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The Textbook Effect: Conventional Wisdom, Myth, and Error in Marketing

Textbooks and Research Journals

Conventional wisdom holds that marketing textbooks are based on established marketing concepts. Readers assume that the contents of these books reliably summarize research findings to provide foundational information for students. In what is assumed to be a virtuous and reciprocal relationship, knowledge is generated in research, published in journal articles, and then collected and summarized in textbooks. The process sometimes is reversed when journal articles appeal to textbooks for authority. However, the relationship between texts and research is not always virtuous. For example, in their study of marketing texts, Armstrong and Schultz (1993) collected 566 normative statements about pricing, communications, and product or distribution decisions that were not supported by empirical evidence. Nine of the statements were judged to be "nearly correct" when their wording was reversed!

In this review, I explore the ambivalent and often perverse relationship between knowledge generating (research) and knowledge disseminating (textbooks) activities in a process I call the "textbook effect." The textbook effect refers to (1) the embedding of old, defunct, unsubstantiated theories in textbooks and (2) the effect such embedding has on practice and research. Although my point is a general one, for the sake of illustration I take up a particular case of the impact of the textbook effect on the body of research referred to as "fear appeals."

The Case of Fear Appeals

Fear appeals have become a mainstay of the marketing literature. After many decades of research, it is interesting to

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review how the textbooks report fear appeals issues and how these reports relate to what research is published in refereed journals.

Twenty-three general marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior textbooks, published in the last three years and having some coverage of fear appeals, were selected for review. Although the books varied in how much they said, they varied little in the substance of their reports (see Table 1). Few reported actual research on what works and why. Of those that did cite research, all reported a theory that has never been supported in the literature.

Most of the texts simply gave narrative descriptions or examples of types of threats that can be used to appeal to consumer fears. Some listed fear as a type of appeal, others cited studies showing the growing use of fear appeals, and a few referenced articles that list how readily fear appeals are used in certain areas. A handful, besides giving examples, also discussed the difference between social and physical fears.

Although the topic is called "fear appeals," more appropriately it should be called "appeals to audience fears." Textbooks do not so much discuss consumer fears as present descriptions and examples of types of threats that can be used in marketing communications. Threats are literal content that illustrate undesirable consequences from certain behaviors, such as car damage, injury, or death from unsafe driving or bad breath, illness, or cancer from cigarette smoking. Fear is a consumer's possible emotional response to threats. A threat is an appeal to fear, a communication stimulus that *attempts* to evoke a fear response by showing some type of outcome that the audience might want to avoid. Despite this important distinction, the textbooks tend to use the terms fear and threat interchangeably, discussing a type of threat as the "amount of fear" in a message.

Only five of the textbooks had detailed discussions about effects or effectiveness of appeals to fear. All five said the relationship between the amount of fear and persuasion is curvilinear (a few even showed a picture of the near-classic inverted-U). Under this view, increases in audience fear have an optimal level for persuasion, after which there is a drop-off in the likelihood that the audience will respond in the desired fashion. Two of these five authors also present a history of the evolution of fear appeal thought.

The problem with this dependence on the inverted-U hypothesis is that refereed published reviews of the literature and a meta-analysis of data have all shown that, despite the idiosyncratic nature of fear arousal responses to threats and the ad hoc nature of some research definitions and execu-

tions of fear appeals, the relationship between the emotional response of fear arousal and persuasion is not curvilinear but monotonic and positive. In general, the greater the actual fear engendered by a communication, the greater is the persuasion (Boster and Mongeau 1984; Rotfeld 1988; Sutton 1982, 1992).

A meta-analysis of 35 published studies on a wide range of topics, subjects, and communications vehicles concluded that "increases in fear are *consistently* associated with increases in acceptance [of the recommended action]" (Sutton 1982, p. 323). Some old psychobiology studies suggest that large amounts of subject fear have a negative impact if and

TABLE 1
A Guttman Scale of Textbooks' Coverage of Fear Appeals

	Description	Examples	Social Versus Physical	U-Shaped Response	Evolution
Batra, Myers, and Aaker (1995), <i>Advertising Management</i> , 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Bearden, Ingram, and LaForge (1995), <i>Marketing: Principles and Perspectives</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X			
Bovee, Houston, and Thill (1995), <i>Marketing</i> , 2d ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.	X	X			
Bovee, Thill, Dovel, and Wood (1995), <i>Advertising Excellence</i> , 1st ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.	X	X			
Evans and Berman (1995), <i>Principles of Marketing</i> , 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Hoyer and MacInnis (1997), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 1st ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.	X	X			
Keegan, Moriarty, and Duncan (1995), <i>Marketing</i> , 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Kotler and Armstrong (1996), <i>Marketing: An Introduction</i> , 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (1996), <i>Marketing</i> , 3d ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X			
Mowen and Minor (1997), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Nickels and Wood (1997), <i>Marketing: Relationships, Quality, Value</i> , 1st ed. New York: Worth Publishers.	X	X			
Siegel, Carolyn F. (1996), <i>Marketing: Foundations and Applications</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X			
Solomon and Stuart (1997), <i>Marketing: Real People, Real Choices</i> , 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X			
Vanden Bergh and Katz (1999), <i>Advertising Principles</i> . Chicago: NTC Business Books.	X	X			
Burnett and Moriarty (1998), <i>Introduction to Marketing Communications</i> , 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X	X		
Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (1998), <i>Marketing</i> , 4th ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (1998), <i>Advertising</i> , 1st ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
Semenik and Bamossy (1995), <i>Principles of Marketing: A Global Perspective</i> , 2d ed. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.	X	X	X		
Belch and Belch (1998), <i>Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective</i> , 4th ed. Boston: Richard D. Irwin.	X	X	X	X	
Shimp, Terence A. (1997), <i>Advertising, Promotion, and Supplemental Aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications</i> , 4th ed. Orlando, FL: The Dryden Press.	X	X	X	X	
Solomon, Michael R. (1996), <i>Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having, and Being</i> , 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.	X	X	X	X	
Berkman, Lindquist, and Sirgy (1996), <i>Consumer Behavior</i> , 1st ed. Chicago: NTC Business Books.	X	X	X	X	X
Tellis, Gerard J. (1998), <i>Advertising and Sales Promotion Strategy</i> , 1st ed. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.	X	X	X	X	X

Notes: description = gave description of fear appeals, examples = gave examples of fear appeals, social versus physical = discussed social versus physical fears, U-shaped response = discussed U-shaped response, evolution = covered evolution of fear appeal thought.

only if the person's fear is so strong as to verge on the neurotic (e.g., Janis 1968; Leventhal 1967). However, there is a dearth of evidence that mass communications appeals can engender neurotic emotional responses, and no one has asserted that neurotic consumer behavior should be a strong focus of future advertising research or marketing strategy. Surprisingly, the discussion of how people resist strong fear messages and the repetition of the various curvilinear hypotheses remain quite common in marketing textbooks.

In those rare instances in which textbook authors note that the inverted-U has not stood up under scrutiny, they tend to explain that it still might be true despite problems with previous research findings. For example, one book, which cites a strong review of the literature that clearly illustrates how and why the inverted-U has failed to be supported by research data, then asserts a seemingly intuitive explanation by saying that the optimal level of fear might depend on the degree of relevance of a topic for the audience, somehow missing the point that topic relevance is an integral part of audience fear. If a subject is not relevant for an audience, they will not fear it.

How the textbooks locked onto this old and erroneous view of fear appeals goes back almost 50 years to the work of Janis and Feshbach (1953, 1954). In their studies, the appeals the researchers designated as weaker were more effective in persuading high school students to adopt the recommended tooth care procedures. In an almost offhand comment that attempted to explain the results, the authors speculated that an optimal level of fear for persuasion might exist. Two decades later, Duke's (1967) critique of Janis and Feshbach's studies complained that their findings had become overgeneralized in the literature. Although Janis and Feshbach dropped all discussion of the elusive optimal level of fear from later theoretical presentations, their original speculation was picked up in marketing textbooks.

Textbooks in any field can lock in old thinking to the detriment of future research. As Nobel Prize-winning economist George Stigler (1985, p. 112) observed, "Once an idea is widely accepted, it is guaranteed a measure of immortality." Similarly, naturalist Stephen J. Gould (1985, p. 384) has repeatedly pointed out how "[f]acts achieve an almost immortal status once they pass from primary documentation into secondary sources, ... errors are copied from generation to generation and seem to gain support by sheer repetition. No one goes back to discover the fragility of original arguments." Almost all basic sociology texts state that Margaret Mead found that the Tchambuli of New Guinea reversed sex roles, despite her repeated assertion from the time she published her work on the Tchambuli in 1935 until her death that she never made such a claim. In 1979, Goldberg (as reported in Goldberg 1996) pointed out this persistent error in a letter published in *Contemporary Sociology*, a publication of the American Sociological Association and read by virtually everyone publishing in mainstream sociology, only to review textbooks a decade later and find that the letter had no effect whatsoever.

In the same way, once the concept of an optimal level of fear for persuasion found its way into textbooks, many marketing researchers have repeated it and sought to validate it,

explain it, or simply use it as a starting point for their work (e.g., Keller and Block 1996; Strong and Dubas 1993).

Typically, research in marketing journals starts in one of two ways. On the one hand, it is claimed that some unknown optimal level of fear exists to maximize persuasion power. On the other hand, after dutifully listing a handful of studies, the conclusion is that prior research data are "mixed." In both cases, discussion locks onto speculation that an optimal level of fear for persuasion might exist. Despite the failure of every thorough literature review to show empirical support for the theory, the optimal level of fear concept seems to have been elevated to the position of disciplinary dogma—repeated, discussed, tested, and/or debunked as if it remains the prevailing successful theoretical explanation. One would think that if the data are repeatedly mixed after 45 years of research, the theory would be discarded as unsupported. Many studies look for ways to explain or support a theory that has never been supported in the first place. This is not altogether unlike the researchers who seek evidence of Bigfoot based on a priori conclusions that he exists (see Gould 1996).

Given the staying power of "levels of fear" and the inverted-U in marketing journals, the consistent repetition of this view in textbooks is not altogether surprising. Conversely, it could well have been the textbooks that led to the common view in journals. Which came first is not clear, but the current textbook presentations do not provide reviews of contemporary research literature. Their discussions often depend on articles written when Richard Nixon was president.

One study still frequently cited in textbooks (Ray and Wilkie 1970) attempts to defend and explain the inverted-U in the face of equivocal data. The article speculates that studies that found "high fear" most persuasive might have used communications that were equivalent in scare content to the "mild fear" messages found most persuasive in other studies. Similarly, researchers who found the strongest response to what they labeled high fear did not use scary enough material to realize that subjects would be less persuaded at higher fear levels. Back when this article was written, research in the area was in its infancy. The first critiques of the curvilinear theories had just started to come out in psychology journals (e.g., Higbee 1969), and marketing researchers were attempting to reconcile confusing and conflicting data (e.g., Spence and Moinpour 1972; Sternthal and Craig 1974; Wheatley 1971). However, this does not explain why these articles are still the theoretical linchpins of textbooks published in the past few years. Perhaps the fact that they were originally published in the still-prestigious *Journal of Marketing* or *Journal of Consumer Research* explains something.

But the plot thickens further. Some articles are cited by the textbooks as concluding things they did not say. For example, they referenced an article as supporting a curvilinear relationship, even though that article had a specific subhead stating "The Myth of the Inverted-U" (Rotfeld 1988). To a certain extent perhaps, the books simply repeat one another: New studies are patched into old discussions; new findings or theories are presented in a context of how they fit with prior and accepted textbook summaries. I certainly do not

want to single out specific textbooks for this misuse, because the practice is far from uncommon. However, one conclusion could be that the textbook writers' goals are not to review research accurately but to maximize the number of marketing faculty members who have at least one article listed in the references (Rotfeld 1999).

Explaining the Textbook Effect

The dogmatic retention of unsupported and outdated theories in textbooks, as well as the implicit endorsement and propagation of these in journal articles, is a problem. Textbooks seem to institutionalize theoretical approaches from previous years. One result of this is that many researchers also lock into the unsupported views and defend theories that have failed to establish any explanatory utility.

Yet textbook authors are not wholly to blame for the textbook effect. No textbook author or team I know of claims to be expert in all the areas general books are required to cover. As a potential remedy for this situation, most publishers send manuscript chapters out to reviewers for comments and corrections. Unfortunately, reviewers tend to be selected as possible major adopters, not because they are experts on the topics. Because of this process, authors wish to repeat the conventional wisdom.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how authors use and/or avoid the research literature. Consistent with Armstrong and Schultz's (1993) findings that the actual use of research seems limited, a general point is usually made, and a research article or two is cited to demonstrate how the issue under discussion is applied. General statements spring from single examples, and then the author moves on to another subject. In most cases, the cited research articles are not even related to the broader discussion. If actual research is used, it is often based on errors, myths, or attempts to defend the conventional wisdom.

The basic problem remains. Textbooks have institutionalized a theoretical approach from the earliest years of a field, and probably as a partial result, researchers also have locked into a pattern of trying to explain or support a perspective that has repeatedly been discredited. In many fields, textbooks take on an aura and power not unlike that of sacred texts. The mere presence of a collection of textbooks can provide legitimacy to a discipline or a specialized subfield (Ferrell 1998), even when those basic texts fail to be the compilations of journal research that most of us believe they should be. Some faculty members might try to criticize textbooks or not use them at all, but their numbers are few and they often report widespread student complaints of the practice.

Perhaps, at least in the case of fear appeals, the errors are about to be corrected. In the new fourth edition of his consumer behavior text published in fall 1998 (after the books for this study were gathered), Solomon (1999) cites recent journal articles and states,

Some of the research on fear appeals may be confusing a threat (the literal content of a message, such as saying "engage in safe sex or die") with fear (an emotional response to the message)... [G]reater fear does result in greater persuasion—but not all threats are equally effective because

different people will respond differently to the same threat. Therefore, the strongest threats are not always the most persuasive because they may not have the desired impact on the perceiver.

This change is encouraging! However, it is a single textbook and a single topic.

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A General Theory of Competition: Resources, Competences, Productivity, Economic Growth
by Shelby D. Hunt (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000, 303 pp., \$70.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback)

A General Theory of Competition: Resources, Competences, Productivity, Economic Growth is a welcome attempt to develop a more contemporary and realistic theory of competition. It comes at a time when there is growing unrest with the neoclassical theory of competition. This unrest arises from the increased recognition that the neoclassical assumptions of perfect information, homogeneity of buyers and sellers, maximization of firms' profits, and competitive equilibrium are not isomorphic with the competitive environment. In addition, the increased mathematical sophistication of the theory has virtually become, to many scholars, a goal in and of itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, many business practitioners and theoreticians (including some economists) have increasingly found neoclassical economic analysis largely useless. Consequently, there has been a push to develop richer, more useful theories of competition. In his *General Theory of Competition*, Hunt pulls together much of this new thinking and integrates it with his own theory of resource advantage to develop a lucid general theory of competition. Perhaps most important, Hunt draws a compelling picture of competition that is not a zero-sum game to divide up limited resources but a win-win game about creating more resources.

The explanatory richness of Hunt's general theory of competition stems in large measure from its basis in at least 11 different research traditions: Austrian economics, competence-based tradition (from strategic management), differential advantage theory, economic sociology, evolutionary economics, heterogeneous demand theory, the historical tradition, industrial organization economics, institutional economics, the resource-based tradition (again, from strategic management), and transaction cost economics. Hunt's general theory is indeed a truly interdisciplinary theory! In the book, he demonstrates how his theory can explain certain phenomena better than neoclassical economic theory can, because it uses more "descriptively realistic premises." Table 1 (taken from the book) compares and contrasts the foundational premises of perfect competition with the more "descriptively realistic premises" of Hunt's resource-advantage theory.

The book is clear, logical, and compelling and avoids unnecessary jargon or mathematical terminology, which makes it (I would suppose) accessible to a variety of readers. It would be unfortunate if the book were not read by a wide audience. Given its broad applicability, I would expect

the book to be of interest, at the very least, to scholars and students in economics, history, law, political science, business (especially marketing and strategy), management consulting, and public policy, as well as to executives and entrepreneurs.

Because of the unifying and integrative nature of Hunt's general theory of competition, it should be especially useful to educators, managers, and public policymakers. For example, business faculty members are increasingly pressured to integrate business topics to help students appreciate the complexities and systems nature of business. Increasingly, students are called on not only to understand and appreciate the fine points of accounting, economics, finance, law, management, and marketing but also to see how they interrelate. A workable general theory of competition, which truly reflects real-world competitive processes and dynamics, would provide a vehicle for such integration. Indeed, Hunt's general theory has the potential to awaken the business discipline to its various myopic views and provide a holistic view that compellingly demonstrates interrelationships among the business disciplines.

Accounting and finance students studying the general theory of competition will recognize that social capital and other resources (i.e., brand equity, channel equity, superior human resources, and the ability of the organization to learn) are missing from the financial statements. Understanding the nature and scope of intangible resources will give these students a more comprehensive understanding of a firm's value creating resources. This frame of reference will help students understand why "book" and "accounting" values are often less than the market value of a firm. Finance students will see that sources of financial capital are influenced by relational and social capital. They will see that liquidity and financial slack in the firm are not independent of relational resources.

Students of economics will learn that economies are not static equilibrating systems but evolving, adapting living systems, in which management and marketing processes and entrepreneurial risk taking are important sources of economic growth.

Marketing students will begin to appreciate that customers are not the only things that matter to the firm. They will see that a firm's resources include relationships with other stakeholders and that these can also be important resources that provide competitive advantage to the firm. They will also understand that business success can be related to internal and nonobservable competences and not just to what is offered or directly exchanged with the customer. Students of strategic management will see strategy making in a new light, because Hunt insists on a disciplined, comprehensive, and thoughtfully integrative framework that insists on a broadened perspective.

Marketing managers and executives will find *A General Theory of Competition* useful in shaping their firms' strategic plans. In this vein, the theory shares much with the extant business strategy literature. For example, it provides an excellent framework for identifying pathways to superior financial performance.

Perhaps the book's most useful long-term benefit could be as a compelling, multifunctional integrative framework