

# Commentary on “Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review”

Damien McLoughlin

**ABSTRACT.** This focussed issue of *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* on the subject of textbooks, their content and the growing internationalisation of the market prepared by Backhaus, Mell and Sabel is thus to be welcomed. The authors provide fertile ground for thinking about textbooks in three areas in particular. The first is why there are so many textbooks on the market. The second issue relates to the particular challenge posed to textbook authors by students with no experience of business markets. The third issue relates to the coverage of Business Marketing in other textbooks. A cooperative response to these issues from what is a relatively small community of business marketing researchers is identified and discussed. doi:10.1300/J033v14n04\_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Business marketing, education, textbooks

## INTRODUCTION

The discussion of textbooks today often focuses upon their cost (ever increasing) the number of students who buy one (ever decreasing) as well as the more important topics of their suitability for particular tasks

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and their ability to meet particular objectives. This focussed issue of *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* on the subject of textbooks, their content and the growing internationalisation of the market prepared by Backhaus, Mell and Sabel is thus to be welcomed. The authors provide fertile ground for thinking about textbooks in three areas in particular. The first is why there are so many textbooks on the market. The second issue relates to the particular challenge posed to textbook authors by students with no experience of business markets. The third issue relates to the coverage of Business Marketing in other textbooks.

### **WHY SO MANY TEXTBOOKS?**

One of the surprising aspects of the paper is the sheer volume of textbooks in the Business Marketing area. The authors highlight sixteen English language textbooks in table 1, seven of which are in their first edition, six of those since 2002. (Although it must be said that at least one of those new books, Ford et al. does represent one of the first attempts, after 30 years, of members of the IMP Group to present their ideas in a format suitable for taught courses.) While acknowledging the need for non-English books, is there really a need for this number of textbooks?

It could be suggested that textbooks play a number of roles; a source of reference when students are not in lectures; a source of reference when students are no longer in the course or even in formal education; providing a resource to students who may be better suited to learning by reading rather than listening (Boskin, 1988). Textbooks also act to set out the core principles of a subject area in a way that they may be consistently and conveniently communicated to a student group. These general principles hold true for Business Marketing as for other subject areas.

In this regard Business Marketing has been well served with a number of established textbooks now in late single digit editions and also by more recent texts. But how should the recent increase in the population be understood? Boskin (1988) refers to the fragmentation and specialisation of the economics discipline as an explanation for the explosion in the number of economics texts coming to market. Given the scale of economics as a discipline, with close to one million students per annum taking core economics courses, this fragmentation might be expected and welcomed, but the situation in Business Marketing is somewhat different.

During a gathering of Business Marketing faculty at Northwestern in 2001 it was said that across all business schools in the US there may only be a couple of hundred B2B researchers, with perhaps the same or

slightly more in Europe, reflecting the strength of the subject in Northern Europe. If there are so few Business Marketing researchers and instructors, why are there so many new textbooks? Has a level of diversity and alternative thinking emerged within B2B marketing in recent years sufficient to justify this degree of activity?

Clearly, there has also been some change in the discipline over time. As evidence for this, the page count of the two older texts (counted by the number of editions) is the longest while other texts in later editions also tend to be longer. This suggests that more material is being added as each new edition is prepared. (With great respect, it might also suggest that older material is not being excised.) Alternative explanations may be that some of these new texts are coming to market as part of a product line filling strategy by publishers and/or that the maturing of the teaching and research cohort is naturally progressing towards writing textbooks. While in no way objecting to these processes, is this good news for our students and our subject area? Or, as was pointed out at the start of this section if the textbook is to set out the core principles of a subject is this proliferation likely to promote this in a positive way?

### ***CAN B2B MARKETING BE EFFECTIVELY TAUGHT USING A MANAGERIAL APPROACH?***

The second major issue arising from the paper is the domination of what the authors describe as a managerial, or a marketing mix, approach to marketing. The authors identify that 11 of the 16 English language textbooks they examined took such an approach. This presents two problems. The first relates to the lived experience of marketing. There is an important reason why introductory marketing textbooks focus on consumer marketing; consumer markets reflect the lived experience of everyone in Western society including those who might be students of marketing. With such lived experience, students taking a course in marketing can access the applied nature of marketing.

The student of business marketing is different, for those students without a lived experience of business markets, a change in the context in the textbook will not provide them with true access to the logic or principle of business marketing. Without work experience or a background in a particular type of family business, it is unlikely that they will understand the significance of the phenomena that they are presented with. Even acknowledging that some business schools adopt interesting, original and creative techniques for exposing students to business marketing

practice (Hutt and Speh, 2004), in my experience (I have had extensive involvement with action learning for more than ten years) students require long-term exposure to situations in order to develop understanding and the skills needed to respond.

The second issue is more concerning. While the 4 Ps is an easy way to access diagnostic tool (Van Watershoot and Vanden Bulte, 1992) it does not represent the reality of what marketers, and particularly business marketers, spend their time or money on or what we as a research community examine. In support of this point I might carefully refer to the two texts on the list of English language books that are arguably most strongly driven by high quality research in business marketing. Representing a North American tradition Anderson and Narus (2003) is a textbook, which is largely driven by the research experience of the authors. Representing a European tradition, in this case the IMP group, Ford et al. (2002) is strongly research driven. In neither case is the marketing mix used as a direct or indirect template. In each case the textbooks are primarily driven by the research experience of the authors, in each case the authors are leaders in their fields and in each case the structure and content represents what most of us as instructors and consultants recognise as the “reality” of business marketing. In fact a comparison of the table of contents of both books is striking in the similarity of its coverage.

While an argument can be made to teach the 4 Ps for introductory marketing, why do we persist with the “mistake.” There is little justification for using it as an organising framework for a course such as business marketing which always arises as part of a marketing specialism or as an elective.

### ***THE COVERAGE OF BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKETING IN OTHER TEXTBOOKS***

We are right to be interested and curious about the textbooks, which represent our area. However, extending the logic of the paper, we should also be concerned and interested in how other textbooks represent Business-to-Business marketing. A cursory examination of two leading textbooks commonly used for introductory courses in the United States and Europe, Kotler (2003) and Dibb et al. (2006) are worrying from our perspective as business marketers. In each case the authors focus on describing buying behaviour in business markets and on identifying the differences between business and consumer marketing. Given the lived

experience view of marketing and the attitude of simply translating the 4 Ps to a business marketing context, this is not surprising and is certainly not a point of criticism of the authors or readers of these books. But it does raise the issue of whether this coverage is damaging Business Marketing.

As noted earlier, textbooks play a formative role. Is the popularity of business marketing as a career adversely affected by the coverage it receives in core textbooks? To answer this question conduct a simple survey in class, ask how many students see their future careers as brand managers with one of the great brand owners such as P&G, Diageo, Danone or Lever. Then ask how many see their future as an account manager with a forklift manufacturer, a packaging company or an animal feed distributor? How Business Marketing is presented in other textbooks matters.

What it does raise is the question of the contribution which business marketing makes to the wider marketing disciplines and more importantly how that contribution is regarded by textbook authors or how it can be more effectively communicated to the wider community of marketing students. Taking relationships as an example, both Anderson and Narus (2003) and Ford et al. (2002) provide comprehensive coverage of the role and management of relationships in business markets. I would very strongly argue that the work of the IMP in the 1970s was the original source of relational thinking in marketing. This was an original contribution to marketing by Business Marketing researchers, outstanding work has been done in his area by researchers on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet when the core principles of marketing texts are being revised and new material is added in, its CRM systems that get the coverage.

## CONCLUSIONS

I welcome the author's paper and the vision of the editor of *JBBM* in initiating this project. It is useful for our community to communicate with itself regarding the major issues which face us. The analysis, which the authors have conducted, is useful and interesting. Its usefulness arises as it provides us with a complete overview of the options for Business Marketing textbooks. It is interesting for two reasons. It provides insight on the growth of our subject outside the English language. I am intrigued by this and what it tells us about the globalisation of business practice and ideas. It is also interesting for the question it raises about the role of textbooks in our subject area. In this regard, as highlighted in earlier sections, there are serious issues arising from this.

I would like to suggest one solution to the prevailing situation that could deal with many of these problems. This alternative is to create a *Wikibook* for our teaching area. The Wikipedia Foundation sponsors a range of free information sources and has a particular facility for textbooks. The suggestion is that we create a global textbook, with authors volunteering chapters on the 20/30 major themes of relevance to business marketing today. These chapters could be commented upon, added to and identified for deletion by members of the Business Marketing community. The organisation of chapters for the purposes of teaching would be a matter for the instructor, he would select and refer students to those which were of primary importance, and where appropriate of secondary importance.

The benefits of such an approach are significant; the “book” would be free, would have the potential for theory and example updates on a real time basis and most importantly given the current internationalisation of Business Marketing books, would be available for free to all around the globe with Internet access. This alternative could deal with the proliferation of textbooks by eliminating the demand for them, provide alternatives to the managerial approach for those who desire it and offer a wider perspective on business marketing that authors of marketing textbooks may draw upon.

Evidence of the possibilities of this approach is provided by a visit to the *Wikibook* website which features a basic textbook on marketing as well as books in other areas of business, management, and economics. Doubts about whether such a voluntary approach might succeed in our community will be reduced by a visit to the IMP Group website ([www.impgroup.org](http://www.impgroup.org)). Available for free download there are a number of the major, original texts written by IMP Group members on which contracts have lapsed.

Finally, I would like to consider how the thread of research relating to textbooks might progress. The authors set out with the objective of providing the business marketing community with the knowledge of the availability of textbooks available on the market with the objective that our selection decisions might be better informed. As noted previously such information is useful but how might it effect the decision makers of us as surrogate consumers? (Solomon, 1987) I suggest that the decision-making process for textbooks within our community might be driven primarily in paradigmatic terms (would an instructor from the IMP group recommend a text based on the managerial approach?) and on the basis of relationships between authors and colleagues within the subject area. Another paper anyone?

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