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Title: Educating marketing professionals?

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The renowned consumer behaviour expert [Bernard Cova](#) (of Euromed, Marseilles and the Bocconi School in Milan) visited the UK during March. I was fortunate enough to attend his fascinating presentation at the University of Hertfordshire on the action research that he undertook with [Alfa Romeo](#) on the topic of value co-creation. This involved recruiting thousands of Alfa enthusiasts (known as Alfisti) from around Europe, and then organizing an event at which senior representatives from the company interacted with the enthusiasts to reflect on the future of the company, its designs and its product lines. The purpose? To engage these 'expert customers' in the process of enhancing the products and increasing brand equity. After all, in many cases the Alfa enthusiasts are more knowledgeable about the brand than the professionals. Alfa were persuaded that it was worth spending some fairly serious time and money to engage in an organised 'value co-creation event', to try to extract some of this invaluable customer expertise and put it to work for the company. Bernard explained that although the event was judged a success, it is doubtful that Alfa will repeat it soon, since a sense emerged that they had got just a little bit too close to their customers for comfort. There is, perhaps, a limit to how much gritty customer reality the average manager, or marketer, can endure. Even when you are selling something as desirable as an Alfa Romeo.

Cova's presentation, based on a substantial programme of research which was clearly considered highly relevant by the industry partners, was very *educational*. At the end of the session I had a far better understanding of what the process of co-creation of value means; in fact, I think I had a subtly altered understanding of what the terms "customer" and "marketing" can mean. The session exemplified, for me, an important aspect of what marketing education should be about. There was engagement with some fairly subtle theoretical ideas (service-dominant logic, co-creation of value, the sociology of work), it incorporated important practical concerns (how should Alfa Romeo develop their brand?), and it resulted in changed and enhanced conceptual thinking—let's call that learning—in at least one member of the audience (me).

Different people will no doubt respond differently to this anecdote. Maybe this is what happens in all of your marketing classes every day, in which case I envy your students. Maybe this is an ideal to be striven for, but it cannot be achieved because of various constraints (suggest your own favourites, perhaps class sizes, student prior learning, mixed-ability classes, excessive teaching loads will figure here). Perhaps, like me, you doubt whether you have the same charisma (or charming French/Italian accent) as Cova, and so doubt your ability to engage an audience so completely. All these, and others, are expected and reasonable responses. However, what about another possible response to the anecdote? This is the response that says that economic times are tough, students are customers, the customers want knowledge and skills that will give them an advantage in the job market, they cannot see how the described kind of learning will facilitate this ("a subtly altered understanding of

what ‘customer’ means” – how is that going to put bread on the table?), so we should not even be trying to teach this way. Is this stereotype of the student-customer so far-fetched that we can dismiss this kind of thinking out of hand? I don’t think so.

Here is an example from an article by Philip Davies in the [Times Higher](#):

“**student**, *n.* someone who had to apply themselves to study in order to learn. Now obsolete (see student customer).

- **student customer**, *n.* one who, without doing anything else, can get what they want by paying an appropriate fee.”

This is an amusing article, and one assumes that Davies intended irony, but the irony would have no bite if this way of thinking seemed entirely outlandish.

What is particularly galling, in the student-as-customer debate, is that commentators with no discernible knowledge of marketing get away with presenting simple-minded definitions of “customer” and of the relationship between the supplier and the customer as though they were state-of-the-art. It is as though the development of marketing thinking had failed to advance since [P. T. Barnum](#) (1810-1891). Such ignorance, if writing about many other fields, would be considered laughable. But my impression is that, for some reason, marketing scholars are less inclined to defend their conceptual domains against the abuses of journalistic commentators than scholars in most other fields. By contrast, these days the public debate on a number of fairly sophisticated economic concepts is generally conducted at a fairly high level: terms such as public-sector debt, GDP and even quantitative easing seem to be used at least reasonably accurately. But when it comes to the term “customer” and the relationship between buyers and sellers, it seems that something like Davies’ definition is usually intended: the elementary, anonymous exchange of money for a good or service. It’s as though decades of research in the fields of relationship marketing, services marketing and consumer behaviour had never happened.

What concerns me is that if we were to adopt a simple-minded definition of the student-customer, and then respond straightforwardly to what this student-customer wants, then the likely outcome would be a marketing curriculum lacking engagement with underlying social scientific principles and concentrating on the latest glitzy communications techniques (such as Facebook and Twitter). At the extreme, this would mean marketing “education” reduced to the process of showing students where to point and click in whatever happen to be the most fashionable Web 2.0 applications. This would be vocationalism, pure and simple.

All of this put me in mind of what I would describe as one of the recent classics of the marketing education literature: “A Professional School Approach to Marketing Education”, by John Schibrowsky, James Peltier, and Thomas Boyt ([Journal of Marketing Education, 24\[1\]: 43-55](#)). Published ten years ago now, the article delineates a spectrum of approaches to marketing education anchored by the liberal arts model at one extreme and the vocational school model at the other. In the liberal arts model students are taught *about* marketing with a strong theoretical focus and an emphasis on analytical techniques; in the vocational education model students are taught specific skills to complete specific tasks and perform specific jobs. Schibrowsky and colleagues advocate neither of the extreme approaches, preferring the middle way of the “professional

education model". They suggest that this implies a curriculum focusing on theory *and* practice, on strategic thinking, human skills, leadership and teamwork, and on synthesising information to deal with complex issues requiring informed judgment. My own preference remains for this professional education model.

Marketing educators have a far better understanding of the subtleties of customer relationships than most people. They appreciate that one version of this relationship—an anonymous and once-off transaction where a good or service is exchanged for money—is extreme and very unusual. They know that in high-involvement service industries concerned with the delivery of complex, multi-faceted products that cannot be simplistically pre-specified and which necessitate an involved, enduring and evolving supplier-customer relationship, the anonymous transaction notion of a customer relationship is manifestly counter-productive. They are, therefore, uniquely placed to correct misapprehensions among the general public about naive definitions of "customer", and to resist pressure from poorly-informed managers about how to understand and respond to student-customer requirements in higher education.