

# Behind the Veil: Insights and Influences On Kotler's Contributions to Marketing Thought

Maureen Bourassa, Queen's University, CANADA  
Peggy Cunningham, Queen's University, CANADA

*This paper explores Philip Kotler's contributions to marketing thought with particular emphasis on his textbook, *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control*. Through a review of the literature of the period and interviews with a sample of Kotler's colleagues, we explore the thinking behind this work and the influences on its development. Our research was driven by the question of how and why this work became the 'standard' that largely defined teaching and practice in marketing. *Marketing Management* is compared with other textbooks in the 1960's to better understand the contribution this book made, namely: (1) its managerial approach, (2) its strategy and planning orientation, and (3) its presentation of teachable models and decision frameworks. Finally, we conclude with the contention that Kotler's work contributed to the legitimacy of the marketing discipline during a critical period in the discipline's history.*

Few in the marketing discipline, whether they be academics or practitioners, would deny that Philip Kotler has played a dominant role in shaping the way researchers and practitioners think and view the field of marketing. Some even suggest this role may have been too dominant (Brown 2001). The purpose of this paper, however, is not just to add further recognition to these accomplishments, but also to dig deeper into Kotler's contributions to the field of marketing over the last fifty years. Our purpose is to build a better understanding of the thinking behind Kotler's contributions and to explore other scholars' influence on his work and ideas. Marketing, like any other field of study, is essentially comprised of the people within it. It therefore follows that we can better understand our field, where we have come, and how we have gotten there by understanding the key figures that have shaped it.

In addition to these broad objectives, we approached this project with specific objectives as well. First, we attempted to understand what influences – both personal and environmental – shaped these contributions. Second, we worked to understand why certain contributions have

been widely disseminated and are used even today. By exploring these questions, insight has been gained into how and why marketing knowledge is legitimized.

The research process included personal interviews, literature reviews, and textbook reviews, a process which has been enlightening. It is not often that there is an opportunity to connect the names and contributions of legendary researchers to the 'real person'. Having an opportunity to engage in interviews with Philip Kotler and with his colleagues about the focal researcher's contributions, how they came about, and why they are important to the field has facilitated the creation of a living history. Because this work is a living history, it is not a final piece. As Kotler's career continues, the impact of his work will continue to change and grow. We hope to revisit this research as new developments emerge.

The organization of this paper is as follows. First, the methodology, comprised of interviews and a literature review, is described. Second, the key themes that resulted from the interviews and the literature review are presented. These findings are organized into four sections: (1) Kotler's key contributions, (2) factors that influenced Kotler's work, (3) Kotler's *Marketing Management* textbook in the 1960's, and (4) the evolution of *Marketing Management*. Third, the discussion section explores the idea of Kotler as an institutional pillar in the field of marketing, and demonstrates how key elements uncovered in the interviews and literature review support this argument. A conclusion summarizes the findings and the results.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to compile information for this paper, we undertook a number of research activities over a period of three years. In December 2001, one researcher did an extensive review of Kotler's personal collection, interviewed him in his private library, and observed as he went about his work. Kotler believes his private collection is the only complete collection of his works. During this time, a posting was placed on the ELMAR (ELECTRONIC MARKETING) listserv requesting comments and insights on Kotler's contribution to marketing.

In 2004, another researcher conducted a total of ten interviews, one with Kotler and nine with Kotler's colleagues. A majority of the interviews were conducted by telephone; only one was conducted electronically (i.e., an email dialogue of questions and answers). The interviews followed an open-ended style, with interview guides providing a framework for the discussion. In some cases, not all questions could be covered due to time constraints or an inability to respond; in other cases, questions were explored in great depth. The interview guides are included in the Appendix. Notes were taken at the time of the interview and were later recorded electronically. Interview notes were reviewed and interpreted by both researchers and common themes were identified. Throughout this paper, the participants will be referred to as informants. The term 'informants' is commonly used in the marketing literature to refer to participants in interview processes (Fournier 1998; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

In addition, the researchers reviewed the academic literature and book reviews published in the *Journal of Marketing*, and also did a brief content analysis of key marketing management textbooks published in and around the 1960's.

## FINDINGS: THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Kotler's Key Contributions

It is important to begin by describing Kotler's key contributions over the course of his career. Nearly all the informants were asked what they considered to be Kotler's single most important contribution to the field. One would seriously question the validity of this research if Kotler's contribution in terms of broadening the concept of marketing were not mentioned. Kotler's work in this area formally began in 1969 with his *Journal of Marketing* publication. In this article, he (together with Sidney Levy) proposed expanding the tools and activities of marketing beyond for-profit applications to the marketing of non-profit organizations, ideas, and people. The informants in the interviews frequently mentioned this contribution as important. Kotler's notion of broadening the concept of marketing has had an enormous impact on the field, as evidenced by journals dedicated to non-profit marketing (e.g., *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*), and by numerous articles and books on marketing non-profit organizations, ideas, causes, people, places, and nations.

Since Kotler's textbook *Marketing Management* had long been recognized as a breakthrough training tool, we expected that this work would be high on the list of what our informants mentioned as most important. However, only two informants specifically identified *Marketing Management* as a first response. Four informants emphasized Kotler's ability to conceptualize and integrate

marketing thought, however, as well as his ability to create frameworks and models to understand marketing management. Many more informants referred to Kotler's capacity to conceptualize and integrate in other parts of the interview. Thus it is Kotler's abilities – conceptualization and integration – that were stressed, rather than a specific work. Two interpretations of this finding are possible: some may not see textbook formulation and writing as a significant contribution to academic thought, or some may believe that these abilities are captured in a number of works including *Marketing Management*.

Nonetheless, *Marketing Management* was viewed by some as a contribution to the discipline. To briefly summarize, *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control* was first published in 1967 and has seen eleven editions. The textbook is quite sophisticated and is targeted at graduate level marketing students. It has sold over three million copies and has been translated into twenty languages. If one accepts the voice of the marketplace, this textbook has had a significant impact. Given the importance of this textbook and how it has shaped teaching and practice in the marketing discipline, the remainder of this paper will focus on this work. As one informant noted, it epitomizes what many think of when they try to explain Kotler's significant additions to the field ...

...he added rigor to thinking about marketing strategy ...

... he has helped to shape the domain of marketing through his conceptual frameworks and focus ...

... overall, Kotler is a great integrator ...

This section has outlined two of Kotler's key contributions to the field of marketing. As the paper unfolds, we will elaborate on Kotler's contributions that resulted from his development of *Marketing Management*. In the next section, important influences on Kotler's work that have been uncovered will also be discussed, including: Kotler's personality, drivers in business education, the managerial school, and philosophical debates in marketing.

### Factors that Influenced Kotler's Work

#### *Kotler's Personality*

As stated in the introduction, this research process has been a reminder that academic research involves real people. It is therefore important to begin by describing Kotler's personality, because this has played an important role in shaping his work. In this section, we do not present all aspects of Kotler's personality, but rather a small number of facets which emerged in, and are relevant to, our research.

According to the informants who participated in this research, Kotler is a 'wonderer' and a 'sponge' who has a 'huge absorptive capacity' and can soak up everything around him. Kotler's colleagues told stories, in the

interviews, about how Kotler would pull out a pen and paper mid-conversation to jot down notes about something that someone had said (and how these notes might even make their way into a textbook). They told stories about how he is sincerely interested in diverse perspectives, and how he observes the world through reading and conversation. Kotler admits that he has an appreciation for learning and applying problems to new areas.

Kotler is not only a 'wonderer' and 'listener', but is also an exceptional communicator. One informant discussed Kotler's public presentation style as very effective, which he has always sought to emulate. Other informants commended Kotler's ability to make complex phenomena appear simple to an audience. In classical music, it is a great compliment for a performer to hear that he or she has made a very difficult piece sound simple. In marketing, it appears to be no different.

The fact that Kotler is keenly interested in the world implies that he can effectively collect information. His talent at communicating with audiences means that he can effectively disseminate information. In other words, Kotler's personality and skills are important factors in explaining how he arrives at his contributions and why they are perceived as successful.

### **Business Education**

A number of informants referred to the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports when discussing influences on Kotler's work. These reports pushed for more integration of various disciplines into business education; they were highly critical of the fact that marketing had, in the past, been so descriptive. The Ford Foundation specifically argued for a greater emphasis on economics, mathematics, and behavioural sciences (Ford Foundation 1967). Kotler, given his educational background in economics and behavioural sciences, was well poised to address the shortcomings of the discipline as described in the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports.

### **The Managerial School**

The Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports, along with other factors, led to the rise in the managerial school around the time that Kotler began his academic career. Being surrounded by such a movement in the field surely influenced the way Kotler thought about marketing. The literature review indicates that in his early years, he even struggled with how 'marketing' should be defined and whether this concept was distinct from or the same as 'marketing management'.

In the first edition of his *Marketing Management* textbook, Kotler defined marketing as analysis, planning, and control – in other words, he seems to have equated marketing with marketing management (Kotler 1967). In a later journal article, he did not provide any definition for marketing, explained only that it encompassed the concept

of exchange, and went on instead to clearly define marketing management (Kotler and Zaltman 1971). By the second edition of *Marketing Management* in 1972, however, Kotler was able to clearly distinguish between marketing and marketing management: "Marketing is the set of human activities directed at facilitating and consummating exchanges" (Kotler 1972b, 12); and "Marketing management is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of programs designed to bring about desired exchanges with target audiences for the purpose of personal or mutual gain. It relies heavily on the adaptation and coordination of product, price, promotion, and place for achieving effective response" (Kotler 1972b, 13).

### **Philosophical Debates**

In the 1960's, many marketing academics felt angst, because they were forced to constantly defend their profession from accusations that marketing was more of an art than a science. As Kotler noted, his aim over the last thirty years "has been to promote marketing as a science and to explain how the marketplace really works by giving real-life texture to the theories of economists" (*Kellogg World* 2001). There is other evidence that Kotler has worked to promote marketing as a science.<sup>1</sup> Kotler's textbook on marketing models (1971) brings with it the assumption that marketing can be approached in a rational and 'scientific' fashion. In the preface to that book, Kotler wrote, "The present book seeks to construct a systematic and self-contained theory of marketing analysis and decision making" (Kotler 1971, vi). One informant reinforced this view, noting that the value of creating marketing models, in part, was in helping the field to be perceived as more scientific. In one edition of *Marketing Management*, Kotler specifically defines marketing as "the scientific study of exchange relationships" (1972b, 1).

There is evidence that Kotler sought to associate marketing with science as a way of gaining legitimacy for marketing. Kotler has justified the use of mathematics in marketing management as a way to reduce the 'mysticism' associated with marketing (Kotler 1963). In other words, rational/scientific approaches would be a way to increase the clarity and legitimacy of marketing. In a paper on the role of computers in marketing, Kotler clearly states that the development of marketing models (i.e., rational, systematic approaches to addressing marketing issues) allows marketing to command a greater level of respect (Kotler 1970).

The history of marketing reveals a scientific pursuit to create a general theory of marketing (see Alderson 1965; Bagozzi 1975; Bartels 1968; Hunt 1971). Kotler was no exception to this pursuit. In an interview conducted as part of this research, Kotler was asked which academic article he was most proud of and why. He says that "A Generic Concept of Marketing" (1972a) is his favourite. According to Kotler, every field needs a foundation and the idea

proposed in "A Generic Concept of Marketing" was that 'exchange' should form the foundation or core of marketing.

Despite Kotler's scientific pursuits, he is not regarded as an empiricist. A number of the informants commented that they have never known Kotler to conduct empirical research. In a 1979 article, Stern noted that some of Kotler's management theories were only hypotheses drawn from a variety of disciplines that had not been operationalised and tested. A review of Kotler's literature is objective evidence that he does not publish empirical studies. Instead, Kotler relies primarily on close observation, integration, and analysis to create knowledge.

This section has discussed a number of influential factors in shaping Kotler's work. In the following section, Kotler's *Marketing Management* textbook – one important accomplishment – is explored in depth. This exploration includes comparisons of Kotler's textbook with others at the time.

### **Kotler's *Marketing Management* in the 1960's**

The literature and textbook reviews, as well as the interviews, allowed us to compare and contrast the characteristics of the first edition of *Marketing Management* (1967) with other textbooks published during the same period. The informants suggested that Kotler's textbook was built on a foundation that had been laid by other prominent authors, in particular Wroe Alderson, William Lazer, Robert Bartels, and John Howard to name a few. When Kotler was asked, in an interview for this paper, what other researchers influenced his thinking, he answered, "John Howard and Wroe Alderson". Pressed for details, he explained that he liked how John Howard's mind worked, and that he appreciated Wroe Alderson's fresh thinking and marketing frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

One informant noted that McCarthy's textbook, *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*, was first published in 1960 and was also written in a managerial style similar to Kotler's. The target audience for McCarthy's textbook was students in introductory marketing courses. Because Kotler's *Marketing Management* was geared at graduate students, there was likely only limited competition between the two works.

A key question explored in this research was, 'If Kotler's book followed so many other great works, what set it apart and made it successful?' Three key themes have been uncovered which make Kotler's book different: it appeared at a time when there were many descriptive textbooks; it took a planning and strategy oriented approach; and finally, it incorporated clear and concise models and frameworks that lent themselves to being teachable and explainable.

### **Non-Descriptive**

Until the 1950's and 1960's, many textbooks were rather descriptive in nature. One informant, in comparing Kotler's work to other books, explained that Kotler's was different because it was more prescriptive (normative), and that this was accomplished by incorporating optimization strategies and economics. A look at book reviews published in the *Journal of Marketing* from 1961 to 1971 is objective evidence of the trend away from descriptive approaches and towards managerial approaches. Book reviewers described the texts that followed a descriptive approach (i.e., institutional, functional, and/or systems approaches) as 'conventional', 'conservative' (Goldstucker 1961), and 'fragmented' (Stellmacher 1965). The descriptive marketing textbook market was seen as 'saturated' (Engel 1961).

Some deemed the descriptive approach to be less valuable, "... the student is given the feeling of being closer to marketing problems than in many texts directed more toward mere [emphasis added] description of marketing functions and institutions" (Faville 1963, 116). The critical tone is sometimes undeniable. In one book review, it was stated that the functional and institutional approaches, in general, "...may be criticized for lacking cohesion – the 'functional', 'institutional', and 'commodity' approaches, and the rest often being simply juxtaposed in successive sections of marketing textbooks, without any real focus for the analysis. In contrast, the 'managerial' approach attempts to unify these various elements by showing how they affect the marketing manager in the firm..." (Boddewyn and Berschinski 1962, 118).

In contrast, Kotler's 1967 edition of *Marketing Management* was considered, in its *Journal of Marketing* book review, to be valuable because it did not adhere to traditional approaches. "A major contribution is the consistency with which the author has maintained his focus on the management viewpoint. Typically, there is minimal reference to the traditional treatment of marketing history and institutions ..." (Fox 1967, 103).

The fact that other textbooks in the field were quite descriptive was an inspiration for Kotler to write textbooks. As a new instructor teaching marketing for the first time at Northwestern's Business School (later named Kellogg School of Management), he couldn't find a textbook that pleased him. He had considered not only the descriptive textbooks in the field of marketing, but also those of his parent discipline – economics. Again, Kotler found that marketing phenomena were oversimplified. Thus, he decided to write his own book. He began to write *Marketing Decision Making: A Model Building Approach*, but at the urging of his publisher changed course and began work on *Marketing Management* which was the first of his textbooks to be published.

Kotler's was not the only textbook published in the 1960's with a managerial focus. As already mentioned, McCarthy published a managerial marketing textbook in

1960, though geared at a slightly different audience. Other examples include Kenneth Davis's *Marketing Management*, published in 1961. In 1964, Martin Zober published *Marketing Management* and Fred Jones published *Introduction to Marketing Management*. While Kotler's was not the only managerial textbook in the 1960's, a managerial focus is still considered one feature that set him apart. Perhaps this was because there were relatively few managerial texts compared to the large volume of descriptive ones, or perhaps it was because Kotler's ability to communicate the managerial approach was superior.

### **Planning and Strategy Oriented**

The literature review revealed that a focus on planning and strategy set Kotler apart from most of the others. Like Ansoff (1965) (see Pettigrew, Thomas, and Whittington 2002), Kotler articulated a more rationalistic and planning oriented view of marketing strategy. Kotler's work caused a shift in the marketing field that preceded the work of Schendel and Hatten (1972), who were the two authors credited with bringing a more analytical and economics-based view to the field of strategy than had hitherto existed. The informants reinforced the notion that Kotler's focus on strategy made him unique. Kotler's text discussed 'strategy' in the beginning chapters, which acted as a foundation and was linked to topics presented in later chapters. In contrast, other textbooks discussed strategy only in the final chapters as a way of integration. One informant explained why Kotler's focus on strategy was significant – it communicated to managers that marketing is important, and as a result, it changed (and elevated) the face of marketing, because marketing was no longer just about functions.

Kotler's focus on strategy and planning became more evident over time. In his 1967 edition, Chapter 1 focused on marketing management and the marketing concept, whereas discussions of planning (i.e., the four P's) and control did not take place until Sections 3 and 4. It was not until his third edition in 1976 that strategy discussions really moved to the front of the book. In this edition, Chapter 1 was titled "Tasks and Philosophies of Marketing Management" and Chapter 3, "Strategic Marketing."

It is insightful to compare Kotler's text with Howard, McCarthy, and Alderson in this respect. John Howard's 1957 textbook, *Marketing Management: Analysis and Decision*, also highlighted the importance of marketing strategy and decision making by placing these topics in the first two chapters. Specifically, Chapter 1 was titled "Marketing Decisions and the Nature of Marketing Management", and Chapter 2, "Profit and Marketing Strategy". McCarthy's first edition of *Basic Marketing* in 1960 included no mention of marketing strategy in its table of contents, but by the fourth edition in 1971, marketing strategy replaced the topic of marketing history in Chapter 2. Alexander, Surface, Elder, and Alderson's 1944 edition of *Marketing* included an entire section (Section 4 of 5) on "Planning Marketing Activities". This section included

chapters on a variety of planning considerations – the function of planning, budgetary control, analysis and distribution costs, research in marketing, and market-planning as affected by external forces. This comparison is interesting, because it seems Kotler was not alone in his focus on strategy and planning, yet this is noted as one feature that made him distinct. Perhaps it was Kotler's clear and comprehensible approach to strategy and planning that made it memorable. Furthermore, his ability to clearly communicate his ideas helped bring them to the fore.

### **Models and Frameworks**

The interviews made it clear that Kotler's models and frameworks are integral to his work. It has already been suggested that Kotler has an uncanny ability to absorb information, synthesize details, break down complex phenomena, and communicate with clarity. Given these traits, combined with his background in economics and modeling, it follows that Kotler was able to pull together vast quantities of marketing knowledge into useful frameworks and decision making models. As one informant put it, Kotler gave structure to what was previously quite unstructured.

Kotler was asked to describe how he goes about creating his popular frameworks. Kotler explained that the integration of many fields into his textbook led to asking such questions as, "How many salespeople should an organization have?", which in turn led to the creation of frameworks to provide an answer. This process is highly dependent on an ability to be observant and requires consideration of all variables that might affect a phenomenon.

Kotler's frameworks are important not only because they make his textbook material more approachable by students, but also because they can be taught in a clear and organized fashion. Thus, *Marketing Management* quickly gained acceptance in the marketplace by jointly serving the needs of two distinct groups: worldly wise MBA students who could quickly see the power of the concepts in dealing with their daily marketing challenges, and instructors who sought leading edge, teachable material.

In this section, the major differences between Kotler's *Marketing Management* and other textbooks at the time have been discussed. These differences have been apparent since the first edition of *Marketing Management* in 1967. The next section will explore how this book has evolved over time, which contributes to an understanding of why it has remained popular.

### **The Evolution of Marketing Management**

How has Kotler's book evolved over time? When one examines the first edition of *Marketing Management* (600 pages, 23 chapters, first published in 1967), one is instantly struck not by how different it is from today's editions, but by how much has stayed the same throughout its evolution.

Right from the first edition, the core structure and many of the key concepts that characterize marketing management today were present. The content of Kotler's text has, nevertheless, kept up with (and in some cases gone ahead of) the times. Kotler's ability to stay current is not surprising given his interest in the world and his 'radar', as one informant termed it. Kotler's policy is to revise at least twenty percent of the content in each new edition. His revisions incorporate both academic and practical trends. Kotler attributes the ongoing success of the textbook to his passion for ideas and his determination to offer something fresh with each new edition.

While many of the things present in the first edition would remain foundational over the years, the second edition (880 pages and 8 new chapters) also had some unique aspects. This second edition incorporated Kotler's academic contributions in applying marketing concepts to non-profit organizations as well as ideas and people. While the notion of broadening the concept of marketing was by no means well-accepted at the time, it was still included in Kotler's book. As one informant noted, Kotler's approach has never been entirely 'cautious', which has benefited his texts. The second edition marked the beginning of a tradition which embedded marketing practice in a social, legal and ethical context through which its impact could be assessed.

Also in the second edition, there was no distinction between consumer behavior and industrial purchasing. The core concepts of marketing strategy – segmentation, target marketing, and positioning – were absent. According to Kotler, the notion of STP or 'segmenting, targeting, and positioning' was later presented as a necessary step before any of the four P's is implemented. Branding was given short shrift, but was later added in more depth as a result of Kevin Keller and David Aaker's academic work in the same area. When Lynn Shostack suggested that there was a need to break free from product marketing, Kotler included services marketing in his definition of marketing. There was a chapter on marketing creativity that was subsequently dropped only to return in much later versions of the textbook as innovation became increasingly important. The chapter on marketing research evolved into what is today a chapter on the marketing information system. Kotler was among the first to incorporate the Internet and CRM (customer relationship management) into his texts in response to current trends. When Stephen Brown published *Marketing – the Retro Revolution*, which presents an alternative perspective on marketing, Kotler included Brown's ideas into a recent edition of *Marketing Management*.

As already mentioned, Kotler incorporated the notion of broadening the concept of marketing, from his 1969 article, into the second edition of his textbook. Interestingly, there are other instances where Kotler incorporates his own published academic papers into his text. A *Journal of Marketing* article on "Behavioral Models for Analyzing Buyers" (1965) by Kotler appeared almost

verbatim in his first edition of *Marketing Management* (Kotler 1967, 82-94). In addition, in the 1976 edition, he incorporated his paper on "The Major Tasks of Marketing Management" (1973). Through the simultaneous publication of academic articles and textbooks, Kotler was able to leverage his work and thereby disseminate his ideas widely.

Publisher concerns about length and classroom usability resulted in the third edition, published in 1976, being pared down to 496 pages. A thirty page integrative case was included in the text for the first time. This reduction in length and content was the one misstep Kotler took in the history of the book. He would later reincorporate much of the material left on the cutting room floor in the fourth edition. The structure of *Marketing Management* remained fairly consistent from this point forward.

Going through the subsequent editions of *Marketing Management* is enlightening, not only to see how the books evolved over time, but also to understand how the author himself transformed. The first edition was clearly the work of an economist who had a behavioural science bent. With subsequent editions, one can see the marketer emerge and become dominant.

This section briefly explained how Kotler's textbook has evolved over time. In the following discussion section, concepts of knowledge and legitimacy are explored.

## DISCUSSION

The preceding section uncovered emergent themes from the literature review and from the interviews surrounding Kotler's key contributions to the field of marketing, primarily his *Marketing Management* textbook. These themes included factors that influenced his career, and how *Marketing Management* has evolved over time. From this, insight can be gained into legitimacy as it pertains to the creation and dissemination of marketing knowledge.

Many of the informants drew a clear link between Kotler, Kotler's work, and legitimacy in marketing knowledge. The informants described him as a 'legitimizing', the 'ultimate authority', 'institutional', 'credible', an 'ambassador of marketing', and one who has 'helped to create the dominant paradigm in which we are operating today'. One informant even drew linkages between Kotler's definitions of marketing and definitions adopted by the American Marketing Association.

It is somewhat ironic that a researcher who has not been engaged in empirical research, who creates knowledge through a process of observation and synthesis, and who admits to having been both a 'scientist' (e.g., through modeling) and an 'artist' (e.g., through the notion of broadening marketing) could achieve the status of 'legitimizing'. It is ironic because marketing, like many other fields, has a history dominated by positivism (Anderson 1983) and an emphasis on objective science. Even Kotler

engaged in promoting marketing as a science so that it might be perceived as more legitimate. Perhaps Kotler's career is evidence that legitimacy in marketing is more than science alone.

Looking back at the themes in the previous section, there are common threads which point to how Kotler's work may have attained legitimacy. We draw on institutional theory to guide our insights in this area. While institutional theory is a lens through which one can understand how organizations attempt to achieve social fitness and legitimacy in the eyes of key stakeholders (see Grewal and Dharwadkar 2002), its value lies in the fact that it leads to examining the relationship between organizations and their environments, particularly with respect to the non-economic means by which firms secure their survival. We believe it is a helpful guide to aid understanding of how an author and a discipline gain legitimacy. In other words, organizations are not viewed solely as rational, efficiency-seeking entities but as social, political and cultural ones that respond to the trends emerging in their environments (see Handelman and Arnold 1999).

Drawing on this theoretical background, we see first that Kotler is a keen observer, a 'sponge', someone who is in touch with current trends and practice. In other words and in accordance with what is suggested by institutional theory, Kotler is deeply 'embedded' in the field and leverages his vast network of contacts or his immense 'social capital.' This fact may well have been instrumental in establishing the legitimacy of his work, especially his textbooks. Common sense dictates that if a book makes unrealistic propositions which are disconnected from the real world, it is difficult to accept as legitimate knowledge. Second, Kotler has superior communication skills. He is able to communicate complex phenomena in ways that are easy to understand. The informants described his writing style as crisp and concise, as well as interesting. The fact that Kotler's work is comprehensible and engaging may have been important in establishing legitimacy. Intuition tells us that it is difficult to accept as legitimate what we cannot understand.

Third, Kotler's career extends to many areas – practice, consulting, teaching, research – and he acknowledges there are strong links between each of these areas. The literature review revealed that his academic publications have appeared in his textbooks. One informant felt that because Kotler was publishing in the *Journal of Marketing* in the 1960's, this brought legitimacy to his notion of broadening the concept of marketing. It seems that Kotler was able to leverage legitimacy in the different aspects of his career, which in turn may have increased his overall legitimacy.

Fourth and finally, the knowledge that Kotler has produced may not have been tested empirically, but it has certainly been tested in use. For over thirty years, marketing managers have trained using Kotler's frameworks and have put his theories to the test of practice. Managers, consultants, and executive teachers alike cite Kotler's work as underpinning their thinking, practice, and success. In

1990, the profound impact of adhering to marketing management, as articulated by Kotler, was in fact empirically understood. These tests occurred as a result of the groundbreaking work that explored the effect of marketing orientation on performance of the firm (see Narver and Slater 1990; Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Jaworski and Kohli 1993). These recent empirical studies have provided a test of Kotler's knowledge in the marketplace and have served to legitimize his work.

Kotler's knowledge and frameworks are so well accepted that they have become standard industry practice in many respects. Millions of MBA and undergraduate students have been educated using his materials. As they move into consultancy jobs and positions in marketing management, they practice marketing as it is defined and conceptualized by Kotler. While this phenomenon speaks of the major contribution Kotler has made to the discipline, it raises the one problematic issue that Kotler himself recognized over twenty years ago: "One of the strongest signs of marketing's not yet coming-of age is the relative absence of schools of thought within the discipline. Virtually all marketers think the same way with respect to marketing method, purpose, and values...progress is made through a clash in perspectives" (Kotler 1979, 2-3).

One of the respondents to the ELMAR survey also recognized this liability for the marketing discipline: "I have always enjoyed his work, especially his book on marketing management....we cannot shake away his approach....We have been teaching marketing "his way" (sort of) for the past 35 years. I feel it's about time for a change" (Dr. Robert Tamilia, University of Quebec at Montreal).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has taken preliminary steps towards uncovering Philip Kotler's contributions. The discovery process was based on interviews and literature reviews, which led to emergent themes. Specifically, this paper began with a discussion of the key factors that have shaped Kotler's career – his personality, drivers in business education, a movement towards the managerial school, and philosophical debates. Second, this paper explored key features of Kotler's *Marketing Management* textbook, considering its place in the context of time (i.e., the 1960's). Various observations pointed to three key characteristics that set Kotler's text apart from others: its managerial (non-descriptive) approach, its focus on planning and strategy, and its use of frameworks and decision making models. It was revealed that Kotler's text was not the only one to incorporate strategy as important, nor was it the only non-descriptive one at the time. Perhaps Kotler's clear communication style, through his use of models and frameworks, enhanced his approach and was the most important factor in making his textbook unique.

The final section discussed how these findings can shed insight into the legitimacy of marketing knowledge. It has been suggested that perhaps legitimate marketing

knowledge can be created through a process that is (1) in tune with the world and committed to close observation, (2) clearly communicated and easily understood, (3) leveraged through legitimacy in different but related areas, and (4) put to the test in the marketplace.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This association between marketing and science reflects the ideas found in Taylorism and scientific management.

<sup>2</sup> Kotler mentioned that Peter Drucker and Theodore Levitt ("Marketing Myopia") also influenced his thinking, because both of these authors argued for a customer-centered approach.

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## APPENDIX

### Interviews with Colleagues

1. What do you think is Philip Kotler's single most important contribution to the field of marketing? Describe that contribution and explain why it is important. How did this contribution compare to (or differ from) other research or work in marketing that was happening at the same time? Is this contribution still important today? If so, in what way?
2. Besides the single most important contribution identified above, please discuss other contributions that you feel are meaningful.
3. What do you think have been some of the key influences on Kotler's career? These might be other researchers, characteristics of the marketing field and practice, or other external influences.
4. What effect has Kotler had on your definition of the discipline, your research, your teaching, your consulting?
5. Any other comments?

### Interview with Philip Kotler

1. If you had to pick one, what do you feel is your most important contribution to the field of marketing? Why?
2. What is your favourite academic article that you have published? What impact do you think it had? Why do you think it had this impact? What inspired you to write this article?
3. What have been some of the key factors that have influenced your contributions; specifically:
  - What influenced you to come up with and later share your ideas on broadening the concept of marketing/the generic concept of marketing (i.e., how did you ever arrive at these ideas)?
  - What influenced you to write your *Marketing Management* textbook in the 1960's?
  - What influenced the structure, format, and content of your *Marketing Management* textbook? What textbooks influenced your thinking?
  - What academics/authors had the greatest impact on your early thinking about marketing?
4. How was your *Marketing Management* textbook similar to and different from other textbooks at the time (i.e., the 1960's)?
5. In interviewing many of your colleagues, one of your great strengths has become evident - your ability to develop frameworks in a way that make complex concepts easy for other people to understand. Do you agree with this assessment of your work? When and how did you learn this? What process do you go through to arrive at a framework?
6. I understand that many of the other marketing textbooks in the 1960's and earlier took a macro approach to marketing. Why did you feel that it was so important to take a micro approach in your textbook? Did you face any resistance in doing this, or was it easily accepted as legitimate?
7. What is it about your textbook, *Marketing Management*, that has made it popular for so long?
8. How has your definition of the field and scope of marketing changed over time? What direction do you see marketing taking in the future?
9. What are other contributions (to the academic community, to marketing theory or knowledge) that you are particularly proud of?