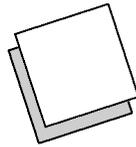


*An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article*



# Postmodern approaches in business-to-business marketing and marketing research

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**Abstract** *Most conventional research methodologies both in consumer and business-to-business marketing are modernist in nature, but their applicability in an increasingly postmodern business setting is decaying. Postmodern conditions are particularly prevalent in the business-to-business arena but, although new postmodern research methods are slowly growing in popularity in consumer markets, their use by business-to-business market researchers is still almost nonexistent. The article contributes to filling the existing vacuum in the business-to-business marketing literature and provides a framework for the use of postmodern research methods in industrial markets. A short case is used as illustration of this use.*

**Most research methodologies are modernist in nature**

## Introduction

Most conventional research methodologies both in consumer and business-to-business marketing are modernist in nature. They are based upon a certain set of assumptions about the nature and behavior of markets and the access to knowledge about them (i.e. that market phenomena result from the rational decisions of well-defined entities and can be observed as distinct measurable processes). These assumptions were developed in and for a world of mechanistic mass production and stable markets. However, those conditions do not hold any more. For the last two decades, some authors have described the onset of a new, postmodern society. And more recently, the concept of postmodern marketing is gaining recognition as both a theoretical approach for the study of marketing phenomena and a practitioner orientation to management. Also, a new set of research tools is being developed in order to fill the informational voids left by traditional research methods confined to mathematical models and statistical analyses. Postmodern conditions are particularly prevalent in the business-to-business arena but, although new postmodern research methods are slowly growing in popularity in consumer markets, their use by business-to-business market researchers is still almost nonexistent. Our article contributes to filling the existing vacuum in the business-to-business marketing literature and provides a framework for the use of postmodern research methods in industrial markets.

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**Science has achieved enormous material benefits for humanity**

In the first section of this article we will describe postmodern thought and society. Section two will be dedicated to the postmodern characteristics of industrial markets and their implications for management. In section three, research methods for postmodern settings will be proposed, emphasizing under which conditions and for what purposes they are useful in business-to-business marketing situations. The last section contains managerial implications and conclusions.

### **1. Postmodern thought and postmodern society**

There is little doubt that Western science has achieved enormous material benefits for humanity. As a consequence of these achievements there is the modern assumption that science as it has been practiced for the last 300 years is capable of solving all our problems, that science is a force for good and unproblematic (Appleyard, 1992). Postmodernists, acknowledging those achievements, draw attention to the shortcomings of modern science, to the social, environmental and political price paid for scientific progress (Brown, 1997), and to the limitations of conventional research methodologies in most areas of human life. While modern science is based on the rule of reason, the establishment of a rational order and the emergence of a freed subject, it has fallen very short of its goals (Cova, 1997a).

Underlying the distinction between modernity (or foundationalism, as some choose to name it) and postmodernity is what Bernstein (1983) called “Cartesian anxiety”. With overwhelming clarity, Descartes (and with him all the Cartesian philosophy which is the base for empiricist scientific development) arrives at a necessary alternative: either there is a fixed and stable foundation for existence and knowledge, or we cannot escape darkness and intellectual chaos. Postmodernism serves as a defense against this “Cartesian anxiety”.

There are basically three traditions in postmodern thought (Hoksbergen, 1994):

- (1) The most radical position is that of French postmodernism represented by Derrida (1976), Foucault (1980; 1982), Lyotard (1984) and others. In an extreme relativistic position, they state that each one creates his or her own reality and reject the possibility of judging one reality as more real than the others since no independent criterion exists on which to base that judgment.
- (2) Kuhn (1977), Lakatos (1977) and Feyerabend (1995) form the core of the second and well known postmodern tradition. They recognize the complexity of scientific activity and see science in the context of traditions establishing their own standards of what is acceptable science.
- (3) The third postmodern tradition is hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1975; Habermas, 1972; Ricoeur, 1971; Taylor, 1985). Their interest is in the study and interpretation of texts, extending their research techniques not only to literature, but to the arts, jurisprudence and, more recently, the social sciences.

These strains of postmodern thought do not appear in a vacuum, but within and in response to a changing society with new and evolving characteristics, as seen in Table I. In this postmodern society, economic relationships adopt new meanings and management needs to take new directions.

### **2. Postmodernity in industrial marketing**

Well, let us assume that our current society, or at least a part of the so called advanced societies, can be described as postmodern. What are the economic implications of being postmodern (see Table II)? And, how are we, as

**In response to a changing society**

All opposites become simultaneously possible	There is no unified criterion on which to base the judgment of reality of a fact against another (Firat, 1992)
Tribes replace social classes	Each individual belongs to several tribes that develop their own complexes of meanings and symbols. In each of these tribes he may play a different role, making every attempt at classification impossible (Cova, 1997b). Our civilization has essentially globalized only the surface of human life (Havel, 1995)
Value systems are transformed	Openness and tolerance of different styles and ways of being and living become an integral part of postmodern plural societies.
Fashion	The emphasis shifts from content to form and style
Fragmentation	Life becomes a collection of disjointed moments and experiences rather than a sequence of consecutively chained episodes
Dedifferentiation	The identity of individuals and institutions become blurred, shared and mixed
Hyper-reality	Simulation and representation are becoming more relevant to human life than physical conditions and "hard" realities
Chronology and time	The present overarches both past and future and is both the temporal limitation to reality and an instrument for its construction
Antifundationalism	Rejection of the existence of an immutable base limiting the scope and span of constructed realities
Acceptance of disorder and chaos, crises and disequilibria as a norm	Equilibrium is undesirable as it implies the negation of new alternatives to the status quo
Pastiche	Irony, parody, imitation, mixture, quotation, self-reference, pun, joke and wink of the eye

**Source:** Adapted from Hetzel (1995) and Firat and Shultz (1997)

*Table 1. Characteristics of a postmodern society*

industrial marketers, affected by this postmodern trend in the management of our organizations?

### Five principal components

Our current economic condition has been termed as postindustrial and characterized by five principal components (Bell, 1973): the axial principle, the reorganization of work structures, an orientation towards the future, new intellectual technology for decision making, and change from the production of goods to the production of services.

#### *The axial principle*

The axial principle refers to the centrality of the theoretical knowledge as the source of innovation and political formation. In a modern economy innovation is based on the heuristic discovery of new and improved ways of doing the same things. The workbench is the center of advancement in production. Machines are gradually improved, processes streamlined and tasks refined through trial-and-error and experimentation. However, more and more innovations – scientific, economic, political and social – are born out of the physical emptiness of paper and pencil theoretical models. Superconductivity, magnetic levitation and network theory came to existence first as purely theoretical concepts and only then developed into commercial

Characteristics of a postmodern society	Components of a postindustrial economy
All opposites become simultaneously possible	Axial principle
Tribes replace social classes	Reorganization of work structures
Value systems are transformed	Reorganization of work structures
Fashion	Axial principle From the production of goods to the production of services
Fragmentation	New intellectual technology for decision making
Dedifferentiation	Reorganization of work structures
Hyper-reality	Axial principle
Chronology and time	Orientation towards the future
Antifundationalism	Axial principle
Acceptance of disorder and chaos, crises and disequilibria as a norm	Axial principle Reorganization of work structures
Pastiche	Axial principle Reorganization of work structures Orientation towards the future New intellectual technology for decision making From the production of goods to the production of services

**Source:** Adapted from Hetzel (1995) and Firat and Shultz (1997)

*Table II. Relationships between postmodern society and postindustrial economy*

applications. The European Monetary Union is another example of a thought piece that happens. In a postmodern economy material advances are driven by new and revolutionary theoretical views of nature and society rather than refinements of existing technologies.

*The reorganization of work structures*

The decline of manual labor and the rise of the professional and technical class are defining new work structures. The service sector is gaining ground as a percentage of our economic activity. Even within our factories there is more service activity (research and development, design, quality control, management and marketing, accounting and finance, etc.) than production activity. Work is becoming less and less a matter of directly manipulating matter (i.e. making a car part from a steel ingot) and more a matter of manipulating concepts and symbols (i.e. controlling a production process on a computer terminal or designing the software to be embedded in a microprocessor).

*Orientation towards the future*

The control and evaluation of technology entails a leap of faith into the future. When was the last time we used a tried and tested production or product technology? In the corporate chase for sustainable competitive advantages the technologies of choice are those embedding the promise (or the fiction, or the dream, or the nightmare) of qualitatively different and superior performance in the future, despite showing obvious shortcomings in their current degree of development (personal computing software is a daily, painful and familiar example). Often at times this option for the promise of a different future becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, but it does not really

**The rise of the professional and technical class**

**Possibilities for expression  
of individuality**

matter, because then new technological promises are available. As we all join the ranks of users of the Internet and practitioners of e-commerce we are providing the content that makes them valuable.

*New intellectual technology for decision making*

This technology, particularly in the area of communications (e-mail, video conferencing, mobile phones, etc.), widens the possibilities for expression of individuality, diversity, flexibility and personal independence, while, at the same time, limiting the freedom of personal interaction (Gillespie and Meyer, 1995) due to technical constraints, privacy concerns and etiquette conventions.

*From the production of goods to the production of services*

The change in the economic domain from the production of goods propelled by energy to the production of services propelled by information, marketing, credit and consumption is one of the most influential forces in the postindustrial economy. If an industrial society needs a sort of communication based upon the physical manipulation of objects, thus keeping their symbolic meaning attached to their real component, in postindustrial production the real and symbolic components of objects, products and brands are split (Fox, 1996). Products no longer project images; they are the filling and the conveyors of the image (Firat *et al.*, 1995). In a way, software has become central and hardware has become peripheral. Products and services increasingly base their value in their linking ability (Cova, 1997b), in their capacity to enable consumers to communicate with producers, with each other and within their organizations. Not only are the so called technology companies involved in different ways of connecting distant parties, marketers of consumer products and their clients have been using brands as a means of conveying self images and life styles for decades, and the practice is pervading the whole economy.

In this postindustrial economy, can we identify business-to-business marketing as postmodern? Following Brown (1995a) and Firat *et al.* (1995), contemporary consumer marketing shares the characteristics of postmodern society. Business-to-business marketing does too, and to a great or even greater extent.

**Dedicated to industrial  
marketing**

*All opposites become simultaneously possible*

Many of us dedicated to industrial marketing work as both industrial and consumer marketers either as scholars or managers in industries such as software, computers, automobiles, art or publishing. Furthermore, many of us are both scholars and practitioners involved in both purchase and selling decisions; and those decisions are often right and wrong, at the same time. Or rather, it is a matter of time before a decision considered right becomes wrong, and vice versa, as we witness time and again when we select new technologies or price complex bundles of products and services. But perhaps the most appalling example of simultaneous opposites is the multiple nature of the relationships with clients, suppliers, partners and competitors. The old problem of identifying who are the company's clients, suppliers, partners and competitors looks trivial when you realize that the same companies are all at the same time. Consider the case of two European manufacturers of telecommunications equipment (A\*\*\*\*\*1 and E\*\*\*\*\*n) competing for the same contract in China. At the same time, E\*\*\*\*\*n buys from A\*\*\*\*\*1 important components for its products worldwide. A\*\*\*\*\*1, in turn, uses E\*\*\*\*\*n's software for some of its best selling products. And relatively often A\*\*\*\*\*1 and E\*\*\*\*\*n join forces to make a common bid to big projects. They are simultaneously providers, clients and partners of each other.

**No right way of conducting business**

*Tribes replace social classes*

This process might seem relevant to consumer marketers, but not so much to industrial marketers, at least at first sight. Well, for those who think this way we would suggest taking a look at the tribal relationships developing in high technology areas like Silicon Valley, experiencing the importance of ethnic relationships in doing business in Asia (Gómez Arias, 1998), or attending their next class reunion and observing how much business develops around a common Alma Mater. Class as determined by birth and wealth is less and less relevant. Groups and tribes as defined by interests, preferences and lifestyles are the common thread of business.

*Value systems are transformed*

We can no longer say that there is a right way of conducting business. Different management approaches can bring success to a company, and the very same approaches can take another company under. Consider Microsoft's traditional confrontational style. It seems to have worked for them and you can find management authors purporting it as the entrepreneurial style guaranteeing business success. But an equally aggressive style has been used by many other companies whose names nobody can remember.

Pluralism, the acceptance and embracing of diversity, is in the very essence of marketing. Literature, computing, music, psychology, statistics, economics exert an important influence on all aspects of marketing practice and research. More so in the industrial arena where the relationship is not between one brand and one consumer but between two or more groups of people and brands from different companies and backgrounds. Thus we see theoretical physicists in investment banking and biologists in computing applications.

**Fashion affects the way we do business**

*Fashion*

Fashion in industrial companies affects not only the definition of the acceptably "in" business attire or the generalization of "dress-bad Fridays" (or is it "dress-down", or "casual"?). Fashion affects the way we do business, with fads like reengineering, downsizing (and resizing, and rightsizing), key (and core) competencies, the five competitive forces, excellence, relationship marketing, brand equity or postmodern management and marketing. Fashion affects where we do business (after a few years of Asian fashion it seems that Europe is again in vogue; maybe next season Africa or the Middle East will be "in"). And fashion in business creates business not only for consultants and academics, but also because the concentration of resources around a fad makes it a reality.

*Fragmentation*

It can be perceived in the enthusiasm with which we have embraced micromarketing, database marketing, one-to-one marketing and relationship marketing (Badot and Cova, 1995). For a long time industrial marketers have recognized the need to address the individual and distinctive characteristics of each client organization. But even the concept and structure of the firm itself is fragmenting. If Weber (1968) established that the modern firm was structured as a rational legal, bureaucratic and hierarchical system characterized by operational procedures, regulations, productivity standards and rational decision-making processes, Clegg (1992) writes about a flexible postmodern firm, centered in the management of the key competencies of its human resources, addressing the needs of market niches, based on technological decisions made possible by multiple purpose microelectronic equipment and ill-defined job descriptions requiring multiple skills. The

## **Companies lose their borders**

management of relationships with this sort of company requires not only addressing the needs of the purchase centers (structures) and the decision makers (people) within them (which, after all, is a modernistic approach), but also considering the evolving nature (time) of the relationships individuals establish within and outside the firm (tribes).

### *Dedifferentiation*

It is manifest in the blurring of the limits between the firm and its environment with strategic alliances, joint ventures, vertical distribution systems, and the use of marketing methods to new areas such as museums, the arts or religion. As companies lose their borders, attention is shifted to the individuals within the organizations and their tribal affiliations, which will in turn provide an identity to the firm. For example, the management team at most joint ventures comes from the partnering companies and often keeps privileged relationships with them. Furthermore, loyalties are often divided among the joint venture, the originating company, the partner company and others.

### *Hyper-reality*

The confusion of fantasy and reality infuse not only brand and corporate image management, but also the way we develop and market our products. We design, develop and test many of our products as computer models. CAD and virtual reality systems are powerful tools that allow new product developers to unleash their imagination. And sometimes the computer model becomes the product marketed (an abstraction, after all), rather than the product and its associated services. A developer of BIOS (the software that makes a microprocessor recognize it is controlling a computer when the power turns on) set up a division for the design of the BIOS area in the microchip, and the marketing of the design to microprocessor manufacturers. The circuitry is designed in a computer; it looks fine. The design is tested in a computer; flawless. The design is shipped via e-mail to the client. The client and the developer have a problem. Did anyone realize that the design (the dream) would have to “materialize” at some point?

## **Just-in-time systems**

### *Chronology*

The importance of time and its perception is relevant in just-in-time systems, in the use of time as an instrument in negotiations and in the evaluation of business relationships and technological alternatives in the light of wide time spans rather than as discrete point events. Time is losing its nature as a fixed component of the external business environment and becoming an instrument that can be compressed, expanded and managed as another component of business processes (Holmer, 1997). Production processes are often divided into overlapping subprocesses, or distribution systems start moving goods before orders are placed.

### *Antifundamentalism*

It is part of the convulsions about the concept and application of marketing that have taken place during the last decade, and the interest for themes such as green marketing with its anticonsumption implications and the effect of marketing on sustainable development. Antifundamentalism means breaking with the boundaries of established categories and stereotypes and gives us the opportunity of cross-fertilizing separate domains in science and technology (thus the reality of optoelectronics and the promise of biocomputing) and in marketing management and research (where presumably robust techniques are continuously and successfully challenged by both scholarly researchers and

**Markets are becoming more and more volatile**

rugged practitioners). After all, antifundamentalism is a necessary requisite for radical innovation and progress.

#### *Disorder and chaos*

Markets are becoming more and more volatile, whether we refer to financial markets or markets for goods and services. Change is everywhere, and stability has all but disappeared from the business' external and internal environments. Therefore, management needs to accept higher levels of risk. This means demand forecasts will be inaccurate; new product performance, uncertain; financial projections, inconclusive; management processes, unstructured; and career changes, unexpected. A chaotic environment is not better or worse than a stable one, but it requires from managers flexibility, adaptability, ability to think and fast, width of experience and depth of understanding of complex problems.

#### *Pastiche*

It includes irony, parody, imitation, mixture, quotation, self-reference, pun, joke and wink of the eye. Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of industrial pastiche is Mongolia's for a long time one and only power station, an old Russian model long past its operational life. It was kept functioning by Western and Russian engineers, mixing new, old, copied and recycled parts and equipment. The irony is that the biggest consumer of its energy was the power station itself.

In a postmodern world, a postmodern manager is appearing, characterized by non-linear, contingent and discontinuous thoughts and practices. The modern manager equipped with a set of management tools and growing experience along a continuous career path no longer fits an unstable environment. On one hand more, different, new management and non-management tools are also necessary for changing, multifaceted and ill-defined managerial situations. On the other, experience becomes qualified, not by its length or depth, but by its width. While 20 years of experience in one field become useless when that field disappears, a network of different own and spurious experiences better suit the needs which new, shifting, multiple realities are posing on many companies.

**Discovered by quantum physics**

### **3. Research methods in postmodern business-to-business marketing**

From the methodological point of view, the postmodern contribution to research is based on the appreciation that, as it was discovered by quantum physics in the first quarter of this century, it is not possible for the researcher to place himself outside of reality and look at it like an external god. Instead, researcher and researched phenomena are part of the same reality, and research is a form of interaction that modifies reality itself (Artigiani, 1995). In the end, marketing research has to do with the representation (Brown, 1995b) of some facts not alien to the researcher. That is the reason why those opting for a postmodern approach to market research use techniques emphasizing the four key concepts of socialization, text, chorality and interpretation (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). We expand on them below, using one of our own consulting assignments as an example.

#### *Socialization*

Knowledge may emanate from any physical source or state of mind, or combination of them, making up the belief system of a society. Furthermore, the concept of community and tribe becomes central to the extent that although it is not possible to access universal truths, it is to access local

## A knowledge structure

## Language used was characterized by four elements

truths (Murphy, 1989). The authors once consulted for an organization where senior management believed there was an organizational problem in the marketing department. Further research showed that disfunctionalities actually existed at a higher level, but the belief in the existence of the problem at the departmental level made the problem real, and the project had to be approached at both levels.

### *Text*

In a broad sense, text can be identified as a knowledge structure including human action and scientific theories (Eco, 1979). This concept justifies seeing social sciences as an act of interpretation (Heckman, 1986). Although French postmodernists tend to adopt deconstructivistic methodologies whereby reality is interpreted following the interests and prejudices of the researcher, the hermeneutic tradition studies social interaction using a text analogue that needs to be read and interpreted to discover its meaning (Hoksbergen, 1994). Stern (1996) proposes the use of three stages in this analysis:

- (1) The identification of the literary attributes of the text (phenomenon under study), including the sort of language used, intervening characters and the theme of the story. Using the previous example, the main theme was given by the CEO: "I want to reorganize the marketing department". The characters were four:
  - *The CEO*. He was the son of the founder of the company and had been appointed recently. He concentrated most decisions and practiced "management by walking around".
  - *The head of human resources*. An experienced professional recently hired to cope with the personnel needs and organizational problems of the expansion of the company. The problem with the marketing department was not his problem.
  - *The marketing manager*. A young executive fresh out of business school. He was our first liaison with the company, and then was excluded from the project group.
  - *The head of sales and marketing*. A veteran of many years in the company, he had worked with the CEO's father. He was excluded from the definition of the problem.

The language used was characterized by four elements: the extensive use of pronouns ("I" and "he"); the use of nouns; the use of the verbs "be" and "want"; and the absence of adjectives. This sort of language was descriptive of a current situation (verb "be") and a wanted situation (verb "want"), but lacking details (adjectives), relationships (conjunctions and prepositions) and processes (verbs).

- (2) The construction of meaning through the categorization of the text within traditional literary genres and the study of the rhetoric tactics used. In our example, the text was an essay from the CEO on what his company was and what he wanted it to be. He did so through the extensive use of metaphors (he was a priest selling the perfect product, heaven, and his company was his temple). The explanatory notes at the margins were provided by the head of human resources before and after the meetings.
- (3) Deconstruction of meaning, analyzing the existing binary oppositions, detecting absences and voids in the text, and reduction of privileged voices. Basically, we detected two opposites: the first, between the CEO and the rest; the second, between what the company was and what he

**Monovocal interpretations  
are based on material or  
mental determinism**

wanted it to be. It was important to detect the obvious absence of the head of sales and marketing; and we had to reduce the privileged voice of the CEO in order to listen to other voices in the company.

*Chorality, or the number of different meanings contained in a text*

Monovocal interpretations are based on material or mental determinism. Multivocal interpretations are built socially or according to the personal idiosyncrasies of multiple actors (Boje, 1995), and it cannot be said that one is superior to others. In our case there were at least three voices: the CEO, the department heads, and our own voices.

*Interpretation*

This means the way in which the researcher chooses the meaning he or she associates to a text depending upon his or her assumptions about its origin. These assumptions can arise from theoretical foundations, but also from the researcher's prejudices and personal interests. Our definition (interpretation) of the problem and proposed solution was based partially on theoretical models with which we have worked in the past and proved useful, but as academics we also explored some new (or at least we thought publishable) theories and approaches. Furthermore, our proposals would be interpreted themselves, and hence were formulated as emerging conclusions from the thought processes of the clients themselves.

Would a more traditional method have been more useful in this case? Can we say that postmodern research approaches are better always or in some particular cases? Postmodern approaches and methods are not better, they are different. In our case, the lack of reliable quantitative information, the fuzzy initial definition of the problem and the verbal nature of the processes we were dealing with limited the applicability of other methods and led us to adopt different approaches that, in the end, allowed us to get to the problem from a different angle. In general, postmodern research approaches are most useful in situations that can be described as postmodern. However, most industrial situations combine both deterministic and postmodern angles. For example, pricing problems have a quantitative side of cost and value. But prices are also a means of communicating what a company stands for and the quality of the relationship with a certain client. Here, pricing models can be complemented by the study of the actors involved and their interaction processes as exchanges of meaning.

**4. Managerial implications and conclusions**

A distant look at these postmodern approaches to marketing research might suggest that progress in the knowledge of marketing reality (or realities) is impossible, since it cannot be determined which research direction is the right one or which results are acceptable. McCloskey (1985), however, emphasizes rhetoric and persuasion among researchers as a means to the advancement of research, and concludes that "good science is good conversation". Some seasoned executives would agree that "good business is good conversation".

Despite the academic appeal of postmodern approaches in marketing, they have been subject to two main areas of criticism. First, they have been unable to construct a coherent theoretical framework, partly because of their emergent nature and predilection for pastiche and fragmentation. Second, they are often unable to provide directions for the management of companies and other organizations in the pursuit of their objectives. While it is true that postmodern theory is in a state of flux, managers can find that postmodernism makes relevant contributions to marketing.

**Suggestion that progress is  
impossible**

## No absolute criteria for judgment

First, since there are no absolute criteria for judgment, it is necessary not only to choose among alternatives, but to choose among criteria on which to evaluate those alternatives. Therefore, choice becomes highly subjective. In the limit, the relevant decision is about people, groups of people (tribes) and the values of people; criteria and alternatives are a consequence.

Second, more attention needs to be paid to form, style and representation (fashion and hyper-reality) in business-to-business marketing. Aesthetics and user interaction are as much dimensions of product and service performance as maximum throughput or transactions per hour. Furthermore, even in industrial settings, products and services have to be managed as sources of experiences for their multiple users.

Third, time is crucial. If something can be done now (the delivery of a product, the launch of a new service, the supply of information) it has to be done now, or earlier. Otherwise, someone else will, perhaps from another time zone. Real time means that time is as real as steel.

## Relying on techniques from the hermeneutics tradition

Fourth, postmodernism has provided new (some would say not so new, after all) research methodologies delinked from the formal elegance of mathematical models and statistical techniques. We have shown how some of these techniques are useful in complex, ill-defined industrial settings where the use of formal mathematical and statistical models would be inadequate. While relying primarily on techniques from the hermeneutics tradition might suppose too radical a change in most businesses, these techniques are complementary of modern quantitative techniques and help define the problem and interpret research results.

As Holbrook (1997, p. 229), a consumer researcher, put it, it may well be that in these situations we “have greater lessons to learn from our cats than from LISREL manuals or from our copies of the marketing principles textbooks”. Or our industrial marketing textbooks.

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***This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present***

## **Executive summary and implications for managers and executives**

*Running a business is a creative process – most successful entrepreneurs do not focus primarily on the administration of processes but on interpretation of the market's needs and on the application of the business's core competencies to meeting those needs. Business management cannot be made entirely rational – decisions are not made for us by research, we make the decisions on the basis of what we know (or rather think we know).*

*Viewed from this context, Arias and Acebrón are right to describe the nature of modern economies as “post-industrial” and therefore, the ideas of “postmodernism” become more applicable to real situations. In a society where the attitudes, relationships and creativity of individual people are the raw materials for business success, we cannot rely on “empiricist” or “Cartesian” approaches to research or management.*

*However, businesses and business people are pretty practical. The higher flights of relativist philosophical fancy only bring sneers and snide remarks. The cacophony of post-modern jargon acts – most often – to turn off even the best-educated and thoughtful manager.*

### ***Post-modern management – changing the language***

*The starting point for our examination of post-industrial society lies in the recognition that nearly all jobs – and certainly the jobs filled by the highly skilled and better educated – are service jobs. Moreover, very many of these jobs did not exist 20 years ago.*

*In his book Doorway in Summer, science fiction writer Robert Heinlein described the job of the “synthesist”. This job – the perfect postmodern job – was not to act as a specialist but to draw together different streams of study, knowledge and research so as to define a new “thesis”. Leaving aside the Hegelian overtones of such a job, we can recognise the modern manager in Heinlein's invention.*

*The modern marketing manager must now understand more than just the processes usually defined as marketing – market research, advertising, sales management, promotions etc. Our modern marketer must be concerned about production process, relationships, human resources and social responsibility alongside the traditions of the marketing discipline. And managers from other disciplines are expected in return to understand marketing.*

*It is this break from functionalism and the associated new jobs in business development, relationship management, network development and corporate communications that describe the post-industrial, postmodern business environment. A bit like Dirk Gently (in Douglas Adams, The Long Dark Teatime of the Soul) managers have to appreciate the “interconnectedness of all things”.*

### ***Postmodernism's central message – think for yourself***

*If we learn anything from postmodern thought it is that we cannot rely on the rational nature of science. Despite its success, science has failed modern society by raising new problems and challenges. And, we recognise that science (and its counterpart, the law) is amoral. Science can tell us we can do something – clone sheep, for example – but cannot tell us whether doing that something is right.*

*And by right we always mean two things. We often mean “right” in the moral sense as when we question the technologies of human fertilization. But at the same time we can mean by “right”, that which works, which delivers our aims. The latter meaning presents the biggest challenge facing post-industrial society – the idea (championed by many postmodernist thinkers) that moral rights are relative and should be related to the debate about means and ends.*

*At the same time we have the new “morality” that condemns the absolute ethics of past ages. We must judge people by their own mores rather than by reference to a moral or ethical framework that describes “rightness” or “wrongness”. Yet within this new morality we have a new collection of unchallengeable ethics concerned with race, gender, environment and the moral superiority of the state.*

*In truth, science can only operate according to Descartes’ rational, empirical approach. The point of science is to seek to demonstrate what is not true – something only achieved through experiment and testing. But business is not a science and – despite the efforts of scientific management’s advocates – has never been a scientific discipline. The lesson of postmodernism must be to recognise that Cartesian analysis is just a tool to place alongside the methods outlined here by Arias and Acebrón. As managers we have to think for ourselves and make decisions by ourselves – we cannot let research, or worse still the computer on our desk, make those decisions.*

#### ***Subjectivity – a new strand in marketing research***

*The point about the methods proposed by Arias and Acebrón is that they rely on subjectivity and “interpretation”. The findings of postmodern research can never be entirely without challenge since my understanding of the meaning of a “text” may well differ from yours. The danger is that – as has happened with literary criticism – subjective statements (e.g. that Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice and Dickens’ Oliver Twist are anti-Semitic) become de facto objective truths because the “experts” have taken a specific stance.*

*No interpretation of research can ever be “right” in the sense that the interpretation cannot be challenged. And this recognition – flowing as it does from postmodernism – provides managers with protection from prejudiced interpretation. And – if we accept Hume’s philosophy – all interpretations are prejudiced. The crucial task of the researcher is therefore to describe for managers that thing on which a decision must be made rather than to dictate the decision. Decision-making is (at risk of repeating myself) a matter for managers, not researchers or consultants.*

*To draw a conclusion from Arias and Acebrón, I would argue that the main lesson from their work is that business (and marketing in particular) is not just about objective, rational choices, but also about the use of creativity, initiative and innovation in the development of people and the things that people can do. If we recognise this fact we are able to understand the world a little better as a place of choice, risk and excitement rather than as a collection of cogs in some great universal machine.*

*(A précis of the article “Postmodern approaches in business-to-business marketing and marketing research”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for MCB University Press.)*