Marketing and uncertainty; A cultural approach

Why are marketing professionals so obsessed with future scenarios? Why do product managers buy reports that they never read? What is the cultural basis of uncertainty in the marketing profession? The marketing profession is ripe with paradoxes that are not explained by economic theory alone. In this chapter I explore some of these. Based on ethnographic research in a marketing department, and on subsequent discussions with practitioners in the marketing profession, I draw attention to the interface of marketing knowledge and marketing practice, as it unfolds in the day-to-day ‘business’ of constructing food products and food adverts.

There is a long history in the social sciences of a division between culture on the one hand, and markets on the other. This also involves a division of labour through what appeared, until recently, as a tacit agreement between economics and anthropology that economists deal with disembedded transactions and rational calculations while anthropologists deal with people and culture. This division served for many years to set the agenda within the sub-discipline of economic anthropology where the focus, traditionally, has been upon non-market transactions and small-scale systems of distribution, rather than the complexities of modern markets. In other words, economic anthropology dealt with economies that were explicitly different from economies described in the field of economics, representing thus the Other, either within or external to the researchers’ own societies (informal economies, non-market economies). This implied, for many years an extraordinary lack of attention among anthropologists with regard to ‘ordinary’ business transactions, or to industrial or post-industrial economies of the capitalist, modern world.

This division of labour reflects a more general dichotomy in Western societies between what Bloch and Parry refer to as ‘market’ on the one hand and ‘morality’
on the other, or between commodity exchange and gift exchange (Parry and Bloch, 1989). Parry and Bloch’s recognition of this much referred dichotomy as a Western cultural construct, rather than as a universal phenomenon has been significant in opening up for a field of inquiry that applies a cultural approach to markets and to capitalism (see for instance Dilley, 1992, Abolafia, 1996, Carrier, 1997, Lien, 1997, Mille, 1997, Callon, 1998). Such approaches have shown that what we commonly refer to as ‘the market’ is not only highly variable, but also subject to a wide range of interpretations. Thus, far from being attributed with a fairly stable set of meanings, the market is a contested, flexible, and highly abstract concept, seemingly self-evident and elusive at the same time.

Michel Callon (1998) argues that rather than denouncing *Homo Economicus* as pure fiction, the myth of economics, we need to explore the diversified forms through which this entity may be expressed. He maintains that just as ‘so-called traditional societies are populated – sometimes even over-populated - with calculative agencies’, … ‘so-called modern societies are endowed with as many non-calculative agencies as calculative ones.’ (1998:39-40). However, for Callon, calculation takes on a meaning which involves much more than the simple and utilitarian ‘cost-benefit’ approach attributed to Economic Man. Callon introduces an analytical framework from studies of science and technology (SST) in which economic processes may be treated as ‘just another kind of socio-technical-discursive arrangement, like cars or nuclear physics.’ (Barry and Slater, 2002:180). This merging between SST and sociology or anthropology of economic processes represents a radical move, with implications beyond the scope of the present discussion. Yet, Callon’s insistence that calculation is both a technical and an ethical practice ‘depending on a set of technical devices and discursive idioms that make calculation possible’ (Barry and Slater, 2002:181) is relevant as a starting point for the present analysis. According to Callon, to the extent that *Homo Economicus* may be said to exist, he is not to be found in the ‘natural state’ so often referred to in economic textbooks, but rather:

‘He is formatted, framed and equipped with prostheses which help him in his calculations and which are, for the most part, produced by economics.’ (Callon, 1998:51)

This opens up new horizons for economic anthropology, where the objective may be not so much that of ‘giving the soul back to a de-humanized agent’ but rather to
‘explore the diversity of calculative agencies’ forms and distributions’ (Callon, 1998:51).

Marketing is a field of knowledge which is both ambitiously academic and intensely applied, and which operates precisely at the interface between economic theory and economic practice. Quoting Callon once more, it is a ‘set of tools and practices taken from practitioners and reconfigured by ‘academic’ marketing specialists’ (1998:27) which then, after numerous transformations, is mediated back to practitioners as a standardized prescription of how things ought to be done.

Marketing thus represents (along with accounting) a profound mediator between the economics and economies - or between disciplinary knowledge and day-to-day practice. Much like the concept of hybrids as discussed by Latour (1993), Callon sees marketing not only a mediator between the two, but also as an agent actively promoting the construction and constitution of each of them. Callon’s approach to marketing and economics serves to remind us of the need to pay attention to interrelations between knowledge or beliefs and everyday practice. I contend that this ethnographic credo is of no less importance as the topic of study grows increasingly complex, abstract or virtual, as in the case of market relations and global economies (Carrier and Miller, 1998).

In this chapter, I will explore the interface of marketing knowledge and marketing practice, focusing specifically on the ways in which marketing mediates and reconfigures notions of time, change, consumption and consumers. I will discuss specific interpretations of the market, and their implications for the ways in which marketing practitioners conceive of their own knowledge, their position vis-à-vis consumers and their ability to make sound marketing decisions. The argument is developed on the basis of eight months of fieldwork conducted in the marketing department of a Norwegian food manufacturer (see Lien, 1997 for a comprehensive account), and was first presented at a European Conference for Advertising Agencies in Bergen in 2000. The presentation sparked a prolonged media debate in Norway and repeated presentations for audiences in the marketing and profession. This chapter incorporates reflections that draw upon comments from such discussions. Although the argument springs from studies of the food production and consumption in Norway, the implications are much broader and are relevant across a wide range of fields and cultural contexts.
All cultural communities share some assumptions that are rarely questioned, often referred to in the social sciences as ‘doxa’. The task of an anthropologist is to uncover such doxic assumptions, and to trace their origin and their implications. This may be useful, not only as an academic exercise, but also as a key to self-reflection for those who belong to the marketing profession. Put very simply, a person’s understanding of the world has important consequences for her interpretations of new situations, and for what she sees as relevant knowledge. In this chapter, I argue that the way the marketing profession conceptualizes markets and consumers may in fact sometimes prevent them from gaining certain types of knowledge that they actually need. Based on this argument, I will then ask how it may be that a discipline which prides itself in helping practitioners to make sound marketing decisions may in fact develop conceptual tools that serve to undermine a type of insight that marketing practitioners need, and even seek. This question involves an ethnographic analysis of the interface between marketing as a discipline and marketing as practice, or, following the terminology of Callon (1998), between economics and economies.

The core of the argument may be summarised as follows: Firstly, contemporary marketing is characterised by a relentless search for knowledge about markets and consumers. Masses of information are continuously produced to meet this search for knowledge (Lien, 1997). A key observation is that such information, however different it may appear, tends to share a particular bias in the sense that it is structured by a focus on the future and on change. Repeated references to novelties, news, the future and anticipated change serve to constitute what I will refer to as a bias of temporality in marketing discourse. Secondly, marketing research on consumption tends to portray consumers as if they were strangers, acting unexpectedly, in ways that are difficult to understand or foresee. This image of the consumer as unpredictable and unknown, reinforced in part by consulting agencies, serves to constitute an image of a consumer as someone you don’t know, another bias in marketing discourse. I will maintain that these two conceptual paradigms serve as basic organizing principles in much of what is going on in the business of marketing and advertising, or what we may refer to as the commoditisation of marketing knowledge. Together they contribute to what I have previously described as a feeling of uncertainty among marketing practitioners, and which is another characterising feature of the marketing profession (Lien, 1997, see also Applbaum,
1999, Shenhav, 1994). The term uncertainty does not refer to insecurity or a low self-esteem on a personal level. Rather, it indicates what I refer to a collective sense of uncertainty, or the shared awareness in the profession (expressed particularly strongly among product managers) that one simply ‘does not know’ and that this lack of knowledge is somehow problematic, or could make a difference in the near future. This feeling of uncertainty is crucial to understanding the striking gap between, on the one hand, the massive amount of resources that is spent at buying information, and, on the other hand, the fact that so little of this information appears to be really looked at or taken into account in day-to-day practice or decision-making (Lien, 1997). In the following two sections, I shall elaborate each of these conceptual paradigms, starting with the bias of temporality.

**The bias of temporality**

As an outsider to the marketing profession in the 1990’s, I was amazed to observe how much time and effort that was being spent among the practitioners in speculating about something that in fact did not yet exist, such as ‘the 21st century consumer’, or 'agencies in 2010'.

Getting access to the latest news and particularly to future scenarios was frequently explained as the main reason for spending time at seminars and conferences (Lien, 1997). Consultants launching such events are generally well aware of this and tend, through their marketing efforts, to frame events as unique opportunities for preparing for the future. A similar tendency is evident in bestselling books on management, creativity and leadership throughout the past decade. This tendency is particularly salient in the field of new computer technologies where speed, change and visions of the future are the focus of attention (Willim, 2003), but the tendency is evident in a range of other fields as well.

Why is the future so important these days? And why are business people so obsessed with prophecies that claim to actually predict the future? The ability to prepare for the future is, in many ways, a universal necessity and part of the historical background for the successful expansion of humankind. But the cultural solutions do not necessarily involve such massive consumption of prophecies. For most people, knowledge of the past and the present would seem sufficient. This is not because nothing ever changes, but because any period of change, will always contain an element of continuity. Some marketing professionals have argued that
marketing is different, because in marketing, and particularly with regard to food habits, the changes are so much greater and so much more unpredictable than in most other areas, and probably also than in most other historical periods.

Sociologists and anthropologist studying food and consumption in Scandinavia in the last quarter of the 20th century argue, on the other hand, that this has been a relatively stable period. It has been a prosperous period, particularly in Norway, and there have been marked changes with regard to women’s participation in the workforce and with regard to appropriation of information technology. But in spite of rising incomes and in spite of an increasing availability of imported foods, eating habits have remained relatively stable (Bugge and Døving, 2000). By and large, the 1990’s is hardly a decade that will be seen as one of dramatic change as far as food consumption is concerned. It appears, in other words, that what characterises the marketing profession in this field is a focus on change, rather than change itself.

Clearly, the significance of change at any given time is relative, and about as hard to predict as the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. What is interesting, therefore, is not so much who is right and who is wrong, but rather how a notion of change is sustained in discourse and day-to-day practices, how it is played out in different areas, and how a preoccupation with the future may structure and facilitate certain decisions at the expense of others. I do not claim that nothing changes, but rather that changes are less profound than they may seem, simply because the continuities, which are always there, are systematically overlooked. Let me give an example:

In 1985, a consultancy agency called Carelius/Eckbo was contracted by Norwegian food industry to produce a strategic plan for the next 10 years. The report is a sincere and well founded attempt to predict what would happen in the Norwegian food market from 1985 to 1995. Reading the report more than fifteen years later, it is hardly surprising to note that many of the predictions never happened. The report is radical, because it predicts dramatic changes in many parts of the food sector, but at the same time it appears old fashioned, in the sense that it bears the unignorable mark of the 1980's. A few examples illustrate the point (Carelius/Eckbo, 1985). According to the report, irradiation might soon be allowed for a lot of products, such as chicken (p.150), and could solve the problems of salmonella once and for all. As we know now, irradiation never became a major method of food preservation in Scandinavia yet, and salmonella remains a
significant problem. Furthermore, according to the report, microwave ovens would soon appear on every kitchen counter, and even in miniature format, 'to be plugged in anywhere, like an electrical razor' (p.136). This way, people could bring their microwave around, and the market for ready made frozen food (TV-dinners) would increase tremendously. In 1996, 63% of the Norwegian population owned a microwave oven (Sandlie, 1999), but their use has hardly revolutionised Norwegian eating habits which still rely primarily on the use of regular ovens. Finally, according to the report, snacks would gradually replace ordinary meals. Lunch would become a snack meal, while a family dinner would become a rare event (p.75). This represents perhaps the gravest misinterpretation of Norwegian eating habits, and one of the most recurring myths of the popular press, partly due to extensive references to North American trends and to trend research commentators (Lien, 1999). A recent review of all available statistics on Norwegian eating habits concludes that in spite of such predictions, eating patterns in Norway remain stable and the dinner remains a significant family meal (Bugge and Døving, 2000). There are other predictions in the report that never came true, but also some that are right, such as a predicted increase in the use of pasta (p.139), pizza (p.82) and poultry (p.127), and an interest in Mexican and Oriental foods. Interestingly, the single food item which increased most dramatically during this period, low fat milk, is hardly mentioned at all in the reportiii.

The report cited above is a sober and careful presentation of future trends, and more radical examples are easily found. Nevertheless, it exemplifies the tendency in such consultancy reports to emphasise change at the expense of continuity. Norwegians eat pork chops, carrots, bread, skimmed milk and potatoes, items considered by both trend researchers and the public to be ordinary and trivial items of everyday life. Although food habits research concludes that eating patterns are relatively stable (Bugge and Døving, 2000, Lodberg-Holm and Mørk, 2001iv), there is hardly any mention of stability in the report. Instead, things that were seen as novelties or recent inventions around 1985 (such as irradiation and microwave ovens) are emphasized out of proportion and predicted to have enormous consequences for the future. This exercise is repeated for practically all novelties, in spite of the fact that, as most marketing professionals are well aware, a great part of the innovations that find their way to the market disappear within a period of five years. The report is but one example of a more general tendency in marketing
discourse in which a preoccupation with change remains a key feature, while signs of stability are systematically overlooked.

Temporal practices are never neutral, but entangled in structures of production and exchange which are culturally and historically specific. Numerous scholars have tried to capture related experiences of change and speed as symptomatic features of the current historical epoch. Anthony Giddens has referred to this era as one of high modernity (Giddens, 1991), while Zygmunt Bauman captures a feeling of fluidity through the term liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). David Harvey links the general ‘speed-up’ and time-space compression to the recent turn in capitalism towards flexible accumulation, (Harvey, 1990:285), a phenomenon which according to Arjun Appadurai brings the aesthetic of ephemerality as its civilizing counterpart (Appadurai, 1996:85). Across all these conceptualisations is a realisation that the anticipation of progress has become endemic, that new inventions have become routinised to the extent that all we know for sure is that ‘nothing remains stable’.

However, the description of such a bias of temporality across a broad range of related fields, does not, in itself, explain its profound expressions in the field of marketing discourse. Instead, we need to ask more specifically: what are the mechanisms through which marketing professionals have come to embrace this language of temporality?

Part of the explanation may be found in the marketing discipline’s ‘raison d’être’ as a mediator between economic theory and economic practice, or between knowledge and practice. Unlike more established academic disciplines, marketing has been based on collecting, ordering and distributing practical knowledge to its practitioners from its very beginnings in the U.S. in early decades 20th Century. Frank Cochoy (1998) describes the establishment of marketing as a process in which the extreme marginality of its early pioneers (in relation to classical economics and to the business world) became, paradoxically, their source of strength. Through a process by which information from the business sphere was tediously collected, ordered, and standardized within a conceptual frame which served to express much of what practitioners already knew - but at a different level of abstraction - pioneers in marketing carved out a field of their own (Cochoy, 1998). Through the use of standardized concepts, common arenas and disciplinary gatekeepers, the marketing pioneers gradually succeeded in establishing a discipline that was systematic, cumulative and universal in its claims. Operating thus at the
interface between economic theory and the business world, the marketing profession represents a Latourian hybrid, engaging simultaneously in bringing together and in setting apart. Business practice that had previously been carried out pragmatically, and without an overarching theoretical rationale, gradually became the subject of an abstract order, which, in itself remained unattainable and distant to the business practitioner, except through the appropriation of a semi-academic marketing discourse. The history of marketing is therefore, as Cochoy maintains, also the history of ‘the progressive separation of marketing knowledge from market practices’ (Cochoy, 1998:198).

A discipline that is founded upon the simultaneous separation and mediation between knowledge and practice is bound to lead a precarious existence. If it becomes too closely involved with purely academic issues, it will lose its value to practitioners. If it gets too involved in the day-to-day challenges of business life, it will be unable to maintain the level of abstraction that makes the discipline (appear) indispensable as a transmitter of knowledge. As Cochoy demonstrates, the history of marketing is a history of a men and women who successfully embraced this challenge. The challenge, however, is not over yet.

The bias of temporality, so central to the marketing profession around the turn of the millennium, may be understood against this background. In order to secure a basis of funding, marketing must be seen as useful by contemporary practitioners. Stirring a sense of urgency, risk or fear of lagging behind, marketing consultants succeed in attracting the attention of advertisers and suppliers. Operating in a market characterised in part by flexible accumulation, they are all painfully aware that shifts and changes do happen, even if their own field of business has been stable so far (as in the case of food habits). Claiming privileged knowledge of the future may be interpreted as one strategy by which the marketing profession latches on to this tendency, and transforms it to a novel business niche. More precisely, by describing future scenarios within their clients’ field as entirely different from the present, marketing professionals indirectly suggest that this future is a ‘territory’ for those privileged few who know the way, i.e. is for those who are able to adapt in time. In this way, they stir a feeling of risk, uncertainty and urgency, but because they also provide the ‘map’ to the future, risk may be alleviated by careful planning. In this way, the emphasis on change becomes part of a more complex relation of mutual dependency between marketing practitioners and their consultants, one in
which the bias of temporality proves itself indispensable to consultancy business. The most obvious example of this would be the trend-analyst, for whom success is based upon a wide-spread anticipation of change in the general public, and who necessarily share an interest in maintaining a bias of temporality.

While trend-analysts and certain market research agencies clearly contribute in constituting images of rapid change, the significance of such institutions alone can hardly account for the bias of temporality within the marketing profession. After all, if the future scenarios didn’t hit a chord in the audience of marketing practitioners, they would hardly sell. Why are the marketing practitioners, and especially those operating in relatively stable fields of business, so receptive to future scenarios? What is it about marketing that makes it such fertile ground for what Appadurai (1996) calls the aesthetics of ephemerality?

One of the most central concepts in the field of marketing is the concept of the market. I shall argue that what I have referred to above as the bias of temporality is, in fact, deeply integrated in the most common usages of the market concept.

**Market metaphors**

Metaphors serve as mediators of knowledge (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Perceiving one phenomenon in terms of another represents an important mechanism by which new phenomena are understood, and new associations and connections may be recognized. Often, metaphors help us make sense of abstract concepts by referring to something more familiar. In this way, metaphors help us make the connections between knowledge and practice. By providing a set of images in terms of which we think about reality, metaphors also contribute in shaping that reality to us. Metaphors may thus become self-fulfilling. This is particularly relevant in fields such as marketing, which mediate between abstract knowledge and day-to-day practice. Following Fernandez (1974) we may argue that a metaphoric assertion evokes a dominant state of mind which involves as specific set of *performative consequences*, as it privileges certain principles with regard to what is interpreted as appropriate action. Each metaphoric structure thus serves simultaneously as a model of the world, and as a model for appropriate action.

Studying metaphors in marketing discourse, I have looked especially at the concept of the market. Instead of applying an arbitrary definition of the market, I looked at the way the term was used among marketing practitioners product
managers and marketing managers in the marketing department of a major food manufacturer in Norway (Lien, 1997). Among the different terms used during meetings, in print, and as part of informal conversation, the term ‘market’ (in Norwegian: *marked*) was among those most frequently referred to. Along with a few other key concepts such as ‘product’ and ‘consumer’, the term market represents one of the most significant terms of reference in the realm of business. Through analysis of various types of discourse in the marketing department, I discovered four metaphoric structures which, together, may account for nearly all instances in which the term ‘market’ is applied\(^vi\). Among these, two are particularly important in relation to a bias of temporality, and in the following I will discuss these only (but see Lien, 1997 for a complete account).

*The market as an environment of natural selection*

Market discourse often involve metaphors, terms and images that draw upon the realm of nature and biology. This relates to notions of the market as an abstract entity, and to single elements of the market, such as products. For instance, the notion of the life cycle is prominent. Products are described as having a 'life of their own', they are 'born' they are 'babies' and they eventually 'die'. Products must be improved in order to 'stay alive'; and when a product is taken off the market, it is sometimes justified by the comment that 'it does not have the right to live'.

Numerous models depicting products' life cycles reflect this way of conceptualizing the market\(^vii\). Adaptation is emphasized, and the image often evokes the Darwinian approach to evolution as a process of natural selection, or the notion of 'survival of the fittest'. According to this perspective, the market – as the natural environment - becomes the final judge, the final arena for determining the fate of the product. This metaphor is often applied when referring to a product’s failure or success, and thus serves as an analytical tool.

*The market as a flux of transformation*

The notion of the market as a flux of transformation is closely related to the metaphor above, but rather than emphasizing changeability as an attribute of products, changeability is referred to as a characteristic of the market itself. The market is described as highly dynamic, constantly changing and thus unpredictable. This image is often evoked in relation to the practitioners themselves, their worries
and concerns. For instance, marketing managers often refer to the need to 'feel the pulse of the market' or 'pick up signals from the market', and to respond to these in order to ensure that products will succeed. Adaptation is crucial here, as in the case above, but in order to adapt one must also know the changes in the market. Information thus becomes highly valued, and it follows from this particular metaphoric structure that information must be not only updated, but focused on the future in order to be useful. This metaphor is particularly important for understanding the bias of temporality. In the day-to-day practice among product managers, this metaphoric structure appeared to be the one most frequently applied, and also the most dominant in creating a script for appropriate action. A direct continuity may thus be established between the metaphors of the market as a flux of transformation, day-to-day marketing practice and what I have referred to above as a bias of temporality.

Metaphors are never right or wrong, true or false, but rather ways of emphasizing certain aspects of a phenomenon at the expense of others. But once they are put to use, metaphors tend to take on a life of their own, they shape the way we think about the world, they justify our actions, and they inform our expectations with regard to the behaviour of others. If every product manager believes that products must be changed in order to adapt to a changeable market, that market will soon materialize, regardless of whether the description was right in the first place.

To summarize, I maintain that an emphasis on change tends to dominate marketing discourse at the expense of continuity, and that it serves to reproduce a bias of temporality within the marketing profession. A bias of temporality contributes to a feeling of uncertainty among its practitioners. This is because the more we celebrate information about the future, the less we will tend to value knowledge about the past and the present. As knowledge tends to be based on experience, the bias of temporality thus makes a product manager’s own experience seem less relevant, simply because it is necessarily located in the past.

**The virtual consumer**

Let me turn to second conceptual paradigm within marketing discourse; the idea that the consumer is someone you don't know. The term consumer is a modern invention. According to Raymond Williams (1983), it did not become part of our
ordinary vocabulary until the 1950's, but since then it has gradually and almost
totally replaced the term customer. This shift in vocabulary from customer to
consumer reflects a final step in a historical process of separation of the field of
production from the field of consumption. A customer is someone you meet, a
customer is part of an ongoing business relationship, while a consumer is an
abstract figure in an abstract market (Williams, 1983:79). The shift from the term
customer to the term consumer thus represents a shift in terms of level of
abstraction, or, following the terminology of Callon, a change of framing.

During the early phases of capitalism, trade was mainly local, and happened
without the intervention of shops (Carrier, 1994). Gradually, intermediary traders
took over, and the distance between producer and consumer increased, along a
spatial, a temporal as well as a social dimension. Today, as trade and production
are increasingly transnational phenomena, a product's place of origin is often hard
to determine. This applies not only to combined products, which may be created on
the basis of ingredients from a wide variety of places, but applies to more simple
products as well. For instance, a smoked salmon may originally have been hatched
and reared in France, then moved to a marine farm in Iceland in order to grow to the
point of harvest, whereupon it has been transferred to Denmark in order to be
smoked, packed and distributed\textsuperscript{viii}. During this process, the fish may have been
subject to the legal ownership of a wide range of companies whose ownership
structures defy most attempts of defining their locality. Consequently, from the
consumer’s point of view, the issue of a product’s origin is increasingly complex
and difficult to ascertain.

Similarly, from the producers’ point of view, consumers represent an abstract
aggregate of transactions taking place in a number of shops far away from the
company premises, and sometimes in places that are not yet known. Consequently,
the idea of a continuous and regular relationship to a ‘customer’ is increasingly
inappropriate. The task becomes one of calculation and of measurements, one of
transforming a vast number of purchases in an infinite time and space to calculable
facts that may be distinguished, measured and compared. Through such processes
of disentanglement, economics (market research) serves its role of formatting the
market in a way that makes it appear intelligible to practitioners (Callon, 1998).
Through such calculations, the sales figures for the south-eastern region of e.g.
Norway for April this year may be compared with the sales figures for April the
year before. By means of sophisticated transformations, sales figures are matched to key characteristics of consumers involved, enabling the marketing practitioner to ‘know’ with some degree of certainty, the sociological characteristics of the people that operate at the other end of the chain of transaction. Sometimes, such processes of disentangling lead to a final re-entangling, often referred to as consumer segmentation, in which the results are presented through narratives of imaginary consumers, depicted in great detail as ‘single mother, with two children, working for the public sector, with a preference for ethnic foods and New Age literature’ (see also Lien, 1993). In this way, the disentangled virtual consumer becomes a person of flesh and blood, one you can imagine as the woman living next door. Consumer segmentation is produced for a great majority of brand products available in the market, even for ordinary, everyday products that appear not to be associated to any fads or lifestyle trends at all. Such processes of disentangling and re-entangling leave us with a notion of consumers that confirms a stereotype image whose most important attribute is that it helps us to think about consumption. ‘Virtual consumers’ (results of re-entangling) serve in this way as a device that helps us think about phenomena that appear otherwise (due to disentangling processes) too complex to grasp.

While sophisticated surveys of consumers allegedly facilitate a sense of familiarity with increasingly distant consumers, ‘real’ consumers remain literally out of sight. During my fieldwork in the marketing department of a Norwegian food manufacturer, I was struck by the contrast between the total absence of consumers on the one hand (no consumer ever passes the entrance to the marketing department), and the relentless gathering of information about consumers on the other. Face-to-face encounters between food manufacturers and food consumers were in fact extremely rare. This was rarely seen as a problem, but aptly captured by a print on the bulletin board of one of my informants which read ‘A Consumer is Someone Who Does Not Work in Marketing’. Yet, the more detached and analytic interest in consumers was paramount, and part of the reason why they accepted an anthropologist in the corridors. Some of my informants would claim that much more time and money ought to be spent on gathering information about consumers. Others would claim that the data available was not utilized sufficiently, but all would agree that their knowledge of consumers was incomplete. This notion of not
knowing all there is to know provides fertile ground for anyone who wishes to stir feelings of uncertainty within the marketing profession.

Occupying the role of an outsider, I sometimes asked marketing professionals responsible for the design and marketing of food products whether they might consider employing a housewife, a woman who would possess a type of competence in feeding the family that few of the young men who were aspiring product managers seemed to possess. My suggestion was not taken seriously. Firmly based in an era of modernity, the marketing managers were not prepared to challenge the basic foundation of their professional career: the fundamental division in modern societies between our personal, private experiences and our professional lives. To do so would have been to challenge the legitimacy of the marketing profession itself, and particularly the efforts of the pseudoscientific laboratories set up to measure the preferences of ‘consumers’, as part of its efforts of commodifying knowledge of everyday-life.

Consequently, those who enter a marketing department enter as professionals, not as private consumers. Experiences from last night’s supper are hardly legitimate as a basis for marketing decisions. Knowledge of consumers is always knowledge, as the bulletin print indicates about ‘someone else who doesn't work in marketing’.

This peculiar construction of consumers represents an instance of what James Carrier and Daniel Miller (1998) have referred to as ‘virtualism’. According to Carrier, abstraction leads some people to adopt an abstract economic world-view in which the ‘concepts and models of economic abstraction .. are taken to be the fundamental reality that underlies and shapes the world’ (1998:2). This becomes ‘virtualism’ when:

‘people take this virtual reality to be not just a parsimonious description of what is really happening, but prescriptive of what the world ought to be; that is, they seek to make the world conform to their virtual vision’. (Carrier, 1998:2)

While, according to Miller, neo-classical economists ‘make no claim to represent flesh-and-blood consumers’ (1998:200), I will argue that this is precisely what the marketing profession will do. Unlike their more academically oriented colleagues in neo-classical economics, practitioners in the marketing profession are expected to present the ‘world as it is’, and they do so with convincing dedication. Equipped with fragments of state-of-the art sociology (Giddens, Bourdieu) and with ‘real-life’ photographs of ‘real people’ to represent the typical ‘prototype’ of various segments
of consumer cartography, they portray an image of the world of consumers which is both familiar and intriguing. Elements of resemblance are carefully balanced by strategies of distancing, creating a blend of consumer ‘types’ that is both familiar and strange. Most importantly perhaps, the images of consumers thus portrayed serve the purpose of confirming the role of marketing research as a necessary intermediary for anyone who wishes to understand ‘the consumer’. In a manner that resembles the commoditisation of future scenarios (bias of temporality, see above), the marketing profession invokes an image of consumers as unknown territory, but one to which the marketing profession may provide a map. In this way, risk is temporarily alleviated and the mutual dependency between marketing practitioners and their consultants is further confirmed.

**Do consumers really exist?**

I have suggested that the ‘virtual consumer’ is an abstract construct which has emerged as a result of an historical development from early capitalism to high modernity which involves two fundamental features: 1) the historical separation of production from consumption (physically as well as socially), and 2) the split between the private and the professional in the social organisation of work. Once these divisions were well established, constructing *representations of consumers* by means of increasingly sophisticated methods of calculations became a real possibility. Widening divisions between acts of production and acts of consumption called for experts of translation, and the niche commonly referred to as market research or consumer research was born. This is the background for the emergence of what I have referred to as the ‘virtual consumer’.

However, the term ‘virtual consumer’ is slightly misleading, in the sense that it assumes the existence of something which is not ‘virtual’ - a consumer that is somehow real. But do consumers really exist? When I presented the argument above to various audiences in the marketing and advertising professions, I sometimes invited all consumers in the audience to please raise their hand. The result was consistent across all audiences: Complete silence and no hands raised. Usually, the atmosphere became tense, and some turned to laughter. Was I serious? What did I mean? Yet, the point that I tried to make through this exercise hardly required any explanation: The term ‘consumer’ is not meaningful with regard to identification at a personal level. It does not offer any lasting source of identity.
With the exception of the few minutes we pause to reply to market surveys, hardly any of us identify ourselves as consumers. To the extent that identity is seen, at least partly, as self-determined, there are no consumers among us, only people that consume.

The consumer that emerges from market research analyses is therefore the result of a conceptual transformation of a part-time activity (shopping, consumption) to an image of a person that is removed from her immediate social reality, stripped of most things that appear as significant in life: work, love, friends or family, and reconstructed as a coherent figure whose primary purpose is that of representing some typical acts of consumption. The term 'consumer' is, in other words, a part-time activity reconstructed as a person, and reclassified as 'hedonist', 'traditional', 'retro' or 'generation x', whatever term appears appropriate in the light of current fads of market research. Instead of understanding consumption as a practice deeply entangled in most other dimensions of life, consumption becomes shorthand for stereotyping of a person. A consumer, in other words, rests upon processes of disentangling that cut the links to practically everything that makes any of us a person. It is in this way one may argue that a consumer is, in fact, a result of virtualism, or a phantom narrated by market and consumer research.

Consumption is necessarily a part-time activity, and takes on meaning in relation to other life-projects. Once we focus on persons as coherent human beings, it turns out that consumption is not first and foremost about self-identity, life-style or fads of fashion. Consumption is first and foremost about relationships. This basic insight is convincingly demonstrated through Daniel Miller’s ethnographic study of shopping in North London (Miller, 2001). The virtue of Miller’s study is that it takes consumption to the context of intimate relationships, of household, and of communities, that is contexts in which persons interact as a complex human beings, and not as ‘consumers’. Through its ability to materialize moral values relevant to the enactment of social relationships, consumption is about morality and about love. A second point that emerges from Miller’s study, but also from other studies of consumption, is that acts of consumption are engrained in ordinary everyday life. For instance, a recent collection by Jukka Gronow and Alan Warde confirms that consumption has to do with practices that are to a large extent routinised, repetitive, ordinary, inconspicuous, pragmatic and collective (Gronow and Warde, 2001). In
this way, the authors emphasise experiences that tend to be shared, and that are unlikely to be subject to immediate and radical change.

**Conclusion; how to ‘get real’.
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I have argued that the bias of temporality and the virtual consumer are paradigms that nurture and sustain feelings of uncertainty, urgency and risk, even in markets characterised by stability and shared, ordinary practices of consumption such as the food market. To some extent, these biases are integral to the commoditisation of marketing expertise through consultancy transactions, and constitute a business on their own. However, the paradigms are more widely shared, and may be seen as key constituents of the continuous formatting of the economic practice by the economic (marketing) discipline.

As the emphasis on change and the processes of disentangling both enhance differentiation at the expense of continuity in marketing discourse, latent knowledge acquired by personal experience (through acts of consumption) are systematically devalued. As such personal knowledge would potentially enhance competence, paradigms such as the bias of temporality and the virtual consumer tend to make practitioners in the trade appear less competent and less qualified to sell products than they actually are. In other words, human resources related to personal and professional experience are not often fully utilized as a basis for future decisions.

This is not an attempt to divert resources in marketing research in the direction of ethnographic studies of the kind that Daniel Miller has engaged in. On the contrary, if any suggestion should emerge from this, it would be a plea to ‘get real’⁹, in the sense of adopting a sceptical stance with regard to the transformations that occur when simply phenomena are framed at increasingly complex levels of abstraction. Virtualism has provided us with ‘markets’ and ‘consumers’ that appear to us as entities with their own inherent logic, increasingly distant and out of reach. This has brought about a spiralling rise of investments in technical devices intended to decipher signs from such distant phenomena. However, consumption does not happen on the moon. To ‘get real’ would mean to realise that consumption happens right now, closer than we think, and that we do not even need to construct an image of ‘consumers’ to understand it.

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Endnotes

1 This dichotomy has a wide range of loosely related parallels, such as modern and traditional, public and private, gesellschaft and gemeinschaft etc.

2 For instance, on the back of Rolf Jensen’s bestseller ’The Dream Society’ from 1999, prospective readers are told that ’A new era is coming, a new battle for the market has begun’ (Jensen, 1999). Numerous other examples could be mentioned.

3 Annual surveys of consumer expenditures show that from 1983-85 to 1996-98, the consumption of low-fat milk increased from 8,1 kg/person/year to 55,1 kg/person/year, an increase by more than 600% (Lodberg-Holm and Mørk, 2001). Low fat milk was introduced on the Norwegian market in 1984.

4 Annual surveys of consumer expenditures in Norway, show remarkably stable levels of consumption for a wide range of products. For instance, in the period between 1983-85 to 1996-98 the consumption of meat and meat products remained stable at 46 kg. pr. person pr. year, the consumption of cream went from 5,6 to 5,3 kg. pr. person pr. year, consumption of tea remained stable at 0,2 kg. pr. person pr. year (Lodberg-Holm and Mørk, 2001). Other surveys show that rhutabaga, a common tuber in Norway, remained stable for more than 40 years, from 1955 to 1995, at the level of 3,1kg. pr. person pr. year (Døving and Lien, 2000).

5 A similar feeling of risk and urgency is described in other fields as well in Scandinavia around the turn of the millennium, such as in computer technology (Willim, 2003) and in regional planning (Berg, Linde-Laursen and Löfgren, 2000).
vi These metaphoric structures are ‘the market as territorial space’, ‘the market as a battlefield’, ‘the market as an environment of natural selection’ and ‘the market as a flux of transformation’.

vii Cf. for instance the model developed by the Boston Consulting Group, a leading North-American consultancy firm, frequently quoted in marketing textbooks Kotler and Armstrong, 1987).


ix I borrow this expression from Daniel Miller (2001), who – in the tradition of Hegel – uses the term ‘real’ to denote an activity (shopping, in his example) ‘that actually realized the rationality inherent in it in terms of the historical moment within which we can encounter it’ (Miller, 2001:179). To ‘get real’ in this context would imply the realization of the intentions of business practice without the distractions and diversions that increasing levels of abstraction bring about. To ‘get real’ would imply a move away from virtualism.

References


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