



Goodbye and good luck, Mr Kotler

by Christian Blümelhuber

Goodbyes are never easy. They're particularly hard when you have to bid your adieus to people whom you like and respect, and to stars that have as much meaning and influence as Mister Kotler. However, regardless of how hard it is, dear Kotlerians, it is time for to say goodbye. Your reign is over.

We, the marketers, are leaving the "Kotlerian sector"!

Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Alan Greenspan, Herbert Simon, Peter Drucker and Michael Porter: the only marketing guy who fits into that line is Philip Kotler, the one and only King of Marketing.

For generations of students, marketers, and consumers, he IS marketing. Like nobody else, he stands for the "modern concept of marketing". He helped to establish marketing's credibility as both a discipline and a practice. He spread the cultural influence of marketing around the globe, and for this reason has he raised standards of living and created new jobs. We could tell a long story about inventing and recycling, of hopes and beliefs. But to make it short: he is modern marketing's superstar.

Sherwin Rosen (1981) defined superstars as phenomena wherein relatively small numbers of people dominate the activities in which they engage –and earn enormous amounts of money. That's not only the case for athletes and movie stars, but also for celebrity CEOs and Über-Academics. We, the people, were trained to see the world through a lens coloured by the number of 'hits' (Anderson 2006) –and the fields of marketing research and education are no exception. Everyone would agree that our field's winner who "takes it all" (Abba) is the S.C. Johnson & Son Distinguished Professor of International Marketing at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Mr Philip Kotler.

The results of his stardom are evident to everyone interested in the marketing field. Generations of students, academics, managers and consultants used Kotler's models, discussed them, applied them, and distributed them. In their eyes, there

seems to be imperfect substitution concerning his ideas around the so-called marketing concept, around customer satisfaction as the main marketing goal, around toolboxes and flowcharts, and especially around APIC*, STP* and the Four P's*. In other words, around the elements that define and bring alive the "Modern Marketing Approach".

But modernity has lost its glamour and explanatory power. And so more and more scholars, academics, and even managers claim that marketing needs reform, perhaps a revolution –at least a new paradigm.

The Frank Sinatra of marketing

Frank Sinatra's time is over. He had his hits and appearances, but now he's dead. Not only buried in the warm cover of

Cathedral City's soil, but also in people's memories.

The same is true for Mr Kotler. He is dead –not physically, but, following Stephen Brown as Alan Smithee (1997), his thinking is dead. Like Frankie Boy, he is celebrated and recycled– perhaps not with a museum in Las Vegas, and probably not with a Broadway show, but with lots of nostalgic fans who continue to

play the old songs and keep the light burning. But those old songs are just romantic fiction. They remind us of bygone times: the times of hierarchic, rational, ordered and systematic managed institutions, the times of Ford and Taylor, of the assembly line and FMCG, the modern times.

We are in a new state, a new era now characterised as post-postmodern, reflexive, liquid or hyper-modern (see for example Bauman 2000; 2005; Lipovetsky 2005; Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994). The passage from the solid phase of modern-ity to a more liquid phase of modernity leaves behind modernity's clearly defined borders, tiresome but reassuringly stable routines, slow pace of change, predictable futures, and long usefulness of skills – in other words: modernity's security! What we are seeing

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now is a condition in which structures, institutions, patterns of routines, choices or acceptable behaviours can no longer keep their shape.

It is bringing about a collapse in the long-term thinking, planning, and acting that used to be a prerequisite for strategies and strategic marketing. We are now confronted with lives that are more and more fragmented, with parallel strategies and series of new beginnings and endings, of decouplings and embeddings. And each new step, each new episode in our lives and our marketing calls for a different set of skills and a different arrangement of assets (Bauman 2007, page 3).

Stability is gone. The future is less predictable. The value of skills and assets changes rapidly. Modernity is over. But Kotler seems to be still alive. Why is that?

The manager's teddy bear

In liquid times, new concepts are everywhere but APIC, the Four Ps and STP will survive and live forever. Teachers, consultants, and managers around the globe use Kotler's ideas, spread Kotler's

How can you profit from post-Kotler marketing ideas?

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influences into the business world, and reproduce him again and again. Although some may doubt, the vast majority of managers seem to love him, follow him, applaud him, and apply his ideas.

We can explain this commitment and behaviour with an interesting theory of Odo Marquard, a German philosopher. His "teddy bear effect" explains the familiar situation of a fast-changing

world that is occupied by slow, change-resistant people, who have to align both rapidity (the future), and slowness (the past). To cope with the fast, unpredictable, and insecure world, people need the continuous presence of something familiar.

Like a child with a teddy bear, doubtful and anxious managers carry the most important classics as reminiscence and grounding. The more our presence and future seems to be the hotbed of uncertainties, the more we'll have to carry the past – like a teddy bear – into the future.

The harder it is to understand markets, customers, strategies, and successes, the more important seems to be Mr Kotler as marketing's most important teddy bear. He is the manager's link to the past.

For sure, there is only one Philip Kotler. Many follow him –but there is also a group that doubts. His reign is under attack because the world has changed.

Kotler's successors and the long tail* of marketing

In 1960, McGregor introduced Theory X and Theory Y on the management of employees. Whereas Theory X represented an old style of management in which employees were mindless robots, Theory Y represented a new style in which employees are creative and accept responsibility. We could argue that it's now time that marketing switched from a Kotlerite Theory P (Push/Pull, 4Ps) to a new Theory (as for example suggested by Urban 2006). I don't think that that's the best answer. It's certainly time to quit Theory P, but following Lyotard's legacy that posits the end of metanarratives (Lyotard 1979), there is no place for a Grand Theory in post-post-modern times. There is no single theory that could replace the modern concept. There is no clear and simple call, like "Follow Kotler and you will have success!" that could be interpreted as THE marketing credo of a modern world. Grand ideas have lost credibility.

In post-post-modern, liquid, reflexive economies, we not only face more com-

plexity, but sheer volume. New concepts are everywhere. Some of them, like Customer Experience Management or Beautiful Corporations, may get or may already have had their "season in the sun" (Terry Jacks). But lots are hidden in dusty shelves, in the most obscure corners of the web or in weird scientific journals.

We could read this situation as tyranny, as the paradox of choice: lots of choices, but less satisfaction. But we could also read this situation as a variety of possibilities, where you can find the model, concept or idea that really fits your needs, your situation, your company, brand, and products. Certainly, there's a lot of crap in this "Long Tail" of marketing, but also there will surely be THE one idea that a manager could, or should, have cherry-picked.

When Anderson (Anderson 2006) asks us to think of culture as an ocean and of islands as the only features above the surface, the hit-rate over the years mean that the biggest island on the marketing globe is undoubtedly occupied by the Kotlerians. However, islands are just tips of vast undersea mountains. When (information) costs and efforts of distribution fall, it's like the water level falling in the ocean. New islands surface. And instead of a few hits, we'll uncover hundreds of smaller, but more beautiful, lesser occupied, and therefore more interesting isles.

Like our culture and economy, marketing is shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits, mainstream products, markets, and concepts at the head of a demand curve, and instead is moving towards a number of niches in the tail. And what is true for information products like books and music is surely true for the information product per se: the information. Marketing will get richer and more effective when it applies concepts, theories or ideas that really fit to a situation, a brand, a culture etc.

Breaking free from Kotler, the Hit Man, means more variety in marketing, better fitting solutions, better results, and higher profits.

A long tail can only survive when the costs of reaching the niches and finding the ideas fall dramatically. When managers find filters and navigators that lead them through the tail, marketing will be reborn. In a Long-Tail-Post-Kotler-Ocean of Marketing Ideas, marketing blogs,

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marketing journals and marketing programmes like the European Marketing and Sales Lab can be the Santa Marias. Professors and journalists, bloggers and real experts have to filter out the noise and crap and so will increase the quality of marketing in general and –more specifically– of the marketing concept in use.

Against Kotler: new topics and ideas

There are hundreds of interesting ideas, but the few that stand out will be the main islands, the hits, and the beacons of marketing in liquid times: a consumer's marketing!

Perhaps the most important new contribution to the book of "Grand Marketing Theories" (see the discussion above) comes from Stephen Vargo and Robert Lusch (2004). They suggest nothing less than a "New Dominant Logic of Marketing", that synthesises key aspects of actual marketing thoughts –such as resource-advantage theory and relationship marketing.

This would-be new paradigm is so highly abstract and broad that it is being discussed as the strongest candidate to provide THE marketing framework of our time. This new logic is service-centred rather than goods-centred. It focuses on operant instead of operand resources, is relational and not transactional, and interprets the customer as a co-producer of value. Briefly, the new logic seems to be quite the opposite of the traditional Kotlerian mass-marketing approach, so it's an obvious suggestion, as any class on formal creativity will agree.

The most important aspect and main idea of this logic is, in my view, the conceptualisation of the consumer as a co-creator who takes an increasingly active role in the processes of production, marketing and consumption. If we took this idea to the next level, than we would discuss a "marketing of consumers" –marketing that re-empowers customers, that allows them, and not just the company, to drive a market. Such marketing goes beyond "poll-itics" and re-emerges as a toolbox for the post-, hyper or liquid consumer. Marketing's role could become that of facilitating or co-ordinating the efforts of members of a community or tribe around a product, service, or brand. That's a co-producer, not a provider role (see for example Firat & Dholakia 2006).

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We and our models, theories, and concepts should accept that marketing is becoming everyone's role. It is no longer just the role of professional managerial cadres educated at top business schools or graduates of expensive trainee programmes at Unilever or P&G. Such an idea defines marketing a societal activity and overcomes the implicit bias of the marketer's perspective.

More flexibility – and more luck in marketing management

Let me follow the Kotlerian path of marketing-management that is marked by 4 P's and directed through APIC, where

the P – "planning" – of course (consistent with the P-approach) stands out. Everything seems to be planned, and planned: from communication to design, from strategies to product usages. But:

- Had the big successes really been planned, analysed, implemented, and controlled? Or did Post-Its, Penicillin, or Viagra just happen accidentally? Didn't they just appear, like a rainbow? Haven't the companies just been lucky? Didn't they exploit an opportunity instead of following a business plan?
- Do consumers really use and understand products, services, and brands, as it was planned in the marketing department? Hijacked brands (Wipperfurth

Marketing concepts

As a reference for 4Ps, APIC, and STP see any of Kotler's Textbooks. The latest is the 12th edition of Marketing Management, co-authored by Kevin Lane Keller (2006 published by Pearson).

4Ps. Marketing activities come in many forms. The most famous set of activities was established by McCarthy, who classified all tools into four groups, which are called the Four P's and can be interpreted as the "holy quadruplet" of a "Kotlerian Marketing" approach: product, price, place (distribution), and promotion (communication).

APIC. Analysis, Planning, Implementation, and Control: these are the four steps of the (marketing) management process.

STP. This stands for a core concept of modern marketing management: Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning. It starts with the idea that nobody likes the same hotel rooms, movies, or cookies. Therefore, marketers divide up markets into segments, identify and profile distinct groups of buyers, decide which segments to serve, and position the offering in the minds of the target buyers (which means: deliver central benefits to that group).

Long Tail. The Long Tail is the colloquial name for the distribution curve where a high-frequency amplitude population is followed by a low-amplitude population. In many cases, the low-amplitude part (the Long Tail) can comprise the majority of the whole "population". The Long Tail is seen as a business model where "products" of low volume can collectively make up a market share that rivals or even exceeds the few hits or best-sellers in a market.

Brown, Stephen. Some would label him the Anti-Kotler. Stephen is a marketing professor of Ulster University and has published numerous articles that contradict and provoke "classical" thinking. He is "Alan Smithee" who "killed" Kotler in a European Journal of Marketing publication of 1997 titled "Kotler is dead". He also asked managers to tease and torment their customers (Harvard Business Review, Oct/2001), has identified Harry Potter as an outstanding role-model of successful marketing (Brown 2005), and has promoted a "Celtic" marketing approach.

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2005), twisted servicescapes (Aubert-Gamet 1997), or Doppelgänger images (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel 2005) are among the concepts that explain and discuss the high flexibility of customers when they use products, services, and brands, in an unintended way.

All these aspects, flexibility, non-intentional designs and even luck can of course (and please recognise my "Kotlerian loop" now:) be managed. Not in an APIC way, but in a way that is more consistent with our fast-changing environment.

Follow Louis Pasteur, who once said, "luck favours the prepared mind". And try to understand what your customers really sense, feel, think, and do. Embrace qualitative, ethnographic studies. Bet on several horses, not just one. Be prepared! These seem to be calls for a "rational logic" for a marketing management of our times. Not convinced yet? That's OK, but you should be as unconvinced as you are about the classic APIC model.

Kotler, the comeback kid!

Most champions do not clear the stock voluntarily, and this applies to Mr Kotler, too. He tried to keep up with the Brown's*, and presented "new" topics and ideas that seem to fit better in post-modern times.

My feelings about this are ambivalent. On one hand, Kotler proves his "bondage" to the past. Take his attempt to promote the idea of "holistic marketing". Together with his new co-author of *Marketing Management* –Kevin Lane Keller, another Überfather, but on *Brand Management*– he calls for a more integrated marketing that embraces all stakeholders and functions. This is easy to understand, and it sounds great. No doubt thousands of managers will follow that suggestion, because "it makes sense".

So far, so good? Ah! Bad! Surely it's just another placatory sweet or poison pill, another teddy bear for managers stuck in the past? Isn't this orchestration just another modern concept making interesting promises that cannot be fulfilled? Doesn't it make more sense to follow different, parallel strategies rather than just one holistic one? Shouldn't we believe in Sperm-Strategies instead of integration? Didn't we leave the modern sector? Didn't we break down that wall? On the other hand, Kotler, together with

his co-authors, promotes unconventional and interesting ideas. Take serendipity, ethics, and driving markets as examples (Kumar, Scheer & Kotler 2000; Kotler 2006), and understand that Kotler not only covers and interprets the songs or concepts of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, but also drives marketing in a new direction. For example, he introduced the market-driving phase as a new step or orientation a company can adopt towards the marketplace. This phase triggers industry breakpoints, comes from a visionary (and not a planner or marketing "machine") and focuses more on potential than on existing customers.

Experimentation is encouraged, luck is accepted, and inexperienced employees are welcomed to create weird ideas. Doesn't that sound post-Kotler? Absolutely. These attempts prove his marketing aptitude for betting on the right horse. And for that we praise him, love him and follow him. Or is this all only a marketing-trick in line with Brown's *Harry-Potter-Marketing-Tralala* (Brown 2005)? Shouldn't we interpret these attempts as ornamental additions to his modern house? Some of you will remember the credo of Adolf Loos, the modern Austrian architect and critic who defined "ornament as crime". We could see Kotler's latest articles as a crime on his original ideas, since they are hard to understand, even harder to follow and –hardest of all for a modern Kotlerian– impossible to integrate into a holistic Kotlerian concept!

Thank you, Mr Kotler, and goodbye

Kotler is by no means dead. Kotler himself is Post-Kotler. It's his followers, the Kotlerians, who are stuck in the past. His modern ideas live in these managers as cultural influences –his numerous followers simply don't write him off.

But remember that we live in the complicated, insecure times of a "de-Americanisation of marketing thought" (Venkatesh, Penalzoza & Firat 2006), that totally differs from a pre-9/11, stable modern setting. Change is not an option, it's a necessity. Break free from "modern" Kotler. Kill this Kotler in your marketing mindset, and be more open to the Long Tail of marketing, and to ideas that fit today's circumstances better. Be ready for the post-Kotler Kotler. Be ready for your future. ●