger than competitors in doing this. At the same time, it was kind to hands.

Brown (2006) offers a case study analysis of the highly successful and largest European low fares line Ryanair in terms of such ambiguity and paradox, emphasizing in particular the firm's apparent ability to simultaneously please and "persecute" its customers.

The work of Holt (2004) on what he refers to as "cultural branding" resonates in a number of ways with this notion of values-in-tension. He argues that many iconic US brands of the last half-century have been successful because they addressed, and in some way helped resolve, fundamental underlying contradictions in society. Their advertising message identified, and promised to heal, some deep fissure in the country's psyche:

> The foundational premise of the cultural branding model is that iconic brands perform national identity myths that resolve cultural contradictions (Holt, 2004, p. 55).

In order to create an iconic brand through cultural branding it is necessary to study cultural history and examine how it has created the issues that underlie the social tensions and cultural discourses of the day. Transposing Holt's thinking to Ireland, land of the eponymous Celtic Tiger, Fanning (2006) analyses six cultural contradictions: freedom/restraint, individualism/community, globalization/*dinnseanchas*[3], affluence/affluenza, control/chaos and conformity/creativity. He knowledgeably and imaginatively considers how these apparently contradictory tensions may effect Irish society in the twenty-first century – and speculates on how far-seeing marketers might advantageously "cultivate this schismatic core", to use Shakar's (2001) phrase.

Schultz and Hatch (2006) study branding issues at a corporate level based on an extensive case study of the LEGO Group. They identify a number of organizational and cultural paradoxes and argue that four sets of values-in-tension underpin corporate brand management: culture driven/image driven, centralization/decentralization, cultural heritage/contemporary relevance and global/local. In seeking a resolution of these paradoxes they recommend an inclusive approach contending "that resolving them in either direction [alone] appears to involve some unpleasant results" (Schultz and Hatch, 2006, p. 26). Similarly, de Mooij (2005) uses the notion of cultural paradox to analyze issues of global marketing and advertising. Her work seeks to challenge much of the existing orthodoxy about consumer behavior and marketing communications, particularly as applied in large homogeneous countries, such as the USA.

Marketing management and strategy

Slotegraaf and Dickson (2004), draw on the resource-based view of the firm to illustrate a paradox firms may face. A strong marketing planning capability may not only reduce the incidence of post-plan improvisation but also contain inherent process rigidity:

> Since both of these can also increase performance, results illustrate a performance paradox in marketing planning (Slotegraaf and Dickson, 2004, p. 371).

We also use a RBV approach in a longitudinal case study of a European building materials firm, Roadstone (a division of Cement Roadstone Holdings (CRH) plc, the fourth largest supplier of stone-based building products in the world). The case study examines the nature and dynamics of marketing-related competence in the company over 53 years from 1949 to 2001, and draws on documentary, interview, observation and experiential evidence (O'Driscoll, 2004a, 2006). Five examples of paradoxical values-in-tension emerge in this study: upstream/downstream marketing, competence building/competence leveraging, tacit/explicit marketing, codification/personalisation, adhocratic/market culture (O'Driscoll, 2005).

Thus, we might conclude that marketing theorists' embrace of the concept of paradox has been circumspect. Interest is limited to aspects of consumer behavior, marketing communication, and branding. While these fields are highly important, they do not represent all of marketing's necessary endeavor. Other disciplines are finding paradox a worthwhile concept to navigate circumstances of complexity, ambiguity and pluralism, and a valuable framework to manage organizational transformation in response to changing competitive dynamics. Why not also marketing? Marketing has many apparently contradictory tensions to manage: transaction marketing/relationship marketing, globalization/localization, commoditization/differentiation, mass/one-on-one, to name just a few. Indeed, we would argue that the first mentioned of these tensions – transaction marketing/relationship marketing – represents a fertile ground to consider ideas of paradox, particularly in the context of the insights of the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) research program.

Paradox considered: transaction marketing/relationship marketing

It is arguable that relationship marketing represents the most influential paradigm shift in marketing thinking over the past two decades. It challenged a largely US-inspired, science-driven conception of marketing as involving impersonal transactions managed through a system or mix of 4Ps in a highly competitive, albeit sophisticated, manner. In contrast, relationship marketing theorists conceive of marketing in a more humanistic manner seeing relationships, evolving trust, and even substantive partnership, underpinning exchange. Attention to relationship marketing coincided understandably with the growth in the services sector but was also stimulated by thinking in the Nordic school of marketing and by the interaction and network approach to marketing of the IMP Group (Grönroos, 2004). There was certainly a paradigm shift in the academy with scholars embracing relational, at the expense of transactional, marketing thinking in textbooks and in general marketing discourse. It was less clear what was happening in practice in the marketplace. Were marketing practitioners abandoning the principles of transaction marketing in favor of those of relationship marketing? Were they perhaps employing some of both approaches, depending on the circumstances of product type, customer requirement or competitive dynamics? If so, did one approach dominate or were both approaches complementary in instances?

Some in the academy doubted the "shift" in real-world practice. Brown (1999, p. 4) made a prescient point:

> Likewise, the illusion of primacy, in which the present appears to precede the past, is nowhere better illustrated than in the recent much-lauded relationship marketing paradigm shift. According to Sheth and Parvatiyar's (1993) historical overview, relationship marketing was actually the primary form of marketing prior to the transactional lapse that transpired sometime in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the longitudinal case study of Roadstone, we found manifest evidence that relationship marketing was carried out very skillfully in the firm from its outset, and that it also, and simultaneously, used the principles of transaction marketing (O'Driscoll, 2006). This was occurring before the RM concept was articulated in marketing thought, and indeed before Borden (1964) published his ideas about the marketing mix.

CMP research program

It is clear that a greater understanding of real-world marketing practice is required. Such an understanding is forthcoming in the research of the CMP research program. Over the past decade, this grouping of international scholars has been studying marketing practice, in particular, the relevance of relation marketing in different organizational, economic and cultural contexts. CMP researchers embrace a pluralistic approach in both their theoretical worldview and research methodology. A major conclusion – from what is now a substantial body of published research across 15 different countries, many sectors and firm sizes (Brodie *et al.*, 2008) – is that transactional marketing and relational marketing coexist in many firms. While some firms may adopt a predominantly transactional or relational approach, a significant number use a transactional/relational hybrid. Thus, it is an exaggeration to speak of a Kuhnian (Kuhn, 1970) paradigm shift where relationship marketing has replaced a conventional transaction approach.

In seeking to understand marketing practice, and develop theory, CMP researchers are prepared to engage with pluralism, hybridity, and paradox. An either–or exclusionary approach is rejected in favor of a both-and mode characterized by holism, inclusion and polyvocalism (Pels *et al.*, 2000). One of the early contributions of CMP thinking was to calibrate relationship marketing into three distinct aspects of practice: database marketing, interaction marketing and network marketing, so providing (along with conventional transaction marketing) a richer spectrum of understanding about practice. This thinking has now been extended to include e-marketing defined as: "using the Internet and other interactive technologies to create and mediate dialogue between the firm and identified customers" (Coviello *et al.*, 2001, p. 26). Trying to resolve the seemingly contradictory tensions between the transactional and relational in this inclusive manner has helped extend theory, and facilitated analysis of how a newly configured practice might result in better firm performance (e.g. Coviello *et al.*, 2006).

Another apparently contradictory finding of the CMP research program is that the intuitive expectation that service firms (both consumer service and business-to-business service firms) would employ more extensive relational than transactional marketing practices is not evidenced conclusively (Coviello *et al.*, 2002). This sheds light on another tension in marketing, goods/services – and also on another much-lauded paradigm shift, from goods marketing to service marketing. If a lens of paradox emphasizes interconnection and integration, the both–and dimension, then goods and services are enveloped and marked in one another. Thus, it should not be surprising to find a significant number of so-called service firms embracing both transactional and relational approaches[4].

A recent *Journal of Marketing* article seeks to consolidate a "paradigm shift" perspective in this discourse. Vargo and Lusch (2004) contend that a "new dominant logic" for marketing is emerging that involves an irrevocable shift in emphasis from a goods-centered logic to a service-centered one. Services, in this sense, will dominate. Scholars in the CMP tradition challenge this view and argue for an inclusive logic of "goods and services" rather than "goods towards services". They base their argument on the pluralism of marketing practices emerging from their empirical research:

> Rather than any dominance, [they] suggest marketing is characterized by multiple complex processes reflecting a wide range of possible contingencies and opportunities (Brodie *et al.*, 2006, p. 316).

Interestingly, this appeal to contingency and situational theory is the very argument that organizational theorists and strategic management scholars cite in the context of employing a conceptual framework of paradox.

Paradox and marketing: towards a research agenda

This paper is advocating the concept of paradox as a valuable lens or framework to study issues and problems in marketing theory and practice. There is benefit in addressing many marketing phenomena in a non-exclusionary, both-and approach. Paradox tempers marketer's obsession with the new and the novel. Lien (2004) speaks of marketers' "bias of temporality" whereby marketers are fascinated by, and tend to privilege, the novel, what may happen in the future, and the advent of the new trend, product, taste, idea or technology. But, in a Derridean sense, the old is invariably inscribed in the new. The new cannot be properly comprehended without also understanding the old. Such an approach suggests a caution in declaiming paradigm shifts, whether of the RM or service variety.

Paradox unsettles but also challenges the orthodoxy of the academy – and the organization. To quote Ybema (1996, p. 40) paradoxes "seem to smile ironically at our nicely constructed theories with their clear-cut distinctions and point at an unthought-of possibility, a blind spot in oppositional thinking." As CMP research might suggest, do service firms employ more transactional marketing practices than we currently think? Is Brown (2001, 2006) correct when he says many customers want to be "tormented", and are happy to "persecuted". Is there is "a dark side of marketing"

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(Kasabov, 2004, p. 3), yet one that may be quite profitable to service, and product, providers? These considerations alone suggest a rich and varied agenda of research.

Domains for exploration

By way of setting down initially such a research agenda, this paper identifies some 25 marketing domains or phenomena where paradoxical thinking, or values-in-tension, reveal themselves (see Figure 2). These include, to name a few, consumer behavior, marketing exchange, branding, marketing delivery, international marketing and new product development. For each domain, a set of values-in-tension is highlighted. Each set represents a body of ideas and principles about the particular phenomenon, encapsulated as a polar or spectral opposite. This body of knowledge, framed in binary opposition, constitutes an initial catalyzing position. As managers start to act, and theorists start to reflect, these neat binary categories start to dissolve and coalesce. One tension is marked in the other. As well as contradictions, interrelationships emerge, and, arguably, the benefits of confronting marketing phenomena in this non-exclusionary, paradoxical manner.

Managers may use this knowledge and this lens to help them manage and make decisions. Moving towards a synthesis, and finding a solution, are dependent, of course, on the particular context and circumstances of the marketplace and of the firm, facing the manager. Figure 1 seeks to capture visually this contingency process of finding a maximal win-win resolution, or best of both worlds. Equally, the academic may use the lens of paradox to study this evolving practice, modify and build theory. For practitioner and academic alike, the concept of paradox involves embracing context and process as much as classification and abstraction. Finally, the 25 domains suggested as worthy of further research, by using a framework of paradox, are not meant to be exhaustive but rather indicative of the rich possibilities of exploring paradox and marketing in more depth.

Research methodology

Since our conception of paradox speaks in an inclusive and polyvocal way, it should not be surprising that the research methodology exploring such paradox might also be pluralistic and multi-method. Put simply, both interpretivist and positivistic methodologies may be adopted usefully. Case studies, ethnographies and other qualitative approaches will help to discover and build theory, and provide helpful insight in developing constructs to operationalize models. Surveys and other quantitative approaches will assist in refining and (dis)confirming theory, and offer scale and validity to conceptual development.

Figure 2 Paradox in marketing: values-in-tension

		Values-in-tension	
Analysing Customers and Markets	Consumer/Buyer behaviour	Cognition	Emotion
	Consumer/Buyer research	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Markets/Resources	Compliance	Competence theory
	Managing exchange	Transaction	Relationship
Strategy Formulation and Implementation	Consumer/Buyer value	Commoditisation	Differentiation
	Communication	Mass	One-on-one
	Branding	Multivocal	Unique selling proposition
	Pricing	Unitary pricing	Price discrimination
	Supply/Demand chain	Vertical integration	Market
	Selling	Customer acquisition	Customer retention
	Service quality	Customer delight	Customer subjugation
	Services marketing	Goods	Services
	Marketing planning	Deliberate	Emergent
	Bottom line	Growth	Profitability
	Marketing delivery	Hierarchy	Process
	Marketing organisation	Specialist	Generalist
International Context	International marketing	Globalisation	Localisation
	Comparative marketing	Anglo-Saxon	Latin
Societal Context	Ethics and marketing	Self-interest	Responsibility
	Green marketing	Wasteful marketing	Sustainable marketing
Renewal	Marketing renewal	Competence leveraging	Competence building
	Competence development	Tacit marketing	Explicit marketing
	New product development	Product orientation	Customer orientation
Disciplinary Development	Marketing philosophy	Modernity	Postmodernity
	Theory development	Theory	Practice

While research on paradox in the areas of organization theory and strategic management has largely been in an interpretivist vein, there have been a number of quantitative studies (e.g. Amason, 1996; Dennison *et al.*, 1995). In marketing, the concept has been studied using qualitative approaches almost exclusively. But paradox is an embryonic notion in marketing. As marketing managers and theorists adopt paradoxical thinking – as a valuable framework to manage and understand company transformation and response to changing consumer and competitive dynamics – it seems reasonable to assume that a greater balance and inclusion of research methods will come about. Interestingly, this pluralistic approach to research underpins the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) research program that views this very hybridity as injecting necessary vigor in to research activity (Brodie *et al.*, 2008). The call for a more pluralistic approach to research methodology in marketing has been around for more than a decade (Thompson *et al.*, 1997) and relevant and important issues such a paradigm incommensurability have been addressed (Pels and Saren, 2005).

Paradox and marketing organization

It is a commonplace to argue that marketing gets done in and delivered by organizations. Organizations, like the people in them and the markets to which they respond, can be complex, contradictory and mercurial. Organizing in these circumstances necessitates coping with ambiguity, equivocation and inherent tensions. Paradox provides a lens, a managerial and theoretical framework, to make sense of this ambiguity and resolve an apparently endless choice. Lewis (2000) details the problems and challenges of managing paradox in an organization, examining the tensions involved, the reinforcing cycles, and the likely successful management processes. Paradoxical tensions arise from perceptions of opposing and interrelated elements. Most individuals apply a formal linear logic, polarizing the elements to stress distinctions rather than interconnections; they are programmed, as it were, in an either-or mode. But emphasizing one polarity exacerbates the need for the other, often igniting defenses, impeding learning and creating counterproductive reinforcing cycles:

> Managing paradox, in contrast, entails developing understandings and practices that accept and accommodate tensions (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003, p. 397).

Thus, if marketing is to embrace paradox, a deeper understanding of marketing organization will be required. The interface of organization theory and marketing has not been extensively studied (Murray and O'Driscoll, 1999; Piercy, 1998). How marketing is best structured and organized in the firm raises issues of hierarchy/heterarchy, centralization/decentralization, efficiency/creativity, and formulation/implementation, to identify just a few. Further, the type of culture and shared values inhering in the firm is crucial. There is need to analyze the type of marketing leader and leadership necessary to cope with and manage the fluid, equivocal and pluralistic circumstances of paradox. Attempts have already been made to study these aspects of leadership in the field of organization studies (Amason, 1996; Dennison *et al.*, 1995; Farson, 1996). Put simply, living with ambiguity is painful and messy. Any research agenda for paradox and marketing must help comprehend the organizational culture and dynamics of managing *die Qual der Wahl*, the pain of choice, in the firm.

Paradox: bridging theory and practice

Contemporary marketing theory implies a current and robust theory of marketing that reflects and codifies existing and emergent best practice in the marketplace. A close synchrony of healthy theory and effective practice exists, and offers advantage to the theorist and to practitioner (Murray and O'Driscoll, 1999; O'Driscoll, 2004b). The contingency or situational approach that inheres in paradox provides such synchrony and engineers a strong bridge between theory and practice. The resolution to a set of conflicting forces or tensions is determined by the context and specifics of the situation. We described earlier how a paradoxical framework represents a body of ideas and principles about a particular marketing phenomenon, encapsulated in the first instance as a polar or spectral opposite.

This body of knowledge, framed in binary opposition, constitutes an initial catalyzing position. As managers start to execute, and scholars start to theorize, these neat binary categories start to dissolve and coalesce. This struggle to apply existing theory in particular circumstances leads to theory being modified and developed. This is illustrated by the CMP research program's calibration of a simplified transaction/relational binary opposition into a richer explanatory spectrum of transactional/database/e-marketing/interaction/network marketing. What starts out as a seemingly straightforward polar contradiction evolves into a more elegantly designed, explanatory tapestry.

The contention that theory will be modified and extended – as practice is shaped –reifies the manager as a theorist; managing becomes inescapably a theoretical activity. Here, analogous to the reflective practitioner in action research (Schon, 1995), the manager seeking a maximal solution becomes a theoretician-in-practice. Theory development is less an edict from the academy than an act of co-creation between manager and scholar. Not only is the manager struggling to implement, test, and extend existing knowledge about a marketing phenomenon, but also in a constructivist sense, is seeking to create an environment tolerant of ambiguity, inimical to counterproductive defenses, and encouraging of self-reflection[5]. In this sense, paradox is no easy panacea, more a painful, creative and risky avenue. It is tempting to highlight Hedberg *et al.*'s (1976) comment that in a complex marketplace of change, [marketing] managers need to live in tents rather than palaces because tents place greater emphasis on flexibility, immediacy, and initiative.

For practitioner and academic alike, the concept of paradox involves embracing context and process as much as classification and abstraction. Finding a resolution to a paradoxical tension, moving towards a synthesis, is shaped by the efforts of management to engage with the particular circumstances of the marketplace and organization. In endeavoring to do so, paradox helps to map terrains of contradiction, ambiguity and tension. Paradox assists in identifying novel coordinates in a constantly evolving world of buyer needs/expectations, technology and competitive dynamics. Any synthesis is likely to be short-lived. The penumbra of another shadows any one solution. Yet in this journey the tool of paradox helps the firm to manage ambiguity towards synthesis.

Conclusion

This paper advocates the concept of paradox as a worthwhile lens or framework to study issues and problems in marketing theory and practice. There is benefit in addressing many marketing phenomena in a non-exclusionary, both-and approach. Many phenomena are seemingly contradictory yet interrelated at the same time. In a poststructuralist, after modern world, an exclusionary, either-or approach, with one perspective or force seeking to overcome the other, is likely to be of limited use.

In making a case, the nature of paradox and marketing's current, and limited, interest in the notion have been examined. A classic paradox, the tension between transactional and relational marketing, was considered in the light of the CMP research program. CMP research evidence suggests many firms, in real-world practice, pursue these two approaches to marketing simultaneously and non-exclusively – and effectively. Understanding paradox may help an understanding of how firms and managers negotiate this seemingly contradictory terrain in a win-win manner. The paper then speculated on a future research agenda for paradox and marketing, addressing issues such as the likely domains for exploration, methodology, (as well as the type of organizational structures and marketing leadership required). Finally, the paper noted how paradox engineers a strong bridge between theory and practice.

In suggesting that paradox, and thinking paradoxically, may be a worthwhile lens to study many phenomena, problems and situations in marketing, a grand novel theory of marketing is not being put forward. It is accepted that there are other conceptions of paradox than the one espoused here; that there are other process theories of competitive dynamics and organizational development (Van de Ven and Poole (1995) suggest teleological, life cycle, and evolutionary theory, as well as dialectical theory); and that not all marketing phenomena are parsed into a polar opposition initially. Nonetheless, we contend that a deeper conversation with the notion of paradox will be of benefit to marketing theory and practice.

Conceptualizing paradox entails developing a frame that encompasses opposites, enabling a more complicated comprehension of their coexistence and interconnections. It is a frame to deal with an equivocal, ambivalent world. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti speaks of the need to develop a cartography to cope with the "fluidity" of the postmodern condition. She envisages multiple cartographies, not one linear scheme or plan, in negotiation and emphasizes the importance of context and movement (Braidotti, 2005). Paradox provides such a cartography, for the manager and theorist, to help navigate the fluidity of the after modern marketplace.

Notes

1 Taking a deconstructive approach, we can trace the roots of paradox. From the Latin *paradoxum*: "paradox, statement seemingly absurd yet really true", from the Greek *paradoxon*, from neutral of adj. *paradoxos*: "contrary to expectation, incredible", from *para* "contrary to" + *doxa* "opinion". It is arguable that this etymology hints at discourse and conversation rather than exclusion and a degraded view of logicality.

2 It is tempting to introduce the neologism "parasynthesis" here to capture this reiterative dimension. The idea of a provisional synthesis is implicit here, something that will hold together for a time ("para" meaning provisional in this context).

3 *Dinnseanchas* is a Gaelic language word that celebrates an intense attachment to the lore of the local; a place's significance is communicated and sustained through the Gaelic place name and the myth, folklore and history associated with the place.

4 One of the ironical considerations to emerge from our study of Roadstone was that many senior managers, in interview, often articulated themselves as being in a service business. This was in the stone-based building products industry, a business most commentators would consider as an archetypical goods business (O'Driscoll, 2004a, 2006).

5 Interestingly, the CMP research program has moved beyond the traditional case method to apply action research with "living case studies" using part-time executive student's experiences in the workplace (Little *et al.*, 2005).

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