

# Marketing (as) Rhetoric: An Introduction

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This special section of the *Journal of Marketing Management* is dedicated to the exploration of the relationship between the relatively modern discipline of marketing and the ancient subject of rhetoric. While there is a small but significant tradition of using rhetorical perspectives to analyse and investigate aspects of marketing theory and practice, our title suggests that rhetoric can be identified with marketing at a more fundamental level. Indeed, Tonks' (2002, p. 803) insistence, in this very journal, that rhetoric "as a framing device and as an instrument for managerial action is central to a full appreciation of marketing reality" has acted as our mission statement in putting together both this special section and the *1st International Symposium on Marketing (as) Rhetoric* that preceded it in 2017 at Bournemouth University.

Before introducing the invited contributions and the peer-reviewed articles that make up this special section, we wish to outline for the journal readership the basic arguments for treating marketing as a form, or an instantiation, of rhetoric. This must inevitably involve a certain degree of engagement with the history of rhetoric but this is important precisely because most marketing scholars are generally not familiar with this history, and therefore fall prey to the pejorative usage of the term to signify 'empty' discourse designed to manipulate or trick.

## A sophist(ic) understanding of rhetoric

As Vickers (1999, vii) has noted, despite the many years that distinguished scholars and specialists have devoted to "telling us about the great importance of rhetoric as a key to understanding the past, its history, literature, art, architecture, music" they have not been able to "overcome the prejudice, or lack of response" from the wider scholarly world. Worse still, rhetoric is not just ignored but "actively distrusted, and attacked", so that anyone seeking to engage in any form of exploration of its influence upon a discipline such as marketing is immediately faced with a seemingly interminable uphill battle against a dominant view of rhetoric as a poison, something to be avoided, discouraged, shunned. A clear understanding of why this might be will enable us to appreciate not only why marketing is so closely tied to the rhetorical tradition but also why marketing itself suffers so regularly (in the press, in popular fora, but also in the boardroom) from so many of the same accusations as rhetoric.

The initial act of defining rhetoric involves complicated, contingent decisions that are immediately bound up with intense valorisations. It has been persuasively argued (Schiappa, 1990) that the term itself was coined by its first and still most influential *enemy*, Plato. And Plato's description of what rhetoric is, what it tries to do, and how it relates to truth is both heavily influenced by his own particular philosophical project and his distinct unease at the comparative public success of those he labeled as teachers of rhetoric. Hence, the very existence of rhetoric as concept could be seen, from a marketing perspective, as a result of one of the earliest attempts at a "competitive positioning strategy".

Plato's principal intellectual rivals were the Sophists, something well documented in dialogues such as *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Menexenus*, *Phaedo*, *Sophist*, and *Phaedrus*. In opposition to Plato, the Sophists placed oratorical skills, rather than philosophy, at the heart of their schooling. A

central part of Plato's attack on the Sophists was the coining of the term, *rhetorike*, to refer to what the Sophists do with words. Plato took the word *rhetor*, which narrowly referred to someone who made a speech in a law court, and then adapted it into a term to describe the whole business of being a Sophist. This allowed Plato to construct "the sophist as the negative alter ego of the philosopher: his bad Other" (Cassin, 2000, p. 105). The philosopher loves the pursuit of wisdom for its own sake and for the sake of society, whereas the Sophist is a hunter after money; the philosopher uses language to seek the abstract truths of humanity's place in the universe, whereas the Sophist uses language to play tricks and promote whatever 'truth' it is to his advantage to believe at any moment; the philosopher uses words carefully to construct logical arguments that uncover truth, the Sophist uses words to enchant and manipulate an audience towards a contingent 'truth' that may change from day to day.

Plato's campaign to position philosophy in opposition to rhetoric has been historically successful. Although later scholars such as his pupil, Aristotle, and then those energising the Roman tradition of oratory, such as Cicero and Quintilian, saw rhetoric as a necessary part of an educated man's tool set, the practice of rhetoric has always been dogged by Plato's aversion against the Sophists and their occupation with persuasion.

### Rhetoric in the context of marketing

Persuasion evokes feelings of suspicion. Persuasion 'make us' do things (consume things, obsess about things, pay attention to things) that we shouldn't. Duncan & Moriarty (1998) are typical of the way in which many marketing scholars seek to distance their discipline from the use of persuasion. "The notion of persuasion as used in traditional short-term transaction marketing is manipulative" (p. 2), they write, and go one to draw a clear distinction between *persuasion*, which they define as one-way message sending designed to influence, and *communication*, which is the larger set of all message-making activities including "informing, answering, and listening" (ibid.).

The turn towards interaction, relationships and services that marketing scholarship has witnessed over the past forty years is tightly bound to a mindset which sees 'traditional' persuasive marketing as counter-productive, unattractive, and problematic. Approaches such as the Service-Dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2015; 2017), and earlier the wider service and relationship perspectives (Gummesson, 1997; Gronroos, 2006; Lindeberg-Repo & Gronroos, 2004) all tend to repeat the same mantra regarding the need to move away from marketing as persuasion, and towards an understanding of marketing as interactive, continuous dialogue. As if rhetoric cannot be interactive, or based on listening, or part of building relationships.

So, while *communication* is most definitely understood as a vital component in contemporary marketing theory, it is an idea of communication which is positioned as fundamentally more *authentic* than the traditional marketing focus, which had been "preoccupied with persuading customers to buy" (Gronroos, 2006, p. 320). The embarrassing hucksterism of old-style marketing is based on the mass push to manipulate customer attitudes and behaviours. This scholarly dynamic is highly redolent of Plato's positioning of philosophical discourse in distinction to untrustworthy Sophist rhetoric.

Fundamental to the marketing scholarly objection to rhetoric – the art of persuasion – is its' motivation to influence, a motivation betrayed by the *lingua suspecta*, speaking with a "clever

tongue" (*Orator*, Ch. 42, 145), to make us do things we don't want to do. This is also an omnipresent fear marketing practitioners face from other parts of the organisation, upper management, as well as the public at large (Barksdale & Darden, 1972; Cluley, 2016; French et al., 1982; Gaski & Etzel, 1986, 2005; Heat & Heath, 2008; Nath & Mahajan, 2008; O'Donohoe, 1995; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998; Park et al, 2012; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009).

It is here that marketing scholarship seems to be most obviously diverging from marketing practice. In Gök and Hacıoğlu's (2010) study of the role categories described in recruitment messages for marketing managers, they found that the primary responsibility expected was "managing and executing promotion activities" (p. 299). However scholars might define or re-define it, the *job* of marketing is primarily one of promotion, and the management of the research and strategy that will inform it. This is what a rhetor would call, *epideictic* (the praising or blaming of something). There is, of course, a strong tradition in advertising scholarship of investigating promotional executions for their use of rhetorical tropes and figures. So, McQuarrie and Mick (1992, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2009) have explored figurative language, resonance, and the rhetorical use of imagery in print advertising. Phillips and McQuarrie (2002, 2004) have researched changes in rhetorical style in print adverts as well as visual rhetoric in promotional communication, a concept introduced in Linda Scott's (1994) seminal paper on advertising imagery. Visual rhetoric in a global advertising context has been examined by Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) while at the opposite end of the spectrum Pracejus et al. (2006) have charted the shifting rhetorical significance of white space in advertising executions. Theodorakis et al. (2015) have explored the effects of erotic and violence rhetorical constructions on the reception of advertising and, moving outside of traditional advertising media, Fox et al. (2015) have studied the power of figurative language in word-of-mouth campaigns.

Alongside this stream of research, there has been a smaller tradition of scholars engaging with marketing scholarship *as rhetorical production*. Brown (1999, 2002, 2004; Brown & Wijland, 2018) has done much work to demonstrate the manner in which rhetorical style has contributed to the *ethos* of some of the discipline's most famous figures, while Hackley (2003) has focused on the rhetorical strategies baked into marketing textbooks. Brownlie and Saren's (1997) investigation into the construction of the theory and practice of marketing management highlights the rhetorical devices used to create professional legitimacy and *ethos* and so "lend authority and persuasion to accounts of marketing management" (p. 154). Miles (2014a) looks at the way in which the rhetoric of contagion has been used strategically by both marketing practitioners and scholars and he has also investigated the rhetorical construction of interactivity and co-creation as salvational gambits for an anxious marketing audience doubting their relevance (2010, 2016) as well as the rhetorical nature of Service-Dominant logic (2014b). This type of scholarship mirrors the established traditions in organisational studies (Alvesson, 1993; Boyd & Waymer, 2011; Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006; Heath, 2011; Flory & Iglesias, 2010), management research (Hamilton, 2001; Kieser, 1997; Bonet & Sauquet, 2010; Hartelius & Browning, 2008; Watson, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998), and economics (McCloskey, 1983) which have looked reflexively at the rhetorical construction of their respective disciplines and professional practices. This research stream can be seen as part of a broad "rhetorical turn" (Simons, 1990, p. viii) which has interrogated both the hard and soft sciences from the premise that "what gets called fact or logic is symbolically mediated if not symbolically (i.e. socially) constructed" (p. 2).

Finally, there is a small stream of marketing scholarship which has argued that marketing is, *in toto*, an instantiation of rhetoric. So, Laufer and Paradeise ([1990]2016) argue that "marketing is

the bureaucratic form of Sophism" (p. 2), noting the many points of similarity between these ancient and modern professions, from their focus on appearance, to their status as "technicians of enticement" (p. 3) and their implicit moral relativism. For Sophists and marketers, "the key discipline is rhetoric, the technique of eloquence" (p. 7). Building upon Laufer and Paradeise's work, Tonks (2002) demonstrates how "persuasion can be seen as a framing concept for marketing in general and for marketing management in particular" and, as "persuasion is synonymous with rhetoric", marketing scholars need to recognise that "rhetoric needs to have a more central location in making sense of marketing management" (p. 806). For Tonks, the practice of marketing management implicitly "seeks to curtail consumer sovereignty" and is driven by the need to provide the supplier with a "controlling hand" (ibid.).

While mainstream marketing scholars, and those of the relational and service perspectives, might well resist Tonks' characterisation of marketing as a fundamentally control-oriented profession, preferring instead to conceive of it as focused around 'offering' value propositions and co-creation partnerships, this is itself a highly contentious rhetorical construction that in the end only serves to underline Tonks' point and carry it further into the heart of marketing academia. Miles (2013) argues that "marketers need to re-embrace persuasion and, hence, rhetoric, in the context of fluid, interactive, polyphonic conversations, recongising that in such environments all stakeholders are involved in advancing interests and inducing co-operation" (p. 2015). Drawing on this reasoning, Nilsson (2015) has produced one of few in-depth empirical investigations of the very work of marketing managers, where he found that marketing work is "accomplished by sophistic and self-reflexive marketers who argue in, through and in-between volatile *kairotic* encounters [...] in which they employ versatile and expansive language, and enact contradictory selves, for persuasive purposes" (p. 180).

In Miles (2018), the evolution of marketing thought is interpreted through the lens of the rhetorical tradition, "making a case for understanding marketing as a Sophistic enterprise, one which is focused upon the control (or management) of attention [...] through a persuasive, interactive engagement with stakeholders in an agonistic (i.e competitive) environment" (p. 3). With more particular scope, Marsh (2001, 2003, 2013) has constructed a convincing case for a model of public relations based upon the rhetoric of Isocrates which regards persuasion as "a catalyst of civilized society and intellectual development" (2013, p. 153) rather than something of which to be eternally suspicious.

## Marketing (as) rhetoric – A future research agenda

Despite this variegated and sustained scholarly engagement with the interface between marketing and rhetoric we might legitimately complain of a generally slow uptake of rhetorical theory. How can a tradition of persuasion that is thousands of years old, and so fundamental to the constitution of Western intellectualism, be so roundly ignored in a discipline and profession which is, however one might define it, so seriously concerned with the influence of consumer demand?

Of course, marketing's battle to see itself (and have others see it) as a "science" has had a significant role in its reluctance to engage seriously with attempts that put it firmly within any 'Humanities' or Arts tradition. So, while it might be conceded that advertising and PR copy might benefit from judicious use of tropes and figures there is little enthusiasm outside the boundaries of critical marketing scholarship (which naturally valorises the social constructive nature of discourse) for efforts to hitch the entire discipline to the art of rhetoric. Yet, with the science that

marketing does wish to place at its heart increasingly suffering from the larger crisis of reproducibility that is besetting psychology in particular and the social sciences in general (McQuarrie, 2014), perhaps we might wish to re-consider the advantages of defining our discipline in terms of an approach to communication, civic discourse, competition, and social change which has the benefit of many hundreds of years of critically-inclined practice and reflexive theoretical consideration.

There is one further 'barrier to entry' for marketing scholars to engage with the rhetorical tradition. This is the sheer size of the knowledge base that rhetorical theory rests on. The difficulties for marketing scholars to navigate safely in, and by means of, rhetorical theory – to either contribute to the emerging field of marketing (as) rhetoric, or judge the worth of other's contributions – should not be ignored. To somewhat reduce this difficulty, we will briefly set out a framework of rhetorical inquiries which we consider to be particularly relevant to marketing practice and theory, and which can therefore stand as sites of future research and discussion.

The framework below does not represent a historically integrated vision of the rhetorical tradition. Readers are directed to any of the standard overviews (i.e. Conley, 1990; Kennedy, 1994, McCroskey, 2016; Murphy et al., 2014; Smith, 2003; Vickers, 1999) for detailed historical context and explanation. It must be noted that this framework is based upon the Western rhetorical tradition. There is much that might be added from additional considerations of the traditions of persuasive discourse established in non-Western cultures and the important similarities and differences that might exist between these traditions have important ramifications for the nature of national and international marketing.

### Studying Rhetorical Proofs to expand research on branding

Aristotle's (2004) division of rhetorical proofs into the categories of *ethos* (appeals based upon the credibility of the rhetor), *pathos* (appeals to the emotions of the audience), and *logos* (appeals to the intellect of the audience) has been one of his most enduring schemas. It can provide us a way of looking at the communicative relationship between brands and stakeholders that is highly nuanced and fundamentally *strategic*. It is also one of the many examples of how modern psychology has spent years re-discovering something which the rhetorical tradition has had at its core from its start. So, Cialdini's (2001) weapons of "deference to authority" and "liking", for example, are simply aspects of *ethos* which have been considered, formalised, taught and practiced by those seeking to move an audience to their way of thinking since the days of the days of the Sophists.

### Rhetorical Strategy and Marketing Strategy

Rhetoric provides us with a longstanding model of how to strategically organise the job of moving an audience to agreeing with you on how to think and act on a particular matter. How to stimulate demand where none exists, how to switch an audience from one position to another. And, before working up a strategy, how to analyse the audience and the rhetorical situation. All the decisions that a rhetor makes are founded upon a consideration of the audience. This, in fact, was one of the aspects of Sophism that made Plato so nervous – that the Sophist's truth changed depending on who they were speaking to. Yet this is largely a misunderstanding based upon two very different approaches to the audience, or stakeholders as we should call them. The rhetor is

audience-focused, just as the marketer is customer-focused. Of course, this does not mean that we blindly give the audience what they want, rather we allow the audience's knowledge, mood, habits of thinking and communicating, hopes and fears, to act as resources for us in judging strategically the best way to move them to a particular place. Rhetoric, therefore, always involves co-creation.

## Rhetorical Timing and Improvisation

*Kairos* has been defined as "the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something" (Kinneavy, 1986, p. 80). It is a *situational* concept, in other words, that orientates rhetoric around the opportune moment and encourages an improvisatory approach. So, although the tradition of *rhetorica docens* (the instruction in rhetorical technique to be found in the handbooks and 'Arts' across the centuries) can appear to be highly structured and prescriptive the rhetor must always be ready to seize on a particular change in the audience, an accident of the environment, a sudden coincidence, in order to extemporise an advantage. This is also connected to the intense study of the audience that the rhetor must continually engage in -- changes in the constitution of the audience, its mood, its surroundings, must be opportunistically be seized upon. Prepared strategy should never, therefore, become the victim of events; instead the rhetor trusts in their training and in their research/understanding of the situation and the audience to aid in the improvisatory/*kairotic* adaptation of strategy to the dynamics of the rhetorical situation.

This is a valuable perspective for contemporary marketing which needs to deal with rapidly changing networks of actors and environments and which needs to be able to respond to opportunities mid-campaign. A strategy paradigm that does not include improvisation as a core modality is doomed to awkwardness and irrelevance. We would argue that the rhetorical concepts of *kairos*, *prepon* and *decorum* can provide powerful orientations for marketing strategy and tactical thinking. Much work needs to be done to study the conceptual and practical place of improvisation in marketing. Some consideration has been given to improvisation in the managerial and organisational studies literature. As Weick (1998) put it in his foundational study, the "emphasis on order and control" in organizational studies has tended to hamper understanding of how innovation works (p. 543), yet "managerial activities, which are dominated by language and conversation, often become synonymous with improvisation" (p. 549). The most popular point of comparison in organisational improvisation studies is jazz music (Hatch, 1998; Holbrook, 2003; Pina e Cunha et al., 2014; Weick, 1998; Zarankin & Wang, 2013) but there has been almost no recognition that rhetoric, a discipline so close to management (and, obviously, marketing) in its motivations and perspectives, has such a strong tradition of improvisation. The study of what has been called real-time marketing (McKenna, 1995, 1997; Oliver et al., 1998), for example, is ripe for a re-conceptualisation around rhetorical *kairos*.

## Rhetorical Style

Despite the comparatively large amount of scholarship devoted to aspects of rhetoric style in marketing (such as the use of metaphor and other figures and schemas in advertising discussed above) there are still many promising areas which remain neglected. The place of metaphor and metonymy as central conceptual tools in branding and marketing communications is still under-explored, as ably demonstrated in a recent work by Brown and Wijland (2018) on "marketing's figurative foundations". In other words, we need to look reflexively at the ways in which

figuration suffuses all aspects of marketing theory and practice, not just the tightly bounded domain of copywriting and image making for advertising executions.

## Epidictic and Marketing

Aristotle divided rhetoric into three main types: legal (or forensic) rhetoric which was to be used in the courts of law, deliberative rhetoric which occurred in political assemblies, and finally epideictic (or ceremonial) rhetoric which aimed to praise or blame a figure or idea. Marketing is quite naturally concerned with the epideictic environment most of the time as we seek to convince others of the value that our brands, clients, products, or services have to offer. The challenges that the epideictic rhetor faces are identical to the challenges faced by the marketer who must convincingly create and communicate an authentic public image, an inspirational vision, an authoritative understanding, sensible reasoning, and a sense of commonality with the stakeholders (to adapt Sullivan's 1993 typology of epideictic *ethos*). The epideictic perspective offers marketing a powerful, fecund vantage point from which to begin to deal with the sorts of issues around trust, authenticity, perception of influence, and the creation of value that have become such a challenge for the discipline and profession at this time.

## Competition and *Agon*

A (particularly Sophistic) understanding of the competitive nature of rhetoric can help to provide marketing with a far more nuanced understanding of its location within the enterprise and the larger competitive environment. Hawhee's (2004) study of the link between Olympic wrestling traditions and Sophistic rhetoric has allowed us to understand the ways in which the early rhetors regarded competitive debate as a formative, "productive struggle" (p. 192). Given that marketing practices its role within a competitive environment, and given that much of its strategic tooling is based upon consideration of competitive stances (i.e. situational analysis, segmentation, targeting and positioning) there is little consideration in the scholarly literature of marketing's relationship to the idea of competition. The tradition of sophistic debate is based upon *agonism* ("intense, productive exchange") rather than *antagonism* ("spiteful, contentious battling", *ibid*). It is through struggle with a competitor that one can learn one's true strengths and weaknesses as well as display one's virtue. The audience is also an essential component in this form of competition because it is in communion with the audience that virtue (value) is created. We would argue that Sophistic *agonism* provides an intriguing framework for the exploration of co-created value in a competitive environment and deserves careful investigation.

## Marketing practitioners as *homo rhetoricus*

The Sophists formulated ideas on rhetoric which became fundamental for the study of rhetoric, but equally important for our understanding of rhetoric is the Sophists' *rhetorica utens*, their enactment of their ideas in everyday rhetorical practice. The Sophist could be used as a model of a specific human subject – a *homo rhetoricus* – a human being entirely formed by rhetorical practices (Fish, 1989; Lanham, 1976). The identity of a marketing *homo rhetoricus* is a "societal self" constructed among competing interpretations of this self. This marketer has no fixed self or "authentic voice" to which to return. Understood as a *homo rhetoricus*, in midst of rhetorical practice (*rhetorica utens*) the marketer *is* himself; "the wider his range of impersonations, the fuller his self" (Lanham, 1976, p. 27). The conceptualization of *homo rhetoricus* lacks analytic

precision but it might still be analytically useful as model “to think with” when analyzing the *rhetorica utens* of marketing practitioners.

### Introducing the articles in this special section

Although the elements outlined above represent *our* particular vision of the contribution that a rhetorical perspective on marketing can provide our discipline they are, naturally, neither an exhaustive list nor the components that might concern current scholars with a rhetorical interest (or those hopefully waiting in the wings). Precisely because the traditions of rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, and the 'rhetorical turn' are so rich and multifarious in their foci the ways that marketing scholars might engage with them are almost infinitely varied. The three articles and invited commentaries that constitute this special section are excellent demonstrations of this. Ge and Gretzel's (this issue) investigation of influencer emoji use on weibo is an extension of the first type of marketing scholarship on rhetoric outlined above, namely that which seeks to analyse the rhetorical nature of marketing executions and content. While much of the work in this tradition has been focused on print advertising, Ge and Gretzel bring us bang up to date with their focus on the "new language modes" of online discourse. Their use of Aristotle's three forms of rhetorical proof is itself sterling evidence of the continuing relevance and usefulness of these distinctions and underlines the ease with which rhetorical frameworks can thrive alongside others drawn from the social sciences. This paper also offers more proof of the rhetorical importance of anthropomorphism in contemporary online persuasion strategies -- a trend which undoubtedly demands a lot more in-depth consideration by marketing scholars.

Dunne's (this issue) paper on *murketing* is an example of our second type of rhetorical marketing scholarship, that which seeks to examine the rhetorical ramifications of broader marketing practice and conceptualisations. *Murketing*, Dunne tells us, is the "rhetorical craft through which market liberalism and marketing savvy intermingle in demonstrably complicated though not necessarily contradictory ways" (this issue). It is a close cousin to what Wolfe (2001) dubbed "ironic consumption" (p. 78), or the "uncool-equals-cool" aesthetic. Dunne's use of literature and literary criticism as primary texts for the investigation of contemporary marketing's ambiguous sincerity demonstrates to us the value of connecting our practice and discipline to thinking outside the usual suspects of the social science methodologies. How much more insight might we be able to find in a carefully wrought, minutely observed work of contemporary fiction when compared to one more attitudinal study of 200 undergraduates, or yet another round of focus groups? Our focus here on rhetoric is perhaps part of a larger plea for (re-)connecting marketing with the liberal arts and their associated traditions -- not, it must be said, at the expense of empirical perspectives but as an effort towards a larger rebalancing. Dunne, after all, uses Wallace, Trilling and Mirowski as spurs to spin up an argument for evidence-based policy making.

Shaw and Bandura's (this issue) examination of Islamic State *parakleseia* as marketing communication draws together the rhetorical tradition, propaganda, and brand marketing. As they intimate, rhetoric has long served a function as a tool for galvanising those about to head into battle. Machievelli's (2005) advice that all generals should be trained in the art of rhetoric so that they can effectively manipulate the spirit of their troops is just one famous example of how those considering conflict recognise the essential role of persuasive communication. Shaw and Bandura's comparative study of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda rhetoric as contained in their



respective English-language organs of agitation and propaganda nicely underlines the universal nature of branding considerations. Rhetoric is just as foundational for the strategies and counter-strategies of political, religious, and social marketing as it is for their more commercial relatives, and Shaw and Bandura indicate just how foolish we would be to ignore this.

We hope that these articles and the invited commentaries (introduced separately) for this special section contribute to an increased recognition of the value of rhetorical understandings and perspectives for the future evolution of marketing theory and practice as well as a more nuanced appreciation of its historical links to the traditions of persuasive communication.

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