

# Marketing gurus and fads: approach with caution!

**John Dawes** puts marketing guru-speak to the test, and shows how to decode and de-bug it. Mostly, it fails the exam

**M**ARKETING ABOUND with 'fads' – which over-promise and under-deliver. Yet these ideas are easy to fall for. Here is some advice to help spot what is wrong, and separate good ideas from over-hyped fads.

## Gurus

Marketing is rife with successful 'gurus' who attract fame and fortune from dispensing advice for money. Their success is no indicator of the quality of their ideas. Usually their advice centres around a new 'strategy' – like CRM, ambush marketing or guerrilla marketing – that will:

- ▶ lead to massively improved sales and profits
- ▶ lead to more loyal customers
- ▶ result in much more effective advertising
- ▶ result in your customers loving your brand.

These messages are sometimes presented as the 'secrets' of companies that are fantastically successful.

If only marketing were this simple. Sadly, at best, most of these messages are incredibly over-optimistic and at worst they are downright deceitful. Yet they sound convincing and are easy to believe. This article highlights some techniques that gurus use (see box), and how they are often based on lazy or fallacious thinking. I will suggest ways to test the latest fad and look at an idea currently being promoted by several gurus, namely emotional branding.

## A new concept?

Much 'wisdom' from marketing gurus repackages concepts most marketers already believe in. This makes it difficult to disagree, but also makes the idea worth little and not even necessarily true. In a recent book, David D'Allesandro suggests that Rule 1 in brand warfare is, in effect, not to be arrogant or complacent (1). In another, *The New Marketing Manifesto* (2), John Grant lists 12 rules of New Marketing. Rule 1 is 'Get up close and personal'. Further, this is 'a big shift in creative marketing'. However, it is essentially about

understanding customers, doing things customers like and creating likeable advertising – hardly groundbreaking. Rule 2 is 'Tap basic human needs'. Heard that before?

## Over-generalising

This is easy, and most gurus do it. Suppose a speaker says, 'Did you know that one of the most valuable business concepts around is "customer intimacy"? A company I have been working with over the past two years has implemented a customer intimacy programme and achieved a 200% increase in sales and a 45% increase in net profits.'



Great. So should we all spend money on customer intimacy? The answer is no. This is attributing the success of the company completely to one thing – what the guru is trying to sell. The question is, would the company have achieved this result without it? Have other companies used 'customer intimacy' and not achieved such positive results? Are other companies

## Some common guru methods

1. Use concepts we already believe in
2. Over-generalise
3. Tautologies
4. Claim anything vaguely good as an example
5. Think up catchy lists

doing as well, without it? Very likely.

It is common to use many examples to support an argument. Take Ries and Trout – they use dozens to support their key idea of 'focus'. For instance, in 1996 they said McDonald's lost out because it had broadened its range too much beyond hamburgers and that BMW suffered when it extended its range of models. These facts may be correct but it is a selective use of examples – picking only the ones that support one's own viewpoint. The idea of focus isn't bad but it is not universal. Gillette has done very well with Oral B dental products, General Electric isn't exactly 'focused', with a range from aircraft engines to household goods, and Honda has done well expanding from motorcycles to cars. But Ries and Trout say focus is essential. In 1986, they said, 'The only hope to score big is to be selective, to concentrate on narrow targets' (3). In 1992, they predicted that Microsoft's strategy of pushing into new product markets was bad because it lacked focus (4). They pointed to Microsoft's focused competitors – WordPerfect, Lotus and Harvard Graphics. But Microsoft certainly won against those focused competitors. Like many gurus, Ries and Trout are not very good at predicting.

If you hear a speaker generalising from an example, ask them whether they are suggesting that the company was successful only because of X. Ask how we know that it would not have been as successful without X, or whether some companies do this and are not as successful, or do the opposite and are quite successful.

## Tautologies

A tautology is logically true, but says nothing useful – like, 'Tomorrow it will rain or it won't.' A marketing example is: 'For a new brand to succeed, every aspect of the marketing mix must be right.'

What is right? Anything done for a successful new brand.

Another example is: 'Leading brands have strong brand equity.'

How do we know if a brand has strong

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brand equity? When it is successful – lots of people buy it. So tautologies get us nowhere. If you hear a speaker talking like this, ask 'Isn't that a tautology? The cause of success is being successful!'

### **Take anything vaguely good and claim it as an example**

Hugh Davidson took this approach in a book titled *Offensive Marketing* (5). *Offensive Marketing* was held to be a route to successful sales and profits. While the book made some good points, offensive marketing was defined so broadly as to encompass almost any example of sensible – and successful – marketing practice. For example: a clear business vision, dedication to value and innovation were tenets of offensive marketing. So were a long term outlook, preparedness to invest and persistence. These have long been accepted notions of good marketing practice. Jaguar's drive for product quality was used as an example of offensive marketing, as were the diverse examples of large-size Mars bars, high-quality Chum dog food, and sales promotions for Sony hi-fi equipment.

An approach such as this allows the marketing gurus to show they have developed a new approach to marketing that

results in success – by claiming any instance of successful marketing as an example of what they prescribe.

If someone claims a super new approach to marketing success and uses diverse examples like this, try saying, 'You seem to be saying that any example of good marketing is an example of your approach. This isn't too different from ideas that have been around for ages.' The response will be interesting.

### **Thinking up catchy lists**

Jay Levinson, author of several marketing books, invented the term 'guerrilla marketing' (6), which requires seven 'ents', like assortment, commitment, consistent, and so on. His books are hugely successful. What is remarkable is that all these concepts should be so valuable, yet all end in 'ent'. Another example is a European academic who thought up '30 Rs' of marketing. This is catchy list creation masquerading as good ideas.

If you have the misfortune to suffer a presentation based on a concept like this, think up your own list. How about the five Os? Originality, Ownership, Observation, Organisation and ... Outcomes. That took one minute. It would not be hard to attach descriptions to each that sounded like sensible marketing. Or you could think of words that start or end with the letters the speaker is using. If the speaker was Jay Levinson, you could call out that he forgot 'resentment'. This could endear you to the audience, though not the speaker.

More seriously, a consultant giving a list of what successful companies do, like being innovative, forward-thinking, customer-attuned, and so on, does not tell you anything new or worthy – or, importantly, what to do! It does not tell you how to become customer-attuned. Checklists do not tell you about the process of achieving the desired state.

### **A current fad – 'emotional branding'**

Many people believe that marketing, or more specifically, marketing communica-

tions, is a strong force that can make consumers change their beliefs, persuade customers to buy, and promulgate strong emotional attachment to brands. Indeed, many mainstream textbooks on advertising tend towards this view. It is also common among ad agencies; for an extreme example, see [www.love-marks.com](http://www.love-marks.com).

Consistent with this is a recent book by Marc Gobe entitled *Emotional Branding* (7). He suggests that this method of managing brands is the 'Fuel for success in the 21st Century'. Emotional branding 'is a conduit by which people connect subliminally with companies and their products in an emotionally profound way'. Gobe says emotional branding is necessary because consumers today expect their brands to know them – intimately and individually. Stop there! You can immediately question this. The idea of a brand 'knowing' consumers is so vague it would be impossible to determine brands that exhibit this trait – or not. Then, there is no reliable evidence that consumers expect brands to know them – either today, or ever.

Gobe suggests the tools of emotional branding are product design, packaging, and, of course, advertising. The rewards are suggested to be immense – increased sales, and more love from consumers.

He then tries to convince readers of the importance and validity of the idea. He does this by citing examples of emotional branding and what he considers the effects are on consumers. For example, of a new fragrance: 'The mysterious name and jewel-like shape of the bottle for ... Encounter ... tells the story of romantic anticipation.' Of a new graphic for Coca-Cola: '[the design] emotionalises it with the illustration of the product gushing out of the contour bottle. By doing this, Coke elevate emotional brand contact through their packaging.' The result: 'Packaging moves product through emotion.' Unfortunately, these claims of effects of emotional branding are only opinions. They have not been subjected to any serious scientific scrutiny.

Suppose one did try to scrutinise the notion that emotional branding has an effect on consumers' emotions. Suppose one surveyed a sample of consumers and showed them the Encounter bottle and asked a carefully worded question that avoided leading, like 'What do you think of this bottle?' If the bottle had been well designed, many might answer, 'Hmm, I think it's nice!' But how many would answer on the lines of, 'It tells the story of romantic anticipation.' Few would. Gobe shows an artist's appreciation of work by other creatives, but makes the mistake of believing that consumers notice, care or are emotionally moved by it, to the same extent. Consumers get far less excited than marketers about good creative execution.

This illustration shows a technique used in various permutations by many marketing writers, consultants and notables. They construct an argument along the following lines.

1. Marketing today is different or more difficult because of some phenomena I have noted.
2. I know a method or concept that marketers should use in this more challenging climate.
3. This will lead to more success for companies that use it.
4. I 'prove' the validity of the concept by pointing to what I consider to be examples, and make causal assumptions about its use and effect on consumer behaviour or brand success.
5. I have a proprietary method for implementing this concept for which I will charge you x amount of money.

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Unfortunately, many such claims are made in marketing with little solid evidence. Without evidence, money spent by companies on such fads is a gamble. Therefore, there is a strong case for generating serious, accessible evidence about marketing phenomena – just as in

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disciplines like physics or chemistry. It is rare for people in the physical sciences to make bold claims about entirely new methods of energy generation, or perpetual motion, or revolutionary materials, because existing evidence and empirical generalisations can debunk erroneous claims almost immediately.

Marketing is a new discipline and lacks the same solid empirical grounding. So it is easier for writers, consultants or gurus to make unfounded or exaggerated claims. It is like the Wild West, complete with snake-oil salespeople. And managers have a voracious appetite for such claims and advice. The market for business books in the US is over \$750m a year. One can discern an almost indecent optimism in many titles – particularly in marketing. Consider these, currently on offer at Amazon:

- ▶ *Effortless Marketing for Financial Advisers*
- ▶ *Beyond Disruption – Changing the Rules of the Marketplace*
- ▶ *A New Brand World – Eight Principles for Achieving Brand Leadership in the Twenty First Century*
- ▶ *Experiential Marketing – How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act and Relate to Your Company and Brands*
- ▶ *Marketing Outrageously.*

## Summary

Marketing consultants, speakers and personalities often present an idea as a 'key to success'. Unfortunately, most such keys are a list of adjectives, a repackaging of old ideas, or make an unfounded connection between a particular strategy and company success. However, it is not hard to spot the flaws in the logic. It can also be rewarding to expose them, by asking the right questions. Key questions are: what evidence is there to back up the claims? And have there been any hard empirical tests by researchers trying to falsify, not support the theory? If the idea advocated passes these tests, we can be more confident in it.

With these rules you may save your company from spending money on a new fad that it already knows about under another name. ■

*A major effort to generate solid evidence on marketing issues is being made by Andrew Ehrenberg at South Bank University, called the 'Research and Development Initiative in Marketing'. It is a multi-million-pound international programme of fundamental research. For more information see [www.marketingoracle.com](http://www.marketingoracle.com).*

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3. *A Ries and J Trout: Positioning: The Battle For Your Mind.* New York, McGraw-Hill Inc., 1986.
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6. *J C Levinson: Guerrilla Marketing – Secrets for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business.* Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.
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