

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

Ivan Snehota
Annalisa Tunisini

ABSTRACT. The commentary discusses the analysis of the content of business marketing textbooks by Backhaus, Mell and Sabel and in particular the dichotomy managerial used to classify the approaches adopted. It is argued that such a dichotomy tends to veil different and changing assumptions regarding the task of marketing management in business markets, and the claim is made that the interplay between the different approaches is beneficial for the development of the body of knowledge of the discipline of business marketing. doi:10.1300/J033v14n04_07 [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

The extensive overview of business-to-business marketing textbooks, both English and non-English, by Backhaus, Mell and Sabel (2007) points to substantial heterogeneity of approaches adopted by various authors to

Ivan Snehota is Professor of Business Marketing, Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano, Switzerland (E-mail: snehotai@lu.unisi.ch).

Annalisa Tunisini is Professor of Business Marketing, University of Urbino “Carlo Bo”, Urbino, Italy (E-mail: tunisini@uniurb.it).

Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Vol. 14(4) 2007

Available online at <http://jbbm.haworthpress.com>

© 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1300/J033v14n04_07

93

the field of the Business marketing. Given the role of textbooks, the variety, rather than the heterogeneity, shown in the structuring and content of the 39 textbooks examined can be taken as a marker of the broadening scope of the Business marketing discipline in the world-wide academic contexts during the last couple of decades. Considered from this angle their analysis lends itself to some further considerations.

The starting consideration is that the variety of approaches is certainly due to the complexity of the business-marketing processes on the one hand, but also, perhaps primarily, due to the different ontological assumptions regarding what interpretative and normative frameworks can be of use for coping with such complexity on the other hand. This point, understandably, is not the central one for the authors apparently more concerned with the role of textbooks in marketing education. Yet, in our view, it becomes interesting if the textbooks are considered a rough map of the discipline—a draft of a shared framework for marketing management. For such a purpose the dichotomy that splits the textbook approaches in two types; “managerial” (traditional) and “specific” is somewhat coarse-grained. Adopting such an “a priori” dichotomy is likely to lead the attention to the proliferation of contrasting approaches (in the words of the authors heterogeneity) rather than to the interplay between the different approaches that is driving the development of the discipline. We think that it is the interplay of the different approaches that is of interest.

The category of textbooks labeled “managerial” in their approach, which clearly dominates the scene, appears to be defined more in terms of the structuring of the management process rather than in terms of the content, scope or target. The managerial approach is given the meaning of sequential process of analysis, planning, implementation and control and each phase is dealt with as if related, but distinct. Interestingly, the major part of the textbooks following the managerial approach are found to adopt extended or modified managerial approach in so far as they introduce topics that cut across the sequential structuring of the managerial process and elude the sequential structuring of the managerial process. The category of textbooks labeled “specific” appears less clearly specified. It is pointed out that these are organized around topics rather than phases of the management process and it is hinted, with reference to Brennan and Skaates (2001), that such a structuring might suggest not only different views of the problems to be dealt with in business markets but also different views on the effective ways of teaching marketing. This category of textbooks appears to show considerable variety.

Our impression is that there are a few other aspects of the divide that separates the two categories that deserve to be brought to the foreground and might be useful in order to discern and interpret the direction of development in the textbooks and in the disciplines of business marketing at large. We find the textbooks to differ in terms of perspective, scope and purpose. The main differences can be grasped if we look at the traditional managerial approach and the network and value approaches as two extremes.

What is labeled as the traditional managerial approach tends to:

1. focus on the single company and on the strategies it can perform to reach its goals; assuming that companies are largely independent and autonomous with respect to its market context; adopting thus largely an “atomistic perspective”;
2. assume that the nature of the marketing problem is largely given and is to achieve better competitive positioning for the company in a largely homogeneous and anonymous product market;
3. adopt a normative ambition to suggest the right means to face the (known and traditional) problems of business marketing management, i.e., prescribe how to deal with issues related to analysis, choices and implementation in business organizations.

Textbooks following the so-called traditional managerial approach adopt thus the sequential planning view of the managerial process.

Textbooks that are labeled as “specific” approaches appear more difficult to characterize. Yet several of these, especially those that fall into the “network” and “value” approaches tend to have some common traits. They appear to:

1. deal with business markets rather than single companies and point to interdependencies between companies in the markets assuming that the single company’s autonomy is limited by specific others adopting thus a more systemic perspective that emphasizes that the company cannot be dissociated by the network context and vice-versa;
2. consider the marketing problem as being contingent on the type of market relationships of the company and therefore not a priori given; as such the marketing problem of the company is variable rather than given, and consequently the critical task of marketing management equally contingent.
3. limit the normative ambition to interpreting the situations that management has to deal with rather than to the means of how to

deal with these; emphasize interpretative models of the variety as basis for the appropriate managerial action.

Textbooks labeled as following the specific approaches only apparently are non-managerial in approach. Rather, what makes them different is the focus on functioning of the business markets and a different perspective on the very nature of the managerial task and work (Hakansson, Harrison, Waluszewski, 2004).

The two approaches appear thus different in the claim as to the nature and main elements of the task of marketing management, which translates into different views on how the business marketing management is to be taught and learned. Labeling the two approaches as managerial and specific, respectively, obscures to some extent this difference between approaches and in how they are related and interact. It creates the misleading impression that the textbooks in the specific approach just focus on specific isolated items concerning business markets and business marketing management and are not concerned with implications for management. At the same time it suggests that the managerial approach of some textbooks fails to respond to novel interpretations of marketing issues. That is unfortunate.

It seems to us that the evolution of the managerial approach textbooks is characterized by including themes that cut across the sequential conception of the managerial work, (towards the extended and modified type of textbooks) is an answer to the need to amend the assumptions about the nature of the task of management work. At the same time the focus of the textbooks that fall into the category of specific approaches not only on the interpretative frameworks of business markets but concern with consequences for management practices in companies that operate in business markets testify the concern with managerial problems.

Both types of textbooks appear to aim at improving the managerial practice (Anderson and Narus, 2004). The difference is that the first emphasizes the interpretation of the market and the consequent framing of the task of management (the specific approaches) while the second focus the attention on the ways to cope with problems known (the managerial approaches). Both issues are of consequence for effectiveness of the marketing management practice. The call for a more positive orientation by the managerial approaches so as to grasp the complexity of the business market functioning, and for a more normative approach in the specific approaches sometimes voiced in the debate in the discipline is oversimplifying the issue at hand.

The development of both “managerial” and “specific” textbooks (using the language adopted by the authors) certainly shows the need for a growing discussion and questioning of the task of marketing management in both respects—what it has to address and how. The managerial approach has mostly deepened into how to handle recurrent problems, while the specific approach has been mainly focused on what are the phenomena that have to be managed.

What is achieved by the textbooks that follow the managerial approach, the elaboration of more normative indications of how to effectively address certain problems, however, find its limits in the available framing of the issues to be dealt with in marketing on business markets. The latter requires broadening of the perspective and a continuous quest for what is going on in the market, which can produce insight of the specific mechanisms and varied processes characterizing business markets (March, 2006). In depth examination of the characteristics and complexity of market processes that characterizes the specific approach feeds and orient the managerial perspective. In our view this is the dialogic process among the various approaches that without ever ending in a generally shared view is what drives the development of the discipline. Focusing on the diversity might lead to the impression of the need to declare the winners and losers with respect to some abstract criteria of completeness. We are inclined to consider the diversity as a necessary condition for advancing the body of knowledge of the discipline and a sign of its health. Thinking of marketing education, an explicit awareness of the reasons for the differences is what makes the difference between education and training.

REFERENCES

- Anderson J. C. Narus J. A. (2004), *Business Market Management: Understanding, Creating and Delivering Value*, Prentice Hall
- Backhaus K., Mell, B., Sabel T. (2007), Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review, *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*
- Brennan R., Skaates M.A. (2001), Educating Business Marketers: A Lack of Common Ground in the Curriculum?, *XVII Annual IMP Conference*, Competitive Paper
- Hakansson H., Harrison D., Waluszewski, A. (eds) (2004), *Rethinking Marketing. Developing a New Understanding of Markets*, J. Wiley & Sons: Chichester
- March J.R. -The HBR Interview (2006), Ideas as Art: A Conversation with J.G.March, by Diane Coutu, *Harvard Business Review*, october

doi:10.1300/J033v14n04_07