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# Producing marketing: towards a social-phenomenology of marketing work

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**Abstract.** *This article seeks to problematize and de-reify the phenomenon of marketing work by means of subjecting it to a social-phenomenological gaze. Drawing upon a discourse-analytical understanding of the productive nature of language, the interaction at a meeting between an advertising agency and a client is interpreted and discussed. This micro-event is moreover interpreted in relation to the particular socio-cultural milieu, here referred to as ‘the narrative archipelago’, wherein marketing practitioners have to navigate. It is argued that a social conception of the phenomenon of ‘marketing work’ is not only a prerequisite for carrying out marketing tasks; it is also one of the outcomes of marketing practice. In other words, marketing work is contingent upon as well as generative of the social and discursive accomplishment of a notion of ‘marketing work’.* **Key Words** ● advertising work ● discourse analysis ● marketing production ● marketing work ● social-phenomenology

## Introduction

It should be no breaking news that marketing work is a ubiquitous and far-reaching phenomenon in contemporary consumer societies. The various outcomes of marketing permeate our everyday lives and commentators on consumer culture have depicted marketers as the chief cultural architects of today, contributing to – yet not dictating (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Ritson and Elliot, 1999; Thompson and Haytko, 1997) – the production and reproduction of taste, dreams and needs (Belk et al., 2003; Lasch, 1979; Thompson and Tambyha, 1999), identity and self positions (e.g. Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Holt, 2002; McCracken, 1986; Schouten, 1991), life styles and social contexts (Kozinets, 2002; Pollay, 1986; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Given this, incisive scrutiny of the practice of marketing production, of *marketing work*, may be called for (see Robson and Rowe, 1997). Notwithstanding the



importance of research on *consumers* and *consumption practices* (well summarized in Arnould and Thompson, 2005), or for that matter the productive aspects of consumption (e.g. Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002), there are strong reasons for highlighting the *production* of marketing output, such as the production of advertisements, market knowledge and marketing strategies, in studies of contemporary consumer society (see Hackley, 2001).

This article is an attempt to contribute to the body of such research by means of asking the fundamental question: *what is marketing work?* More precisely, the aim of this text is to de-reify the phenomenon of 'marketing work' by way of approaching it with a social-phenomenological gaze, that is to say, one that takes seriously the social and discursive character of the kind of work commonly referred to as 'marketing work'. A social-phenomenological view on the work of marketing carries with it the potential to problematize the perhaps most dominant and well distributed representations of marketing work: those stemming from the marketing management approach (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Hackley, 2003; Morgan, 1992).

The marketing management approach (MMA) is an answer to the need for decision guidance in post-second-world-war consumer society, a world that had become more saturated than ever with consumer goods. MMA gave birth to notions such as the marketing concept, market orientation, market segmentation, positioning and so forth (Hackley, 1999). MMA-texts, penned by portal figures such as Kotler and Baker (e.g. Baker, 2000; Kotler, 2000), are well represented in business schools world wide, and exert from this position of hegemony a pervasive influence on students' and practitioners' conceptions of the world of business and marketing (Hackley, 2003: 1327). These texts 'work up a managerial world devoid of discordance and awash with manufactured consensus' (2003: 1327).

MMA has a strong tendency to reify the 'marketing work' phenomenon. Put differently, the MMA-texts construct marketing work as something beyond human life and social practice, as 'a fixed point of certainty around which the "turbulent" and "unpredictable" managerial universe turns' (Hackley, 2003: 1341). The work of marketing is from the vantage point of MMA described as a set of activities situated within an externally given world whose existence is largely independent of marketing practitioners. The textbooks provided by MMA aim at describing this marketing reality and offering guidelines regarding how to manage or respond to it. Kotler argues, for instance, in his widely spread magnum opus *Marketing Management* (2000), that the marketing tasks are undertaken in-between the forces of a macro environment, composed of demography, economic factors, nature, technology, political-legal and social-cultural environment (Kotler, 2000: 136). These forces should be conceived as non-negotiable constraints for the conduct of marketing work. Moreover, the core concepts of MMA are assigned a reified status. Concepts such as target market, product, brand, value, satisfaction, needs, wants and demands, are in the MMA-texts treated as referring to extra-discursive phenomena, whose existence is independent of how the concepts are used and interpreted in everyday marketing work.

What is more, marketing work is in MMA portrayed as the employment of a set



of neutral (in terms of ideologies and values) tools. A vast array of best-selling marketing devices are offered in this literature: marketing mix, promotion mix, Boston consulting group boxes, consumer behaviour models, positioning tricks, market segmentation bases, product life cycles and communication models, all of which intended to contribute to the marketer's toolbox. These tools are in the world of MMA as neutral as is a hammer or a screwdriver; they intervene silently upon the world, doing so without taking stand either for or against, only to vanish again without leaving behind any kind of moral judgements.

The above said are in a sense trivial observations. However, these representations of 'marketing work' should to my mind not be dismissed as neither innocent nor harmless tales of marketing. Marketing texts have effects and contribute to the reproduction of too narrow a conception of business life and marketing practice (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2003; Morgan, 1992). As aforesaid, one such is a reified representation of marketing work, one wherein the practice of marketing work is cleansed from marketing practitioners' active sense-making of their own practice. 'Marketing work' is here portrayed as a predefined set of activities, tools and goals, rather than a social practice, produced by marketing professionals in their day-to-day activities. Insofar as these MMA-representations enjoy a hegemonic position in marketing and management education and practice – which there are strong reasons to assume (Hackley, 2003: 1326) – they also tend to reproduce a conformist and static world view, one that excludes the possibility of social change. Society is assumed to be located outside marketers and their work. Marketing within society as well as society within marketing is thereby neglected. To the extent that these representations of the phenomenon of 'marketing work' are being naturalized, i.e. rendered unquestionable, through repeated reproduction in, for instance, business schools, universities and the media, marketing practice and practitioners are absolved of responsibility as to the reformation and development of society. This calls for a de-reified account of marketing work, i.e. one that conceives of marketing work as a human and, thus, social practice.

This is not to suggest that alternative representations of marketing work are absent from the literature.

One stream of research that has acknowledged the 'human side' of marketing work includes studies of the *experiences* and *values* of marketing practitioners, e.g. research on the perceived importance of creativity in advertising work (Michell, 1984), on the relation between marketers' personal values and professional norms (Rallapalli et al., 2000; Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1993), on the theories of communication held by copywriters (Kover, 1995), and on female marketing managers' experiences of exclusion from the core decision making within the organization (Maclaran et al., 1998).

A second field of research on marketing work sets out to problematize rationalist conceptions of marketing work. This literature has paid attention to the *ambiguous* and *creative character* of some marketing work, e.g. advertising work (Kover and Goldberg, 1995). These studies include Kelly et al.'s (2005) study of the encoding of advertisements by advertising creatives and Johar et al.'s (2001) study of the employment of tropes and narrative forms such as comedy, romance,



tragedy and irony in the design of advertisements. Lien's ethnography of the everyday work at a marketing department (Lien, 1995, 1997) is a valuable study that highlights the uncertainty and dilemmas involved in marketing management decision making. The relation between the creative and ambiguous character of advertising work and gender identity has been discussed by Alvesson (1998) and Nixon and Crewe (2004). In these studies, gender stereotypes were shown to invest the marketing practitioners' conceptions of the creative, i.e. less analytical and rational, aspects of their work (see also Chalmers, 2001).

Another ilk of research to be counted as a member in the de-reification project of marketing work is research on the *organization* and *management* of marketing activities. In focus here are the modes in which marketing work is being orchestrated. Hackley (2000), for instance, has shown how the work in an advertising agency was managed by means of discursive reproduction and closure. Marketing work was then not studied as a reified apparatus of activities but as (partly) an outcome of 'management as an effect present in the practices, especially linguistic practices, of day-to-day work' (Hackley, 2000: 250). Another example is Laing and McKee (2000), who report on a study of management of the marketing function in self governing hospitals and conclude that germane in this endeavour is the establishment of what they refer to as a 'marketing culture'. Another type of marketing work is studied by Hochschild (1983), who brings into the limelight the attempts to manage the emotional reactions of flight attendants in their day-to-day work. In a similar vein, Leidner (1993) provides an illuminating account of the management and standardization of service encounters at McDonald's and Combined Insurance.

A fourth research area that sets out to de-reify the phenomenon of 'marketing work' comprises research on marketing's political *struggle for professional legitimacy* and *influence*, either in relation to clients or other functions and departments within the organization. This literature sees marketing's relative position in business life as an ongoing social struggle and accomplishment. In Moeran (2005), a study is presented of a Japanese advertising agency team and its impression management in a competitive presentation before a prospective client. Alvesson (1994) explores the back-stage discursive construction and maintenance of professional identity and legitimacy in an advertising agency. Kover and Goldberg (1995) offer a study of how copywriters internally, within the advertising agency and in conflict with account management, struggle for and defend their control over the creative marketing work. In the book 'Marketing Masculinities', Chalmers (2001) explores the various modes in which gender is employed as a discursive resource in the definition of the marketing function and its relative position vis-a-vis other management activities in the corporation (see also Nixon and Crewe, 2004 for a similar conclusion). The problems facing advertising agencies in Japan to find a legitimate professional position in-between client, media, market researchers and account managers are dealt with in Moeran (1996).

All of these studies of marketing work provide important de-reifications of the phenomenon of 'marketing work'. They bring to the fore various aspects of the human, subjective and intersubjective (social) character of the work undertaken



by marketing professionals. They do not, however, pose the primary social-phenomenological question: 'what is marketing work?' This text is an attempt to do so. The purpose of this article is to explore how the phenomenon of 'marketing work' is being constructed in the everyday work of marketing practitioners. My hope is to contribute thereby to the filling of what Maclaran and Catterall regard as the main gap of marketing research, i.e. the tendency to 'ignore the more "private" concerns and lives of those who do marketing work' (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000: 643).

## **Acknowledging the social-phenomenological character of marketing work: the project of de-reification**

Consumer research seems to be the area within marketing studies where phenomenological approaches have appeared most frequently (Goulding, 2005). In the wake of Thompson et al.'s (1989) call for what they referred to as existential-phenomenological studies of consumer experiences, an array of phenomenology-informed explorations of consumer phenomena followed. This stream of research has resulted in studies of the gendered meanings of consumption (Thompson, 1996), of consumers' experiences of the body (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995), of the phenomenon of 'free choice' as it appears in consumer experiences (Thompson et al., 1990), of experience of fashion (Thompson and Haykto, 1997), of the phenomenology of self-gifts (Mick and Demoss, 1990) and compulsive buying (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989).

A social-phenomenological gaze turned towards marketing *work* is one that will not approach marketing work as a pre-given object, but as a social phenomenon emerging in the everyday life of marketing practitioners.

Marketing work is, and necessarily so, a *social* activity. By this I mean that marketing work is difficult (perhaps even impossible) to engage in if there is no shared (intersubjective) frame of reference regarding what constitutes the set of activities and tasks embraced by the notion of 'marketing work'. Intersubjectivity is, however, anything but static, but rather 'an ongoing accomplishment, a set of understandings sustained from moment to moment by participants in interaction' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994: 263).

The basic assumption underpinning this study is hence that 'marketing work' is a phenomenon that is accomplished within and through the social practice commonly referred to as 'marketing work'. Put differently, 'marketing production' is to some extent a product of the very practice defined as 'marketing production'; it is produced from within the activity it simultaneously designates. 'The ontology (nature of being)', write Thompson et al., 'is in-the-world: experience and world are viewed as co-constituting' (Thompson et al., 1989: 137; see also Thompson et al., 1990: 347).

Language use is of special importance in such an accomplishment (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994: 263). It is indeed hard to conceive of marketing work as a practice beyond or devoid of language use. As Brownley and Saren hold:



It is difficult to imagine how any marketing activity could be performed without language, whether it be related to delivering customer service, writing advertising copy, building long-term customer relationships, writing training manuals, to guide salespeople in customer negotiations, composing academic papers, conducting research interviews, completing questionnaires, teaching marketing, or speaking at a conference; for those activities involve people spending a lot of time talking to each other, reading reports, watching advertisements, writing marketing plans, and listening to other people. (Brownley and Saren, 1997: 153)

Needless to say, this is not a feature exclusive for marketing work. Boden (1994), for instance, reports that talk – in meetings, informal office interaction, phone conversations etc. – constitutes an extensive part of the organization members' efforts to perform their tasks.

It is widely recognized in social sciences today that language use, or discourse, is one of the main engines in the continuous creation and maintenance of 'the organization'. The term 'discourse' is here referred to as *language use as a social practice* (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), i.e. language use as actions that accomplish things, for instance social-phenomenological outcomes. As Boden points out: 'When people talk they are simultaneously and reflexively talking their relationships, organizations, and whole institutions into action, or "into being"' (Boden, 1994: 14).

The outcomes of language use are not restricted to the organizations members' notion of 'who they are' (compare with Mumby and Clair, 1997), but may also, this is my contention, comprise a conception of 'what they do' (e.g. marketing work).

## Method and empirical material

Qualitative researchers interested in organizational practices are often, as pointed out by Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 70), prone to conduct interviews with key persons. Notwithstanding the relevance of interviews in some circumstances, there is reason to be somewhat sceptical with respect to what interview accounts can inform us about everyday marketing work as it is undertaken 'outside' the interview situation (Silverman, 1993). Insofar as the ambition is to study and understand marketing *work*, then everyday marketing *work* in its ordinary setting, as it happens, is what ought to be studied (Blumer, 1969). This has also been the ambition of this article that draws empirically upon an observation of a meeting between an advertising agency team and its client. This observation is a part of a larger research project on reality construction in marketing professions presented in Svensson (2004). The empirical material generated within this project comprised in total observations of 14 meetings (internal working meetings, client meetings and project leader meetings), 14 informal conversations, meetings and other social events, and 20 or so interviews and informal discussions. My role as observer was of the kind Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 96) refer to as 'observer-as-participant'; I did not participate actively in the meetings, but my presence did not go without notice. I only intervened in the interaction when



addressed directly by the meeting participants. The methodological approach is what Alvesson and Deetz call a 'situational focus':

a particular situation – a meeting, a job interview, a spontaneous encounter, an event, a decision process, a problem or a task delimited in time and space – rather than stable behaviour patterns, attributes or traits is the focus of study. (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 201)

The meeting focused upon in this text is a planning meeting between the advertising agency, ADEXP, and a client, Garden Inc. Garden Inc. was a manufacturer of gardening machines and equipment and had been ADEXP's client for several years. Theirs was the ambition to approach both professional gardeners, such as municipals and private gardening firms, as well as private households with their product line. A new gardening season was now approaching and a new advertising campaign was thus to be planned. The typical advertisement campaign life cycle started in February–March with a first get-together in which the premises and broad ideas were discussed. In late June, a preliminary advertisement suggestion was normally presented to the client. After four to five months of work, the final proposal was presented. In February, the subsequent year, the campaign arrived at the printing house and was then launched and run in the media from March through May. The meeting studied in this article was the first planning meeting of next year's campaign, and the specific purpose was to discuss next year's advertising of lawn mowers. Present at the meeting were: Sven (the CEO of Garden Inc.), Victoria (project leader at ADEXP), Anders (art director at ADEXP), and Bill (copywriter at ADEXP).

## **Marketing work accomplished: the lawn mower campaign**

In what follows, the various constructions, or accomplishments, of 'marketing work' that emerged at the meeting between ADEXP Advertising Agency and its client will be explored. Four main themes will be discussed: marketing work as (1) management of symbols; (2) violence; (3) an act of creation; and (4) an act of answering/responding. It should be noted that the themes are interrelated as well as partly overlapping. Themes (3) and (4) are in a sense more general and broader than themes (1) and (2). However, although located on different levels and to some extent mutually inclusive, there are still reasons for separating the themes as they do vary somewhat in terms of scope and focus.

### **Marketing work as the management of symbols**

The marketer is in the meeting constructed as a member of an omni-linguistic profession, as an expert in the various languages spoken by consumers. Consider the following sequence from the beginning of the meeting:

Five minutes to nine, Sven, the CEO of Garden Inc., entered the agency doors. He wore a bright suit and a colourful tie, whereas the agency team was dressed in a more casual style.





Sven sat down first, and Bill and Anders opted for the seats next to him, while Victoria sat down by the other end of the table. Victoria started to serve coffee.

Sven quickly unpacked his briefcase and opened the meeting declaring how satisfied his board had been with the last campaign. Bill and Anders seemed very pleased with this positive judgement of their earlier efforts.

'That was nice to hear,' Victoria stated while nodding in the direction of Anders, the latter displaying a face that signalled agreement.

'Anyway,' Sven continued. 'This year's campaign is all set so at this meeting we will deal with the next season.' He then started to present his own ideas. He spread the brochures that were to be distributed this year in front of him, and explained that he was considering the division of one catalogue into two: one for consumers and one for professionals.

Anders agreed: 'Yes. Then it is possible to speak different languages to different target groups.' Bill nodded and Sven went on. 'I would like some outdoor pictures so you can feel the engines, the machines working.'

In the sequence above, the marketer is constructed as the one who masters the different consumer semiosis, as someone who is able to 'speak different languages to different target groups'. Furthermore, the usage of outdoor pictures is assumed to enable the consumers, the readers of the advertisement, to, as Sven says: 'feel the engines, the machines working'. Once more, thus, the symbolic managerial aspects of the marketing profession are put into action. The tasks facing the marketing professional seem then to be those of handling symbols and writing marketing messages (in this particular case: pictures of lawn mowers in action signifying strong and durable machines).

Later at the meeting, Anders presents his idea of having the signature of the factory worker responsible for the specific product attached to the lawn mower as a mode of personalizing and positioning the lawn mowers manufactured by Garden Inc. The excerpt below follows from Sven's announcement of his wishes as to next year's campaign:

'What I also want to put forward is that Garden Inc. is a domestic company.'

'I think it is possible to go even further than that,' Anders said. 'We can let the person who has made the particular lawn mower sign some kind of note that we attach to the machine: "This is made by Nils".'

'Quality', Bill added.

Sven had some ideas of his own. 'We could take some photos of the factory. Well, first we have to clean it up a bit of course. Put some pictures of the factory floor. That could be something. Then we could reinforce this thing about high-tech, at the same time as we emphasize genuineness. It should not be "high tech-ready-to-deliver-to-the-factory". It must be hand-made, right?'

'Yes, it is part of our nature,' Anders agreed, 'that one thinks that what is handmade is of a higher quality.'

By way of personalizing the products, so goes the discussion above, the craftsmanship of lawn mower production is to be stressed. Marketing work seems here to be constructed as a practice of control and manipulation of the links between signifiers and what these are presumed to signify. The implicit assumption, then, is that the personification of the lawn mower, in the form of the manufacturer's signature attached to the lawn mower, will *signify* high quality.



The symbol managerial element of the work of marketing is stressed further when Anders, the art director, tries to pinpoint the main goal of the lawn mower campaign:

‘The thing is that those who have started to buy Garden Inc. lawn mowers continue to do so, isn’t it?’ Anders said.

‘We must turn “it is expensive” into “security and durability”: that they [the lawn mowers] last for a long time,’ Sven clarified. ‘After all, Garden Inc. lawnmowers are 15–20% more expensive than other lawn mowers.’

Anders nodded. ‘Yes, we could use that; that you cannot produce a good lawn mower that is cheap.’

Bill continued. ‘We could also use that you don’t want your lawn mower to break, I mean, use this in order to keep the higher prices. We shouldn’t try to emphasize that it is fun to mow your lawn.’

In the excerpt above, Sven defines the marketing mission as that of ‘turning’ one connotation (‘it is expensive’) into another (‘it is secure and durable’). Stressing a highly proactive intervention in the symbolic universe of Garden Inc. lawn mowers, this construction of marketing work delineates a world wherein the power and ability to transform the relations between signifiers and signified are in the possession of the marketer. The physical product, the lawn mower, assumes here a rather downplayed position in relation to the task of manipulating the connotations associated with it.

‘Real’ reality is not neglected altogether though. The limits of marketing work as symbol management are also acknowledged in the sequence above: ‘We shouldn’t try to emphasize that it is fun to mow your lawn’. Here, the manipulation of symbols faces the constraints of the brute, factual reality of lawn mowing. The omnipotence of the marketer, in terms of the manipulation and control of symbols, is thus refined and somewhat balanced through a confrontation with the inescapable tediousness of lawn mowing.

### Lifting and head banging: the violence in marketing work

The second representation of ‘marketing work’ constructed in the meeting between ADEXP and Garden Inc. introduces an element of violence. This is accomplished when marketing work is discussed metaphorically in terms of inflicting interventions, as in the following sequence where Anders introduces the idea of setting up a website in order to better meet the customers’ varying demands:

‘Yesterday, Bill and I talked about having some clues for the consumer; what kind of lawn mower you are in need of,’ Anders told Sven. He then advanced the idea of constructing a lawn mower guide on the Internet, where the potential buyer could specify his or her requirements as to lawns and grass, for instance by answering questions regarding the size of the lawn, preferred time spent on lawn mowing, preferred result etc. In this manner, this was main idea, Garden Inc. would be able to help their consumers to find the lawn mower that corresponded to his or her unique demands.

Sven displayed a sceptical face. ‘Well, we want to avoid specifying *too* much. We want to lift them up, to a higher assortment level. Then we make more money, right? It is a trick you see?’



We don't want to push them down to a lower assortment level, like: "OK, then I don't need more than this".'

The bundling up the consumers into the category 'they' is presented by Sven as the path towards a successful business. Individual adaptation is thereby dismissed in this interaction. In order to make (more) money, the consumer choices should be delimited, Sven says. Marketing work is here thus constructed as a forward directed and proactive enterprise in which the anonymous doer behind marketing deeds is transformed into the *active* marketer who makes use of force to push (or 'lift') the consumer towards the most lucrative position.

Another example of the violence in marketing work is illustrated in the excerpt below. Here, consumer behaviour is constructed as something that can and needs to be controlled and subjected to rather strong marketing interventions:

After a discussion of suitable newspapers and magazines for the planned advertisements, Sven turned to the other kinds of marketing activities that he had initiated on his own. He revealed that he had advertised in the television game show *Bingolotto*. *Bingolotto* is a popular Swedish TV-show, designed as a traditional bingo session where large sums of money and valuable things can be won. Every week the show attracts millions of viewers. One of the engagements involved the viewers being able to win a Garden Inc. lawn mower as one of the prizes in the bingo game.

'It's hard to find out funny things you know,' Sven made clear. 'But this thing, *Bingolotto*, might be one of those I think. In this way, being a part of this show, we will be able to bang it into peoples' minds.'

In a similar mode as when the marketing approach towards consumers is described in terms of 'lifting them up', a pro-active and forceful conception of marketing work is here brought to the fore. 'Banging ideas into peoples' minds' is the metaphor employed here, depicting consumers as resisting and impeding opponents of what marketers are trying to achieve. The consumers are thus portrayed as obstacles that must be overcome by the marketer. Violence is thus called for.

### Marketing work as an act of creation

Marketing work is furthermore constructed at the meeting, not only as pro-active or violent intervention, but also as a creative practice, as an act of bringing into existence something completely novel. Consider for example the following excerpt, from the initial part of the meeting already commented on above, in which the catalogues are discussed:

He [Sven] spread the brochures that were to be distributed this year in front of him, and explained that he was considering the division of one catalogue into two: one for consumers and one for professionals.

Anders agreed. 'Yes. Then it is possible to speak different languages to different target groups.' Bill nodded and Sven went on. 'I would like some outdoor pictures so you can feel the engines, the machines working.'

Nobody at the table seemed to disagree, so Sven started to go through last year's catalogue. A great deal of talk was devoted to how many pages that ought to be dedicated to which models and machines. Sven pointed at one of the more luxury lawn mowers in the old catalogue.



'This is a teaser, ok?' He explained: 'Some pages will function as teasers and create a desire to see some more, right? Like: "This is the best you can get if you want to put some effort into it", ok?'

Outdoor pictures are said to be able to create a feeling of 'the engines, the machines working'. The feelings referred to here are delineated as outcomes of, not premises for, the work of marketing. This creative element of marketing actions is further fortified. 'This is a teaser, ok? Some pages will function as teasers, and *create* a *desire* to see some more, right?', Sven explains.

The assumed outcomes of the creative marketing work are in this sequence thus framed as primarily emotional in character (feelings, desire). The task of marketing is not so much to enhance the awareness or the knowledge of the superior quality of Garden Inc. lawn mowers, but rather to evoke certain feelings and urges associated with the machines. The lawn mower quality is thus constructed, not as a matter for reason and cognition, but as a feature that can be *felt*, in this case by means of the use of proper symbols in the form of outdoor pictures.

Another example of the construction of marketing work as a creative practice is offered by the following excerpt:

Sven picked up some of the competitors' brochures. 'Look here,' he said, and showed his main competitor's catalogue. 'You can see how they have copied us. It is not very well done though.' He pointed at one of the pictures. 'Not so much action, is it? And the thickness of the paper, the paper quality, you see what I mean?'

Bill received the catalogue from Sven. He weighed the catalogue carefully in his hands. The catalogue seemed lightweight and somewhat fragile. After this close up investigation, Bill looked up, nodded towards Sven and delivered his judgement: 'I see what you mean. A piece like this very easily ends up in the garbage can, don't you think?' He passed the catalogue on to Anders, who had nothing to add to the matter.

Sven went on to another issue: 'A survey has shown that nine out of ten municipalities use Garden Inc. machines,' he proudly declared to the agency team.

'Great,' Anders called out. 'That is something we definitely shall use.'

'Yes,' Sven responded. 'So that this can be transmitted to consumers too, ok? We can use this in one way or another. Another thing we must emphasize and use is . . . that they are eco-machines. We must emphasize our patent quite often. You know. It is unique, OK?'

'Yes, of course we are going to make something of that,' Anders assured his client.

'Well, anyway,' Sven said, 'the paper quality is very important in order to create this feeling, you know.'

All the meeting participants agreed on the importance of using a high quality and roughed paper in the catalogue, and not, as the competitors had done, a thin and gleaming sort of paper.

The paper quality of the catalogues is here brought to the fore as a prompter of an experience of solidity and ecological qualities. This construction of marketing work resembles what I above referred to as 'management of symbols'. The task assigned to the meeting participants sitting in the room that day is hence constructed as the synecdochic linking of two phenomena to each other, i.e. the part (the catalogue) to the whole (Garden Inc.'s ecological and solid quality). The idea promoted at the meeting is that such a linkage will create a certain feeling among the consumers.



## Marketing work as answering and responding

The fourth and last theme is perhaps the least surprising one. Response is very much the rhetorical leitmotif of the marketing management approach distributed in business schools and elsewhere. What is interesting, though, is how this theme is employed in relation to those of 'symbol management', 'violence' and 'creation'. This is accomplished in a mode that circumvents inconsistencies and tensions in the overall construction of marketing work. Let me return to a part of the sequence touched upon in the previous section:

Sven went on to another issue: 'A survey has shown that nine out of ten municipalities use Garden Inc. machines,' he proudly declared to the agency team.

'Great,' Anders called out. 'That is something we definitely shall use.'

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'Yes, of course we are going to make something of that,' Anders assured his client.

Introduced here is a version of marketing work that, in contrast to forward-oriented actions such as lifting, creating and evoking, emphasizes the re-active use of *existing* social facts, in this case the share on the municipal market. This ready-made state of affairs is simply, so it is said, to be 'transmitted to consumers too'. The excerpt below is another case in point:

The catalogues were put aside and the discussion turned to the problem of presenting innovations to the customers.

'Very few people actually take the time to read the arguments in the catalogue. Most of them only look at the pictures, OK?' Sven paused for a short moment. 'Anyway, this is a way in which we can present the different product lines.' He started to draw up some sketches on a blank paper sheet.

Anders interrupted his presentation. 'Yesterday, Bill and I talked about having some clues for the consumer; what kind of lawn mower you are in need of,' Anders told Sven. He then advanced the idea of constructing a lawn mower guide on the Internet, where the potential buyer could specify his or her requirements as to lawns and grass, for instance by answering questions regarding the size of the lawn, preferred time spent on lawn mowing, preferred result etc. In this manner, this was main idea, Garden Inc. would be able to help their consumers to find the lawn mower that corresponded to his or her unique demands.

Sven displayed a sceptical face. 'Well, we want to avoid specifying *too* much. We want to lift them up, to a higher assortment level. Then we make more money, right? It is a trick you see? We don't want to push them down to a lower assortment level, like: "Ok, then I don't need more than this".'

Bill, however, proved himself assiduous. 'Yes, but the most important thing is what kinds of needs you have, isn't it?'

This sequence can be interpreted as an interaction wherein the possible *needs* of the individual consumer are stressed as the main point of reference for marketing work. The consumer is constructed indirectly as a cognitively driven individual, as a person who has a conception of his or her needs. Consequently, the marketing virtue of acknowledging and adjusting to what are assumed to be consumers'



needs is brought to the fore in the excerpt above. Marketing is portrayed as a reactive practice, as listening instead of talking, as responding rather than imposing.

This concludes my exploration of the meeting between ADEXP and its client. How is this somewhat scattered construction of marketing work to be explained? As aforementioned, one of the premises of this study is that language in use *accomplishes* things; phenomena are manufactured in and by means of discourse. However, it is to my mind (an indeed others') a severely misguided view to conceive of discursive construction work as an unrestrained play with symbols and words. Interaction is hardly undertaken in isolation. Rather it takes place within an ambient web of wider social and political (i.e. power exercising) relations (cf. Fairclough, 1995). Language use is no exception in this respect.

### **Navigating in a narrative archipelago: society in social interaction**

Above I have offered a brief glimpse of the micro and everyday anchored construction of 'marketing work'. This is necessary yet not sufficient in the endeavour to understand the social-phenomenology of marketing work. Attention must be paid too, to what can be referred to as the socio-cultural environment (consult Fairclough, 1992), the social structure wherein and in relation to which micro practices take place. To be able to produce statements (speak, write) about a certain topic (e.g. 'marketing work'), shared rhetorical resources must be drawn upon in order to secure sense making as well as legitimacy. Consequently, social structure is present only within and by means of the various activities undertaken by human beings in their everyday interaction (Zimmerman and Boden, 1991). Put differently: 'Through the microscope, one can see glimpses of the fine structures of the social universe' (Boden, 1990: 191).

A potentially fruitful approach to the socio-cultural milieu is offered by the notion of 'interdiscursivity', i.e. the 'normal heterogeneity of texts in being constituted by combinations of diverse genres and discourses' (Fairclough, 1995: 134). A single text is hence seldom a monologue but rather a polylogue, comprising several resources mixed together.

Given the above said, mine is the suggestion that the meeting between Garden Inc. and ADEXP was far from an isolated event. It was an interdiscursive accomplishment of the marketing work phenomenon, that took place in the midst of the socio-cultural environment to which the practice of marketing must respond to. This terrain surrounding marketing practice can be understood as a *narrative archipelago* wherein marketing practitioners have to navigate. A structure that restrains *and* provides the material for the micro interaction taking place at the meeting, the narrative archipelago is constituted by the fairly complex milieu of opinions and public debates concerning the various practices of marketing.

*Narratives* refer here to the dominant voices or representations of society that prevail in various instances of the public debate. Resembling the 'grand narratives' dealt with by Lyotard (1984), the narratives are overriding representations of society that are situated 'out there', although without any (easily identifiable)



author back to whom they can be traced. The narratives can be seen as the great master tales of our time. Distributed by major socialization agents such as education, media and the political apparatus, they describe to us what society is and how we as citizens are to relate to this society.

As for the term *archipelago*, this is in my view an apt metaphor for the ambiguous socio-cultural milieu in which marketing practice operates. To avoid running aground in an archipelago, sharp attention as well as careful map reading and subtle manoeuvring are called for. The situation in the archipelago is hence actively managed by the navigator. The metaphor of the archipelago aims at illuminating the bounded agency, or the 'possibility of a variation' (Butler, 1990: 145), of the marketing practitioner. My suggestion is that marketing work is entangled in the tension between different narratives in society. One interpretation of what went on at the meeting explored in this article is that this tension is handled in and through discourse, by means of the interdiscursive acknowledgement of different narratives. In what follows, three narratives are discussed: the narrative of instrumental reason, the narrative of postmodernity, and the narrative of neo-liberalism.

### The narrative of instrumental reason

As do many sub disciplines of management, marketing practice seems to draw upon a narrative of instrumental reason. 'Instrumental rationality' is a main motif of the great Enlightenment narrative, the latter delivering the promise of emancipation from pre-modern religious tradition, superstition and mysticism, hailing reason and man's and woman's conquering of the wilderness of nature (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944). If we listen to the narrative of instrumental reason, human beings, their needs, dreams and wishes, become objects to control and manipulate through the use of various sophisticated socio-technologies, e.g. psychology and marketing (Lasch, 1979; Marcuse, 1964). Fellow human beings become instruments that are useful for the fulfilment of other goals, e.g. higher revenues or market shares.

### The narrative of postmodernity

The second island in the narrative archipelago surrounding marketing work is the narrative of postmodernity. Telling us the tale of the postmodern world, a world in which the great, ultimate explanations have fallen (Lyotard, 1984) and the boundary between fact/fiction and reality/symbol has become blurred (Baudrillard, 1988), the narrative of postmodernity demands attention from contemporary marketing workers. The scope of this article does not permit an exhaustive review of post modern themes, so I will here mention but one of the main motifs of relevance for the present discussion, namely the emphasis on signs, surface, simulacra, hyperreality and image, i.e. what Harvey (1990: 58) has referred to as a 'contrived depthlessness', rather than inner content and essence (Boje, 1995; Brown, 1994).



## The narrative of neo-liberalism

A third island in the narrative archipelago facing marketing practitioners is that of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism should in this context be interpreted as the representation of society that, according to Fairclough (2000) and Bourdieu (1998) among others, has gained an increasingly strong position in left as well as right political movements. Even political leaders normally labelled social democrats have come to embrace the neo-liberal narrative (Grass and Bourdieu, 2002: 66). This is a narrative that finds its main arena in the discussion of 'the new order of economy', and resides mainly in a strong belief in the free market forces. The hailed *laissez faire* doctrine is thus a paramount theme in the neo-liberal representation of the market and its relation to the state. The narrative of neo-liberalism tells the tale of the sovereign consumer. The latter is the one deciding who is to remain on the market and who is to exit, and the producers assume in this narrative the servant's role, feeding the hungry market whenever it calls. If left alone, the laws of supply and demand will incessantly exterminate unfit producers.

## The navigating marketer: interdiscursive accomplishments of 'marketing work'

How, then, was the navigation in the narrative archipelago undertaken at the meeting discussed above? Let me offer some suggestions.

In the construction of the marketer as a consumer language expert and as an agent who actively and even violently 'lifts' the consumers up to a higher assortment level, aspirations were clearly made to control consumer minds and behaviour. This is a representation of marketing work that can be understood as an answer to the calls from the narrative of instrumental reason, the latter requiring from marketing man or woman to take control of the consumption in order to render the market foreseeable and calculable. Business schools and ideas of management prompt these kinds of demands on marketing practitioners, and, arguably, the narrative of instrumental reason is the strongest voice facing the marketing worker.

This was, however, a construction that did not stand uncontested during the course of the meeting. Recall that Anders, the art director, imported the notion of consumer need into the discussion as he presented the ideas of setting up a lawn mower guide on the Internet. Stressing consumer choices and free markets, the narrative of neo-liberalism was acknowledged as a counterweight to the forceful narrative of instrumental reason. This tension between instrumental reason and neo-liberal conceptions of the relation between production and consumption appeared to structure a substantial extent of the interaction between Garden Inc. and ADEXP. In a sense, the dynamic of the discursive constructing of 'marketing work' was in effect built upon the tautness between these two narratives.

If one listens even closer to the interaction at the meeting, other voices can be heard still. The narrative of postmodernity also informed the accomplishment of 'marketing work', this so when the symbol management tasks of marketing were emphasized. The realm of signs and messages assumed here a more prominent





position compared to that of products and their relation to consumer needs and demands. What is interesting in this respect, is that a classical enlightenment motif – a modernist theme if you like – in the form of a narrative of instrumental reason, i.e. lifting, turning and controlling the consumers' associations, was combined with references made to a postmodern narrative. The latter emphasizes texture, symbols and surface rather than essence (as to the Garden Inc. lawn mower qualities). The meeting participants thus appeared to *navigate* in-between the two narratives of instrumental reason and postmodernity. Thereby, both of the narratives' calls for attention were responded to. The struggle between the two narratives for hegemony in public debate was thereby incorporated in the everyday marketing work (see Boje, 1995, for a similar interpretation of the Disney Corporation). In effect, the tension between the two narratives was not only incorporated; it constituted one of the founding elements in the construction of the marketing work phenomenon as it emerged at the meeting. Contradictions and antipoles were thus built into the very notion of 'marketing work'.

To conclude, what can be seen as a somewhat heterogeneous amalgam of constructions can be interpreted as the result of a navigation between the narratives of instrumental reason, neo-liberalism and that of postmodernity. These three narratives do not only constitute the boundaries within which marketers must perform, but also the very resources by means of which a social notion of 'marketing work' can be accomplished.

## Closing comments

'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences', says W.I. Thomas (in Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572). Social definitions, i.e. shared and communal conceptions, of the world (or some aspects thereof) will have effects on the way in which human beings act towards the world and other people (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Classifications of the world hence become real in their effects, by virtue of people acting and interacting in accordance with these classifications (see e.g. Garfinkel, 1967: 53). Social definitions direct our attention and depict which actions are to be undertaken, which problems are important and which are not, which solutions are appropriate and legitimate and which are to be regarded as unsuitable. Social definitions of marketing work may thus enable as well as legitimize some marketing deeds while disqualifying others.

Reality effects of this ilk render the reified MMA-representations of marketing work particularly dangerous in that they tend to solidify what is fluid, close what is in principle open, and objectify what is profoundly artifactual and intersubjective. As noted earlier, these representations situate marketing work and marketing workers next to society rather than entangled within it, as spectators rather than participants in the social accomplishment of 'society'. I have in this article tried to illuminate the micro-anchored social and discursive accomplishment of the phenomenon of 'marketing work' as this was undertaken within and in relation to a particular socio-cultural milieu, a narrative archipelago. Having done so, a more



general aim has been to offer an example of how a social-phenomenological gaze has the potential to open up the closure of widely spread representations of marketing phenomena.

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