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Customer orientation: Its surprising origins, tumultuous development and place in the future of marketing thought and practice

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The organisation must learn to think of itself not as producing goods or services but as buying customers, as doing the things that will make people want to do business with it. (Levitt, 1960)

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that the concept of customer orientation has its genesis not in marketing, but rather in management thought; specifically, within the Scientific Management movement. We trace the concept through its popularisation in the marketing discipline with the work of Theodore Levitt, the subsequent difficulties in translating the concept into practice through the late twentieth century, and its eventual integration and application of into more recent streams of popular marketing thought and practice, such as service-dominant logic and co-creation. We conclude with an exposition of the contribution of customer orientation to the disciplines of marketing and strategy in the guise of design thinking, the business model canvas, disruptive innovation, and lean startup. In this way, we are "righting" two "wrongs" by correcting the received wisdom in both management and marketing. We are also helping researchers, educators and practitioners in these two disciplines avoid falling into the related traps of repeating their mistakes if do not have an adequate grasp of their past or 're-inventing-the-wheel'.

Introduction

What is the origin of the concept of customer orientation? How has it evolved? What is its contemporary relevance? The purpose of this paper is to analyse the development of customer orientation (CO) over time to reveal its proto-marketing origins in the Scientific Management (SM hereafter) movement and unify different conceptual iterations over the last century. It is critical to rigorously analyse key marketing theories to expand marketing discourse and advance the discipline (Polonsky et al., 2013). CO is perhaps best articulated by its most famous proponent, Theodore Levitt (1969), who stated, 'the entire organisation must be viewed as a customer-creating and customer satisfying organism' (p. 177). This belief instructs organisations to pursue the creation of mutual value between the customer and the firm. The concept has achieved a rare feat and broken free of siloed thinking, benefiting from development and mobilisation over the last century in both the marketing and management disciplines.

The conventional wisdom in marketing thought is that CO is a marketing concept and in management thought that SM was focused solely on the "one best way" to manage workers and rationalise organisational operations to maximise efficiency, engendering degradation of work and union hostility (Kanigel, 1997) with little concern for customers or market creation. In fact, and unlike their contemporaries and many predecessors, members of the SM movement were pioneers who recognised the critical and dual role of the customer as both the co-producer and user of a service. Our focal contribution in this paper is to demonstrate that CO originated not in the discipline of marketing, as one might expect, but rather in the work of early SM practitioners and thinkers who were pioneers advocates of the primacy of customers in the effective and efficient operation of both of organisations but also economies.

Between its genesis in SM and renewed focus in the mid-twentieth century, the CO concept languished as the need to maximise production for US involvement in two world wars took precedence. Postwar consumption in developed markets saw managers once again turn their minds to intra-market competition and

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growth. CO was re-introduced by marketing scholar Levitt (1960), who, through his seminal work *Marketing Myopia* (1960), suggested organisations focus on providing value to customers or they will perish. Levitt (1960) promoted the need for CO as a uniting ethos for an organisation, showing that companies who ignore the changing needs, wants and desires of customers, in deference to an unshakable belief in the technical superiority of their product, do so at their own peril. Although his writings were and are hugely influential, Levitt's work was largely normative and failed to instruct managers how they might operationalise the concept.

Our paper is organised as follows. We will first define the concept of CO and demonstrate its genesis in SM. We then explore how it was promoted and socialised by marketers, most notably Levitt (1960). Following this, we demonstrate how the concept lost momentum due to questions concerning field-level assumptions about consumer awareness of needs and operationalisation difficulties (Arndt, 1978) but was applied and experimented in the marketing discipline by Narver and Slater (1990) and Appiah-Adu and Singh (1998). However, the evidence, strength and consistency of the utlility of CO was found to be mixed (Hult et al., 2005; Kirca et al., 2005). Finally, and most importantly for practitioners, the concept was integrated and pathways to implementation were found across both the marketing and management disciplines. Specifically, within the management discipline, the idea has been integrated through emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), innovation management (Christensen, 1997) and operationalised through "jobs to be done" (Christensen et al., 2016), design thinking (Brown, 2009), the business model canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010) and lean startup (Blank, 2013). Turning to the marketing discipline, we can observe that CO was integrated through service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Emerging from SM, how to understand what your customers truly value, how to know the business you are in, and how to practically implement a CO strategy internally, has been usefully detailed for the benefit of practitioners by both management and marketing scholars.

Customer orientation—concept definition

> *The view that an industry is a customer-satisfying process, not a goods-producing process, is vital for all businesspeople to understand.* (Levitt, 1960, p. X)

A CO strategy (Bennett and Cooper, 1979) is characterised by a customer-focused business culture that develops a thorough understanding of the business an organisation is in and what its customer truly values. It is thereby able to orientate its internal efforts towards creating superior value for customers (Slater and Narver, 1998). Over the last 80 years, the terms 'CO', the marketing concept 'customer-led' and 'market orientation' have come to be used interchangeably in practice, despite their definitional distinction (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Importantly, CO is conceptually distinct from these related and often conflated constructs.

Work by Swedish marketing academic Grönroos (1989) is careful to distinguish between the US definition of the marketing concept and the Nordic view which, for many years, had focused beyond mere lists of 'Ps' (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, etc.). The Nordic construction of the marketing concept is in line with CO, stating that the marketing function exists "to establish, strengthen and develop customer relations where they can be commercialised at a profit and where *individual* and organisational objectives are met" (Grönroos, 1989, p. 6; italics added). In other words, and as Levitt (1960) stated, the organisation must not think of what it produces, but "as providing customer-creating value satisfactions…with the kind of flair that excites and stimulates the people in [the organisation]." In this way, CO can be viewed as an extension of the Nordic expression of the marketing concept, as it relates to a strategic approach of the organisation beyond the realm of the marketing function, and includes cultural orientation of the firm in which the needs of the market are an area of strategic focus (Kankam-Kwarteng et al., 2019).

Customer-led organisations are similar to those that adopt CO, in that the customer is perceived as central to the organisation's activities, which "focus on understanding the expressed desires of the customers in their served markets and on developing products and services that satisfy those desires" (Slater and Narver, 1999, p. 1002). The emphasis on existing customers and their immediate explicit wants and needs is a shorter-term tactical response typified by customer-led organisations. It contrasts with the practice of understanding and catering for explicit and tacit, emergent or unknown needs of customers as part of a strategic approach (Connor, 1999; Narver and Slater, 1990).

This focus on both the current and future needs and wants of customers as a strategic practice reflects CO and its role as a behavioural marker for firms with a market orientation. In the market orientation concept, CO is but one aspect and is defined as "the sufficient understanding of one's target buyers to be able to create superior value for them continuously" (Narver and Slater 1990, p. 21). In addition to CO, market orientation has been defined to include other behavioural components (i.e., competitor orientation and interfunctional coordination), together with an approach to decision-making that prioritises a long-term focus and profitability (Narver and Slater, 1990). In the market orientation concept, great emphasis is placed on the generation and dissemination of "market intelligence" including customer, competitor and environmental insights, across organisational departments. The purpose of this is to establish an "empirical basis to the message of marketing, moving from rhetoric to defined constructs that could be measured" (Uncles, 2011, p. 161). Although market orientation is equated with CO (Webb et al., 2000), it can be viewed as having a greater emphasis on multidimensional drivers (e.g., competitors and external environmental factors) and market intelligence as a primary artefact, as per the definition provided by Kohli and Jarworski (1990, p. 6).

To appropriately frame the discussion on the genesis, use, and broad adoption of CO, for the remainder of this paper we will adopt an inclusive and specific definition provided by Deshpandé et al. (1993):

> The set of beliefs that puts the customer's interest first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders, such as owners, managers and employees, in order to deliver a long-term, profitable enterprise. (p. 27)

This definition reflects both an immediate and emerging relationship with customers, a focus on the creation of value for customers, and importantly, the value to the organisation and its profitability in doing so.

Customer orientation and its origin in the scientific management movement

> *Marketing is primary and all production depends ultimately upon the demand of the market.* (White, 1927, p. 3)

Though long-appreciated in the cognate discipline of economics owing to Adam Smith's observation that "consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production" (Smith, 1776, p. 49), SM was one of the first schools of management to recognise the absolute primacy of customers. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding claims by marketing historians that the "movement to apply the idea of 'scientific management' raised by F. W. Taylor exerted the most important influence on the development of the 4P's con-

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cept" (Usui, 2008, p. 12), that the functional approach to the study of marketing was devised by a leading practitioner of scientific management, Arch W. Shaw (Copeland, 1958; Jones and Monieson, 1990), and that fellow scientific managers Charles Hoyt and Percival White made seminal contributions to the "marketing concept" (Jones and Tadajewski, 2011; Skalen et al., 2008; Tadajewski and Jones, 2012), there has actually been little investigation into the important bearing of SM on CO. This is entirely understandable given the lack of disciplinary boundary-setting between management and marketing that prevailed at the time and also because the early SM movement *was* ostensibly concerned with increasing output by improving productivity. Nevertheless, Shaw, Hoyt, and White were all members of the Taylor Society - the institutional and epistemic home of SM - and through the 1920s and 30 s when the US was beset by economic downturns and experienced a shift from a sellers' to a buyers' market, we can observe the genesis of CO in SM as the latter became increasingly concerned with the planning of production *and* distribution.

Jones and Tadajewski (2011) noted that:

> Commentators in industry were rapidly coming to the conclusion that the economic system was, courtesy of the contribution of Taylor's (1911) improvements in production efficiency, outpacing consumer demand for goods. In short, there needed to be a similar revolution in selling and marketing to the one that had already taken place in production. (p. 466)

Taylor himself regarded the consumer as just as critical a stakeholder as employers and workers: that is, the lynchpin in the capitalist system (Taylor, 1911). Consequently, there was a growing sensitivity to the shortcomings of management in the sales or marketing field relative to production. Thus, there was a shift "from a focus on production as the main value-producing activity towards a greater appreciation of the value constitutive role of distribution and marketing" (Jones and Tadajewski, 2011, p. 465).

Associated with, or perhaps driving this shift in the first half of the twentieth century, we can also identify a distinct elevation in the scope of Taylorism from a purely microeconomic focus, to an industry and macroeconomic focus:

> What began as a tool for attempting to cure supply-side ills, developed over 50 years into an instrument for managing aggregate demand. A progressive majority in the Taylorist movement believed planning should be applied at the national level to stabilize (what would come to be called) the macroeconomy by boosting aggregate demand and making income distribution more equitable. (Bruce, 2016, p. 192; 193)

Arguably, it is here that we witness the genesis of CO. It began with some scientific managers writing about marketing and realising that the very health of the entire economy depended on managers broadening their responsibilities and focusing beyond optimising internal operations by understanding their place in the wider macroenvironment in which they were embedded. They recognised that for an economy to grow, wealth must be distributed beyond the capitalist employer class. Without sufficient purchasing power, potential customers cannot turn their wants into real demand. They believed there was greater economic potential in customers in the working class than in the ruling class and believed the best way to accomplish this was through the payment of a fair wage. This type of thinking and strategy created the macroeconomic foundation of CO. Close coordination or planning of manufacturing and marketing was critical, they argued, as was the important realisation that marketing activities intersected with broader macro issues, such as income distribution, social values, ethnic and gender preferences, public opinion, and so on (Cuff, 1996).

In exegetic work, Jones and Monieson (1990); Cuff (1996); Usui (2008); Skalen et al., (2008); Tadajewski and Saren (2009); Jones and Tadajewski (2011); Tadajewski and Jones (2012), and Levy and Luedicke (2012) traced the contributions of scientific managers such as Arch Shaw and Percival White to marketing thought in general and to CO in particular. Parsing this work, we turn first to Shaw (1876–1962), a Chicago industrialist, publisher (publishing the *Harvard Business Review* in its formative years) and possibly one of the first marketing consultants (Chandler, 1993; Cuff, 1996; Usui, 2008). Levy and Luedicke (2012) argue that he introduced the idea of CO. Having directed Kellogg's first Corn Flakes advertising campaign in 1906, Shaw was acutely aware that in an age of brands and mass production, the pivotal challenge for businesses had shifted from production efficiency to how to guarantee customers (Shaw, 1912). He shared this concern with the first Harvard Business School dean, Edwin Gay, and both sought to shape the curriculum to ensure a greater focus on distribution and marketing (Copeland, 1958; Jones and Monieson, 1990). This shift in focus enlarged the scope for general management responsibility, encapsulated by Shaw's 2nd-year 'Business Policy' course, the intellectual forerunner of what we now know as strategic management. As Cuff (1996, pp. 18–19) put it:

> The multi-functional operations of business enterprise – linking manufacturing supply with changing market demand – made co-ordinating activity a central function. The potential gains from scale economies depended on how well general managers filled this function. The health of the business system as a whole, in turn, depended on whether managers took a broad or narrow view of their responsibilities. They required an outlook and a habit of mind that transcended technical expertise. They had to understand the broader institutional setting in which they managed.

In this context, Usui (2008) argues that Shaw "discovered" the macroenvironment of marketing management and firmly believed socioeconomic problems could be solved by managing businesses more scientifically, but that planning was required not just at the firm level, but also at the level of industry and (what would come to be known as) the macroeconomy.

Percival White (1887–1970) expanded this scientific approach in his ground-breaking 1927 book *Scientific Management Marketing*:

> The beginning and the end of all marketing problems is the consumer … Production exists in order to serve consumption … It is based on the theory of finding out what the consumer wants and then giving it to him (sic) … Production exists in order to serve consumption, and for no other purpose. Man (sic) does not consume in order to produce; he (sic) produces in order that he (sic) may consume (White, 1927, p. 19; 99).

Not only was White determined to place customers at the centre of all marketing problems, but he also wanted to place marketing at the centre of all business management, arguing "marketing is primary and all production depends ultimately upon the demand of the market" (White, 1927, p. 3).

To sum up, in our search for the genesis of the CO, by deconstructing the ideas of Taylor Society members Shaw and White, we can readily detect within the SM movement in the 1930s when "the field of marketing research really began to emerge in earnest" (Tadajewski and Jones, 2012, p. 41), a distinct shift in focus from production to distribution, marketing and sales with a focus on the customer. The SM movement's interest in the customer became a matter of national urgency in the 1920s and 1930s when a buyers' market emerged and the US was afflicted by major economic downturns. CO made sound business sense to ensure the massive increase in output induced by SM could be sold. However, such an orientation was also a critical tenet of a proto-Keynesian coalition in the Taylor Society, which believed that Taylorist planning could stabilise the macroeconomy by boosting aggregate demand and making income distribution more equitable. Further, it was believed that it could enhance humanity's control over anarchic market forces and aid the construction of a society based on democratic and effective planning (Bruce, 2016).

Promotion of customer orientation and socialisation in the marketing discipline

> *What specifically must other companies do to avoid [decline]? What does customer orientation involve? These questions have in part been answered by the preceding examples and analysis. It would take another article to show in detail what is required for specific industries.* (Levitt, 1960)

CO entered the marketing discipline in a form more familiar to marketers in the seminal paper *Marketing Myopia* (Levitt, 1960) and first attempts to operationalise it were in customer relationship marketing. This work articulated the problem of an overemphasis on the product itself rather than a desire to understand what customers truly value. Levitt acknowledged Peter F. Drucker and his "marketing concept" as a key source of inspiration. Drucker (1954) famously asserted that the only valid purpose of a firm is to create a customer. Levitt suggested that his own work linked the "marketing concept" more closely to core business strategy than that of his predecessors. Levitt pointed to numerous examples of industries characterised as "growth" industries and thought to be impervious to anything but success. However, it is shown that due to a "myopic" focus on the product itself, these "growth" industries have suffered by failing to see beyond internal process improvement (e.g., railways and Hollywood). This highlighted the importance of providing value for customers and demonstrated that a lack of CO has significant consequences.

Levitt (1960) carefully separated the marketing function from the sales function:

> Selling concerns itself with the tricks and techniques of getting people to exchange their cash for your product. It is not concerned with the values that the exchange is all about. (p. 55)

Guterman (2011) suggested *Marketing Myopia* has outlasted so many other management ideas because of its "everything-you-know-is wrong" premise, and that once you understand the thesis it seems so obvious.

Levitt convincingly persuaded the reader of the necessity of CO for ongoing business success. Although his examples are illustrative, little detail is given about how to understand customers' wants and how to orientate organisations towards this. As Levitt (1960) himself identified, CO reaches beyond "good intentions or promotional tricks; it involves profound matters of human organisation and leadership" (p. 56). However, how to go about uncovering those "profound matters of human organisation" was left largely up to managers, with little direction from Levitt. Understanding customers was, and remains, a complex task for an organisation. If managers tried to follow the ideas based on the work of Levitt alone, they could not be blamed for thinking that customers can readily identify what they truly value and are willing to pay for. In a reflection of the time, Levitt did not turn his efforts towards applying these ideas to services, which is a conceptual flawsince services, particularly complex ones, differ fundamentally from products.

The marketing discipline did not take up the task of developing the work of Levitt and operationalising these ideas. Rather, it turned to the pursuit of "marketing science", which some scholars have attributed to the continued decline in influence and relevance of marketing departments (Homburg et al., 2015; Hunt, 2018; Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). Clark et al.'s (2014) bibliometric analysis of the 'export' vs. 'import' of citations amongst the leading business journals of the four major business disciplines (i.e., accounting, finance, management and marketing), found that marketing is least cited, and that this gap is only widening with time. Though outside the focus of this paper, this highlights that the marketing discipline appears to have misunderstood what 'customers' truly want and value, and this might explain the gap in the development of CO.

Customer relationship management (CRM) is an attempt to operationalise CO; the term CRM dates to the early 1990s (Buttle, 2008) and is based on the principles of relationship management (Gummesson, 1997; Sheth and Parvatlyar, 1995). There are two main views on CRM: one that focuses on operational execution of customer management supported by technology, and a second strategic approach (Payne and Frow, 2006). Many corporates initially adopted CRM following a sales-orientated business philosophy and used technology predominantly to wage additional communication campaigns. However, this approach often had adverse effects on customers. Instead of using technology to better serve the customer, the 'dark side of CRM' was observed in practice, which is fraught with difficulties, duplicitous practice and undesirable behaviours (Frow et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2015). However, as companies gathered more information about customers and prospects, they were able to become more customer orientated. As such, a mature CRM implementation uses technology to gather information about customers (prospects) and develop offers (actions) that optimise the organisation's relationship with the customer/prospect in line with the second, strategic view on CRM. Buttle and Maklan (2019) defined strategic CRM as "the customer-centric business strategy that aims at winning, developing and keeping profitable customers (p. 6)." This view focuses on and supports creating a customer-centric business culture that follows a coherent and disciplined approach to understand and manage the customer, implemented by leadership behaviours, formal employee reward systems and the allocation of resources to where they best enhance customer value in the long term. If executed rigorously across an organisation, strategic CRM could be viewed as a blueprint for successful implementation of CO. While this view was accepted and advocated for in theory, we observe CRM software spending steadily increasing, forecast to grow to US$82 billion by 2025 (Grand View Research, 2017). However, without the necessary shift towards an enacted CO, many companies are likely to miss the opportunities that technology could bring, viewing technology as the solution rather than the enabler of CO.

Although accepted as *prima facie* a good idea, CO lacked momentum through the last half of the twentieth century. The work of Levitt and others was not accompanied by sufficiently nuanced frameworks and tools to support meaningful implementation. Consequently, attempts to enact CO produced mixed results. CRM attempted to marry SM and CO through strategic CRM. This was accepted in theory but devolved into analytical/tactical CRM in practice. Conversely, in B2B, there was evidence of CO in practice (Harrington and Tjan, 2008), as substantial engagements and long-term cooperation between firms as customers and suppliers were evident in both dyadic and network ways (Håkansson et al., 2009; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Concepts of CO and co-creation are built into such relations as firms seek to understand and jointly create value (Jaakkola and Hakanen, 2013). Accordingly, we believe that the development and implementation of CO within the domain of industrial marketing merits its own analysis, but this line of argument is beyond the scope of this paper. The CO paradigm retained a place in the marketing canon throughout this stage, as ex-post analysis of the implementation of CO continued to show realised business benefit (e.g., Appiah-Adu and Singh, 1998; Narver and Slater 1990), even though evidence, strength and consistency of its utility was mixed (Kirca et al., 2005; Hult et al., 2005).

Application and experimentation of customer orientation in strategy, innovation and beyond

> *No business plan survives first contact with customers.* (Blank, 2013)

The perpetuation of CO began this century in the separate disciplines of marketing and management. Management and innovation applied CO in the thinking of emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), design thinking (Brown, 2009), "jobs to be done" (Christensen et al., 2005) and disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997). In marketing, CO can be observed in service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and via Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) in the form of co-creation. Each of these manifestations can be viewed as a distinct but related attempt to integrate CO into the very fabric of implementation. Perhaps the final and most relevant example of this is the work of Steve Blank, who adopted approaches from each of the above to give meaning (from a customer and business perspective) to CO.

The first rumblings of a CO revival appeared in the work of Mintzberg and Waters (1985), who sought to delineate between 'deliberate' and 'emergent' approaches to strategy. Prior to this, the strategy process was characterised as a formal plan with precise intentions, followed by surprise-free implementation, largely focused on internal optimisation. However, Mintzberg and Waters (1985) suggested that this is likely to represent only one end of a spectrum, and that most organisations' strategic processes will reside within a continuum between deliberate and emergent strategy. In contrast to deliberate strategy, an emergent strategy is unintended order; it is an open, flexible and responsive approach to strategy and the organisational environment that involves taking one action at a time and learning from the outcomes. A key action required for this approach is "searching for patterns in streams of organisational actions" (p. 272). It may not be immediately obvious how these ideas are connected to CO. However, they relate to shifts in the attention of advising managers to adopt a primarily "command and control" internally focused orientation, to an outwardly focused view that strives to learn about their surrounding environment, as had their forebears in the SM movement. Emergent strategy encourages managers to respond to change and adapt, whereas deliberate strategy suggests that one can "set and forget" a strategy and that it concerns internal operations exclusively.

Although Mintzberg and Waters (1985) did not directly cite Levitt or SM scholars, their paper suggested how a CO strategy can be operationalised since it asserted that strategy must be tested by the market and refined accordingly. Prior to this work, most strategy research was internally focused. Porter championed industry (not *customer*) analysis in 1979, around the time competitive advantage derived from *internal* capabilities was introduced by Wernerfelt (1984), which spawned the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy. Neither the "outside-in" view of Porter or the "inside-out" approach of the RBV consider the critical importance of customers.

The next key manifestation of CO is "disruptive innovation" (Christensen, 1997). It made such a significant impact on management thinking that the ideas have been reprised to clarify the purpose, the authors' intentions, and what has been learnt almost 20 years on (Christensen et al., 2015). Disruptive innovation suggests that dominant industry players have become too focused on providing product improvements for their most demanding customers, ignoring less-demanding and supposedly less-attractive customers. Disruptive innovation shows how companies with few resources can challenge dominant industry players by focusing on the overlooked but meaningful customer segments through delivery of a more compelling value proposition, usually the most valued features at a lower price (Christensen, 1997). Organisations may then leverage this advantage by expanding their portion of the overall customer pie (Christensen et al., 2015). The other option for a disruptor is to create new markets in the tradition of SM thinkers. The key contribution of this work to the CO literature is its extension into a new strategic realm: innovation. Further, it adds to the usefulness of the strategy for practitioners by providing more evidence that CO trumps product orientation. The theory has not been without detractors. Much of the criticism relates not to the message, but to how the theory has been misused and applied to innovation more generally (Danneels, 2004; Markides, 2006).

In 2004, marketing scholarship received a shake-up when Vargo and Lusch (2004) published their seminal paper *Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing*, sparking celebration, opposition and debate (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2009). The central idea was that the marketing discipline—reflecting the economy at the time—was overly focused on how best to maximise the production and distribution of physical goods. This narrow view led marketers to focus on the embedded value within the product itself, rather than orienting their efforts towards creating value for their customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

This is history repeating itself, as this same realisation was experienced by SM almost a century before. A key difference however was that the world had changed, and economies were shifting from a focus on manufacturing towards a greater emphasis on intangibles. To maintain pace, marketing needed a "service dominant logic" (SDL). Greater emphasis on services recognises that customers are no longer passive receivers of the firm's offering. Rather, they co-create the service with the firm. As such, benefit to the customer should be central to the mission of the firm; finally, the firm should orientate its operations towards the creation of a value proposition for customers. This is clearly an extension of the work of Levitt (1960). It highlights the flaws of having a singular product orientation that the scientific managers had highlighted and named the very particular relationship between a firm and customer in relation to a product/service: *co-creation*. Brown (2007) perceived the link from SDL to Levitt:

> The late great Levitt, in fact, actually foreshadowed SDL in his classic 1972 article, 'Production-Line Approach to Service', the opening paragraph of which clearly states that 'There are no such things as service industries. There are only industries whose service components are greater or less those of other industries. Everyone is in service'. (p. 293)

However, in the extensive commentary on SDL, the authors are yet to find formal acknowledgement of Levitt's anticipation of Vargo and Lusch's (2004) achievement.

Vargo and Lusch (2004), echoing Levitt, emphasised the importance of providing *value to customers* rather than providing a superior product. However, this work does not give the reader much insight into how they can better understand what a customer truly values or how to modify internal processes to ensure a focus on the customer, not the product. The article does mention that a firm must adapt its operations towards the creation of the value proposition, although how a firm can do so remains opaque.

In a similar vein to Vargo and Lusch (2004), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) highlighted a flawed assumption underpinning much of the extant marketing thinking at the time: that is, that the organisation operates independently from customers and customers only enter the picture at the moment of exchange. Instead, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) found that customers *want* to play a role and co-create value with the firms that provide them with products and services. This exchange involves not just co-creation of the final product or service, but joint *problem definition*. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) questioned how firms can operationalise these ideas, as it is a significant shift in thinking and requires concessions from both customers and management.

Significantly, this was a central construct in the work of Christensen et al., (2005), which began with one of the most famous examples from Levitt's (1969) original article: "that people don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill, they want a quarter-inch hole" (p. 1). The authors explained where marketers have erred—they have segmented their markets by product attributes or customer demographics, measured market share by product category, and benchmarked their product against competitors in the same narrowly defined product category. Christensen et al., (2005) stated that marketers have failed to listen to Levitt's simple message that customers need to get a job done and will seek solutions for their job that conform to their view of the world. This is usually not in line with how marketers define their industry or product category. Although Christensen et al., (2005) resurrected the ideas of Levitt, they failed to provide organisations with a useful method to understand what customers truly want. However, the work of design thinking practitioners fills this gap.

Design thinking (DT) is a 'human-centred' approach to solving complex and 'wicked' problems (Buchanan, 1992; Camillus, 2008). DT has been applied successfully to translate technological innovations into market offerings that deliver compelling customer experiences (Gruber et al., 2015). Further, it has been applied in public service innovation and the development of customer engagement and marketing strategies (Wechsler and Schweitzer, 2019). DT is as much a mindset, as it is a process and set of tools (Howard et al., 2015; Sobel and Groeger, 2013). The DT mindset refers to the underlying values, cognition and resulting behaviours that, over time, permeate the beliefs of people and culture of organisations (Schweitzer et al., 2016). Recent research posits that a DT mindset has a positive influence on individuals, teams, organisational culture and, ultimately, innovation performance (Carlgren et al., 2016; Liedtka, 2011). Being empathetic towards people's needs and contexts is viewed as the heart of DT. Empathy is described as "the ability to see and experience through another person's eyes, to recognize why people do what they do" (Kelley and Kelley, 2013, p. 85). In practice, 'concentrating on people' is not limited to early stage market research, but integral to a DT project from the beginning to the end, incorporating customer feedback throughout the process at multiple points to ensure the outcome is a customer-orientated product, service or process (Liedtka, 2018; Micheli et al., 2019). DT scholars and practitioners have developed a comprehensive set of tools that has found their way into the innovation and entrepreneurship curricula of business schools (Groeger and Schweitzer, 2019). DT forms a key part of the CO puzzle by creating a practical pathway to understand customers and realise the goals of CO, without explicitly acknowledging inherent commonalities. Lacking in DT, however, is an articulation of how CO fits more broadly into the business. DT very much focuses only on aspects of the business that directly interface with the customer and design process. Returning to the definition of CO, the entire organisation must work towards this goal.

This gap was filled by a significant practical step forward in the form of the business model canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010), a strategic tool that centralises the organisation's value proposition for their customer within the business structure. This focuses and links all other functions of the business to the pursuit of CO and allows management to strategically assess whether they are investing their resources in business activities that will bring customer value. This development is complementary to the DT strategic process in that the latter can assist an organisation to understand its customer; with this information, an organisation can orientate its functions around this goal. The business model canvas is a practical tool for practitioners to provide value for their customers and determine internal planning and resource allocation.

The lean startup (Blank, 2013) strategy extends the work of the business model canvas by adding tools for practitioners to ensure they deliver a customer-orientated product, service or process. Further, extending the ideas of SM, Blank (2013) discussed "customer creation", that is, grouping people who have a problem to solve with a genuine focus on customers first, not organisational capabilities, products or distribution channels. Drawing from emergent strategy, Levitt (1960), and DT, Blank (2013) outlined a way to create product/market fit by working with the customer to deliver a product or service they truly value. Blank (2013) suggested that no product has ever survived its first interaction with the market in its original form. The process of determining customers' wants and creating a viable product to fulfil that demand is a messy, iterative process that requires revisiting, looping and constant change (Blank, 2013). None of this practical instruction was present in the work of Levitt or Christensen, and it is likely Blank's work has been embraced so readily by practitioners because it forges a path through the messiness of the CO process. Blank (2013) requires an organisation to create a minimal viable product to test with the market, then pivot and adapt its product/service or process in response to customer feedback, enabling organisations to deliver innovations that uphold the CO strategy. This approach favours experimentation over detailed planning and customer feedback over intuition, further refining the ideas of Mintzberg and Waters (1985), Brown (2008) and Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010). Blank (2013) suggested that businesses should fail fast and focus on continual learning. He advocated for the eradication of business planning documents, suggesting instead that the business model canvas is a "live" document that can be embraced and followed by the entire organisation.

In 2016, Christensen et al. coalesced their 'jobs-to-done' concept, drawing from DT and Blank (2013), to provide more direction to managers about how to understand their customers' wants and how to design products, experiences and processes to meet these. This work is important because it subverts the dominant marketing process and forms a new paradigm for how practitioners perform marketing processes. It is particularly useful to practitioners, as it operationalises the ideas of Levitt. It can also be viewed to extend the work of DT by providing marketing with a different entry point to analyse their potential market and a more customer-centric way to evaluate competition. The reprisal of disruptive innovation (Christensen et al., 2015) is a clearer manifestation of CO with a strategic focus in the field of innovation.

Discussion

Although no longer termed CO, the concept of businesses existing to create and exchange value for and with customers has become entrenched in both marketing and management thought, and increasingly, practice. CO can be taken to the extreme, resulting in excessive engagement with customers and the sacrifice of other stakeholders' wellbeing, including employees, local communities or even the customers' own future selves (Smith et al., 2010). For example, the services sectors of modern economies are flourishing. With it has come recognition that for a service firm to be customer-orientated, employees are required to engage in emotional labour that is psychologically draining (Yoo and Arnold, 2014). Like any strategy, the devil is in the details and these examples show there can be a dark of side of CO if the consequences of the execution are not thoroughly considered.

Financial evidence in support of CO is spurious at best. Dawes (1999, 66–67) identified 19 studies of CO and financial performance and classified them into those based on objective and subjective measures. As asserted by Dawes (1999), subjective measures are not necessarily bad or invalid, but may be the consequence of managers' reluctance to disclose financial information. Further, profit may vary depending on investments or other factors and does not definitively indicate the health of an organisation or the robustness of a strategy. However, many of the subjective items concerning CO involve self-reporting. Researchers have not spoken to the organisations' customers themselves, so the results are not verified or triangulated. The subjective results show a positive association for 12 out of 14 studies; the remaining two are positive but moderated by the environment (Dawes, 1999). The objective measures show a positive association for two out of six studies; three showed no association, and the final study showed a weak association (Dawes, 1999). Based on the existing evidence, financial uplift is experienced by companies that adopt a CO approach. However, the results are not definitive.

In addition to inconclusive empirical results, Rong and Wilkinson (2011) argue that the dominant cross-sectional measure of MO or CO poses significant methodological challenges. Indeed, the authors argue that survey data reveal more about the cognitive maps of managers than the presumed causal relationship between MO and business performance. Uncles (2011) further emphasises that most researchers acknowledge these conceptual and measurement difficulties yet continue with the practice without modifications – a hypocritical behaviour that March and Sutton (1997) addressed already more than two decades ago. We concur with Uncles' (2011) and Wensley's (2011) call to make important and radical modifications to research methods. Or, ideally, follow Woodside's (2011, p. 155) recommendation: “Get out! Get into real-life contexts of where thinking, deciding, and actions of executives occur.”

Conclusion and implications

A rich literature exists extolling the benefits of and successes of CO, yet, in many sectors and organisations, CO has not been adopted (Mason and Harris, 2005). Why this is so is a question for future scholars and is beyond the scope of this work. The purpose of this paper was to examine CO, highlight its unexpected origins in SM, and trace its evolution over time, benefiting from the work of both management and marketing scholars. Although CO has its detractors and it is no longer used under the name CO, the important fact is that it *is* being used and consequently will maintain its relevance and place in the world.

This brings us back to our focal research questions: What is the origin of the concept of CO? How has it evolved? Why and how does any of this matter today? We demonstrated that CO's genesis is not in marketing but rather in the work of early SM practitioners and thinkers. The latter were pioneers who recognised the critical and dual role of the customer as both the co-producer and user of a service in the effective and efficient operation of organisations and economies. Further, we traced the evolution of these fundamental concepts to influential contemporary management thinking and practice in the guise of Design Thinking (DT) and Lean Startup. In so doing, we are “righting” two “wrongs” simultaneously *apropos* management and marketing knowledge in terms of correcting the received wisdom in both. This allows us to assist marketing and management researchers, educators and practitioners to avoid committing two fundamental errors: first, if they do not know their past, they are doomed to repeat their mistakes (Kipping et al., 2014), and second, of falling into the ‘re-inventing-the-wheel’ trap of repeating successes under the disguise of a new terminology with no recognition that the basic idea remains the same. We presently explore both in turn.

As noted above, Levitt (1960) advocated the absolute primacy of CO to organisations' overriding purpose arguing that companies who hold an unshakable belief in the technical superiority of their good/service at the expense of the changing needs, wants and desires of their customers, do so at great risk. Though not profoundly influential in his time, presently in the era of the Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Blockchain being lauded as the technologies of the future (Oracle, 2018), the implications of Levitt's views are more important than ever. Managers and marketers again run the risk of having an unshakeable belief in their technological superiority rather than following the counsel of the SM progenitors of CO, who advocated the primacy of customers in the effective and efficient operation of both organisations and economies. An appreciation of the nature and origins of CO might increase the likelihood of its implementation, by reminding managers that CO made as much business sense in the 1920s as it will in the 2020s. Armed with such an appreciation, managers and marketers might avoid privileging technology over their customers.

We also noted that, though widely held to be a sound idea, CO lost momentum through the last half of the 20th century because the work of Levitt and others was not accompanied by sufficiently nuanced frameworks and tools to support meaningful implementation. Very recent incarnations of CO in the guise of DT and Lean Startup have been successful, in contrast, because they are so hands-on. For these and any future methods and approaches marketing theorists and practitioners need to reunite forces with the adjacent and/or cognate field of management, providing guidance for rigorous implementation across disciplines.

We now close with how knowledge of marketing and management history allows us to potentially avoid the ‘re-inventing-the-wheel phenomenon’. Fuelled by a desire to be up-to-date, theorists and practitioners of both disciplines tend not to elaborate on ‘old wisdom,’ but rather seem more interested in selling new concepts which leads to a fragmentation of research fields (Tourish, 2020). When a new tool/approach is being introduced, companies often make the same implementation mistakes as many organisations before - hiding behind the argument that this is a new approach and thus new ways of doing are required. The ‘newest tools’, however, are derived from previous work. Each modification and re-labelling of an extant concept deviates from the core idea, thereby tainting the initial effectiveness. Instead they could turn to the CO literature and recommendations, following the cumulated advice of six decades. In order to do so, they need to acknowledge its origins. Therefore, refocusing on some of the ‘classics’ can benefit contemporary theory and practice. As Jones and Shaw (2002, p.39) point out: “if variations to the underlying themes occur, they should be recognised for what they are”.

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