



**Copenhagen
Business School**
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

INSTITUT FOR AFSÆTNINGSØKONOMI

NYHEDSBREVET OM FORBRUGERADFÆRD
NR. 36 – EFTERÅR 2021

[ISSN: 2246-2562]

Velkommen til den seksogtredivte udgave af 'Nyhedsbrevet om Forbrugeradfærd'.



The Marketing of Ideas

*By Associate Professor Henrik Johannsen Duus,
Department of Marketing, CBS*

We are coming to recognize that there is a marketplace of ideas just as there is a marketplace of goods. In this marketplace, purveyors of ideas – lobbyists, publicists, charismatic leaders, change agents – promote ideas to influence the attitudes and behavior of target audiences.

Phillip Kotler (in the foreword to *Fine*, 1981)

Introduction

Ideas are probably the most intangible goods imaginable. Nevertheless, it is a historical fact that they have been crucial to the progress of our societies. Ideas have inspired innovation, new companies, design, philosophy, science, politics etc. Pretty much everything in our societies has started with an idea.

But more specifically, ideas create behaviour patterns on the individual level. Think neutrally of ideas such as A) smoking is harmful, B) free enterprise is good, C) CO₂ is a problem for the climate, or D) immigration is not without problems etc. These are just a few random examples out of many, of ideas that create a particular type of behaviour amongst the people who believe them. But very few ideas held by individuals originate with that person. Ideas are usually created by someone else and subsequently adopted by the individual. Ideas are thus something that can be investigated as a marketing phenomenon, just like any other marketable good. Ideas are produced, marketed and consumed, and can therefore also be analysed by economists, sociologists, strategists and marketing analysts as any other goods that are produced, marketed and consumed.

The end users here are identical with the group, which in all other possible contexts are known as ‘consumers’. The producers, on the other hand, are in most cases non-profit organizations. Exactly this was pointed out by Seymour Fine (1981), who was perhaps the first to use the term “The Marketing of Ideas”. This marketing process can more directly be referred to as ‘Idea Marketing’.

What is idea marketing?

Idea marketing may be seen as related to political communication, propaganda, social marketing and public relations, and examples have often been seen by scholars as being part of these areas. But it is this author's view that idea marketing differs in essence from all of these areas, although examples of overlap can be found.

The main difference here is the time horizon, as idea marketing usually has a very long-term character, where the dissemination processes must be counted in years and in many cases in decades or even longer. For example, idea marketing differs from ordinary political communication, which usually operates within short time horizons of days, weeks or months.

Propaganda – which should not be conflated with the more direct political communication – is usually not long-term either but comes closest in its essentials to idea marketing (Fine, 1981). Patrick (2012) defines propaganda objectively as a situation-based interpretation of reality with fluid boundaries to journalism. And the interpretation of reality is also integral to idea marketing.

Social marketing is medium-term, but differs from idea marketing by usually being more politically correct. Conversely, it is not a characteristic of idea marketing that the message is politically correct. On the contrary, it is a particular feature of idea marketing that it applies especially when the message is controversial, and the goal is to convince people of something that is definitely not mainstream.

Public relations also operate with short- or medium-term time horizons, but it also differs from idea marketing by usually focusing on promoting an organization, company or individual rather than an idea. Of course, this does not preclude that idea marketing is done by an organization or company, or that it may indirectly benefit certain companies, organizations or individuals.

Idea marketing is at the same time argumentation-based in the sense that complex arguments are usually included in the marketing of ideas. This opens for a special perspective on idea marketing, where, for instance, science (or more broadly academic argumentation) is seen as a way to market ideas (Peter & Olson, 1983).

Hence, it can be argued that idea marketing is:

- Very long-term
- Argumentation-based (i.e. uses complex arguments)
- Interpretative of reality
- Performed by non-profit organizations
- Usually not directly (but perhaps indirectly) focused on promoting a particular organization, company or individual
- Especially relevant when the message is controversial (i.e. deviates from ideas held by the mainstream)

The organized production and marketing of ideas

Idea marketing may be seen as an organized and deliberate collective process. This implies that idea production and idea marketing takes place in an organization specifically created to produce and disseminate ideas. Obvious examples of such organizations are universities, think tanks, interest organizations, religious organizations, and certain political groups.

For example, universities must produce and disseminate new (preferably groundbreaking) scientific ideas, think tanks must do the same on a predetermined ideological basis, interest organizations must disseminate ideas favouring their members, political organizations must disseminate their political ideas, and religious organizations must propagate their religious ideas.

A unique price and cost theory has been developed for idea marketing, where the focus is on the consumers' non-monetary cost of adopting the idea (Fine, 1981). However, a special feature of idea marketing is that the 'consumers' are, in most cases, not those who pay for the ideas in a monetary sense. Monetary payments are made by 'donators'.

In many cases, this is not controversial. For example, for universities such 'donators' are the government, foundations, industry etc. For interest organizations it is, in general, their members, who may be individuals, organizations or companies. However, when it comes to think tanks and certain special interest organizations, funding is a 'trade secret'

and thus from a *qui bono* perspective more opaque and controversial. Consequentially, this is in itself a relevant area of research (Coralic, 2017).

History and cases

Idea marketing is certainly nothing new. Since ancient times, religions and religious organizations have been known to be a direct way to market certain idea complexes (or so-called meme complexes) to large masses of people. That entire societies even today are directly or indirectly influenced by religions is an obvious and readily observable fact, and in this context, one must be acutely aware that the actual religious content only constitutes a fraction of what is communicated. The direct impact on the behaviour, attitudes, and lifestyles of consumers, as well as the wider impact on politics, science, design, art etc., is not to be overlooked.

That there often exists a deliberate marketing effort from religious organizations is seen especially when we consider neo-religious movements that are run more or less like corporations, with Scientology as the perhaps most obvious example. Taking into account that the Church of Scientology has customers numbering in the millions, the leaders must know a thing or two about marketing.

Political organizations that emerged after the Enlightenment can be seen as an even more direct way of producing and disseminating ideas, but the political communication associated with this is, as previously mentioned, extremely short-term when it comes to political parties. It may therefore be reasonable to distinguish between political parties and other political organizations.

Not least in recent years, a number of political organizations have emerged that have a more long-term (so-called meta-political) perspective than parties, but this is in itself such an enormous topic that it will not be pursued further here.

Since the 1830s, we have seen a rise in what we today call think tanks, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, these have become popular (Kelstrup, 2016; Coralic, 2017; Scheidt & Grandpierre, 2021). Emphasis is placed on the production and dissemination of economic, social, and political ideas, which is hardly surprising when we remember the famous

words of Keynes, that; “*the world is ruled by little else*” (Keynes, 2018 [1936] p. 340).

In Denmark, the number of think tanks has also exploded in recent years (Kelstrup, 2018). In 2016, the marketing agency, Toft Communication, identified a total of 30 Danish think tanks, collectively employing around 1,400 people, which means that, in personnel terms, the think tank sector is larger than smaller Danish universities such as Roskilde University and the IT-University (Toft, 2016). In addition, the research staff spends almost all of their time on research, which is not the case for employees at universities.

When it comes to interest organizations, it is, of course, quite common for companies and industry associations to set up such organizations to advance their cause (Fine, 1981). And right here are found remarkable examples of idea marketing. For example, Patrick (2014) describes how the American organization of gun owners (NRA) successfully used an idea-based “horizontal” communication strategy to counter and conquer the political agenda from the mainstream media.

Another example can be found in the tobacco industry’s secret support of the Danish front organization Hen-Ry (short for ‘hensynsfulde rygere’; i.e., considerate smokers) headed by the chain smoking medical doctor Tage Voss. The official objective of the organization was to improve relations between smokers and non-smokers. The equivalent American organization, The National Smokers Alliance, was established by the tobacco industry after the idea-based strategy had played out successfully in Denmark. Such creation of front organizations is apparently quite widespread and is officially known in the advertising industry as ‘astroturfing’; i.e., the creation of false grassroots movements (Toft, 2004).

Discussion and conclusion

The existence of idea marketing indicates that we live in a world where we are constantly and systematically influenced by long-term idea-based communication from non-profit organizations in order to turn our positions in a certain direction. Furthermore, idea marketing has historically had a huge significance for the world we live in, and there is no indication that the significance is weakening. As our societies’ transition to relatively more immaterial production (dreams, visions, knowledge, and ideas) and relatively less extractive,

manufacturing and services production (Kahn, 1976; Toffler, 1980, 1990; Jensen, 1999), the importance of idea marketing may only increase.

Against this background, it is difficult to understand why the area is as under-researched as it is. It is indeed paradoxical when one considers that it is practiced globally by tens of thousands of organizations. The theoretical normative conclusion is therefore that there is a need for more research into idea marketing. The practical normative conclusion is that practitioners in marketing and communication can learn a number of tricks and techniques that are not in the mainstream textbooks by studying idea marketing. In this context, one should see this short article as “a map with a cross on it and a good shovel” (Toft, 2004 p. 106).

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e-mail: atj.marktg@cbs.dk

Hanne Pico Larsen, ekstern lektor, Ph.D.

e-mail: hpl.marktg@cbs.dk

Anne Martensen, ekstern lektor, Ph.D., cand.merc.

e-mail: am.marktg@cbs.dk

Szilvia Gyimothy Mørup-Petersen, lektor, Ph.D.

e-mail: sgy.marktg@cbs.dk

Diana Storm, studiektor, cand.negot.

e-mail: dst.marktg@cbs.dk

Thyra Uth Thomsen, professor mso., Ph.D., cand.merc.

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