

Consummation

Re-imagining the role of marketing from driving consumption to enabling consummation

For the last century or so, the defining economic paradigm of most modern or “developed” nations has been that of “the consumer society” (Baudrillard 1970). Some commentators even trace the roots of the consumer society back further to the early industrial revolution in Great Britain. The phrase is used to describe a set of dynamics in which users of products and services are identified as consumers who follow the acquisitive tendency to maximise the benefits of their consumption. By so doing they ensure the maintenance of economic progress and the direct and indirect benefits accruing not only to consumers themselves but also to wider society, through the generation and redistribution of surplus value. Within commercial enterprises the marketing function has been at the centre of generating consumer demand and hence at the epicentre of the dynamics of the consumer society. Marketing can be described as a set of processes that lead to the definition of a clear market gap and opportunity and the positioning of a brand of product or service to fill that gap, the creation of a brand of product or service to deliver against the positioning, and the communication thereof through media to promote the availability of this brand of product or service to relevant targeted audiences (American Marketing Association¹).

The concept of the consumer society (and the role of marketing within it) as an organizing paradigm for a society or economy has drawn negative critiques from a range of quarters (Offner, 2006; The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2012; Moore, 2015; Polman, 2015). In recent years the sustainability movement has highlighted the incompatibility of such a model with planetary boundaries, by which is meant primarily the capacity of the Earth to provide raw materials for this consumption and to accommodate its waste outputs, most notably greenhouse gas emissions. This is epitomized in the idea of the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968).

Enterprises are already wrestling with the need to design and operationalise more ‘sustainable’ consumption and value chains. Large corporations are signing up to a slew of sustainability pledges and commitments and framing these with their own narratives of sustainable growth. Challenger start-ups are creating new business models based on addressing social or ecological issues, internalizing the hitherto neglected externalities of impact.

A reference to the root meaning of the word consume - “use so as to destroy; take up and exhaust; use up” (Shorter Oxford Dictionary) - indicates the unsatisfactory and incomplete nature of consumption and therefore the consumer society as either an economic paradigm or a compelling narrative for the future of human and planetary flourishing. A new economic framing must expand the imaginative horizons of producers of goods and services and marketing functions as well as consumers. Importantly, any such new framing must also allow for an inclusion of the needs of people historically with no access to the consumer society as well as the needs of future citizens. This new paradigm of economics must be able to inspire societal hope and spur entrepreneurial innovation.

¹ American Marketing Association, (2017). “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”

This paper proposes a new manifesto of Consummation for the marketing discipline at the centre of a new paradigm of economics. Consummation is defined as “the act of making something complete or perfect” (Oxford Shorter Dictionary). Consummation evolves marketing driven consumption in three important ways.

Purpose branding

Firstly, Consummation signals a shift from the positioning of brands of products and services in the marketplace to brands conveying and advocating foundational existential statements of purpose in society. The Anglo-Dutch multinational corporation Unilever has been a pioneer of integrating purpose into its portfolio of consumer brands and reports on both the positive impact these brands are having on society as well as the fact that they grow faster than other Unilever brands without a clear purpose. (Vizard, 2020)

Impact innovation

Secondly, Consummation spurs a new form of innovation from devising new products and services by addressing or creating consumer needs to imagining and designing products and services that address wider social needs or both simultaneously. In the coffee sector industry experts have been concerned by a concentration of supply in two producing countries - Brazil and Vietnam and a long-term loss of the historical diversity of producing origins. This has impoverished farmer communities and reduces flavour variety which is an important aspect of the consumer experience. Nespresso, the high-end portioned coffee company, has been reviving coffee production in regions that have suffered the consequences of war, natural disaster or poor governance to preserve rare origins. The Nespresso “Reviving Origins” range is creating a positive impact in South Sudan, Puerto Rico, Zimbabwe and others and presents Nespresso consumers with rare tastes of undiscovered coffees and stories of positive impact in producing communities.

Hope narratives

Thirdly, Consummation heralds a move from communications that primarily drive awareness of the features of a branded product or service to the dissemination of relevant messages that inspire people to think or behave differently. In India, the detergent brand Ariel, created an advertising campaign that addressed the perception that domestic work and laundry were the sole responsibility of the woman in a household. The Ariel “Share the Load” campaign featured advertising and social media messages that encouraged men to change their attitudes and behaviours towards domestic chores and to “share the load”. The campaign was successful both in terms of prompting 1.6 million Indian men to sign up to the pledge as well as doubling sales in the campaign period (BBDO India, 2016).

Consummation-inspired marketing has the potential to refresh the role of marketing as a creative, respected and influential positive force in enterprise and as part of a new economic paradigm of The Consummate Society. It can drive a shift to a higher level of excellence in global value chains, redirecting people’s needs, wants and desires and the processes, products and services that fulfil them.

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